

REVIEW: TOMORROW'S SCOTLAND

Arthur Aughey

Gerry Hassan and Chris Warhurst (eds), **Tomorrow's Scotland**, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2002, pb, 256 pp, £14.99, ISBN: 0853159475.

Tomorrow's Scotland is a collection of fourteen essays and an extended introduction by the editors. The book adds to the growing literature on the 'new' Scotland and provides a useful review of recent developments. It is divided into three sections which examine the changes currently taking place in political, social and economic life. The purpose is not only to describe what is happening but also to make a contribution to the debate about what ought to happen. In most cases, the individual authors make intelligent suggestions about the future on the basis of equally intelligent descriptions of the present. Contributing to a debate about tomorrow's Scotland, the book cannot avoid demonstrating, implicitly and explicitly, certain anxieties about today's Scotland. It could be said that the character of public life in any society is defined by its anxieties, and two related anxieties often reveal themselves in current reflections on Scotland. The first is the anxiety of parochiality. The second is the anxiety of influence.

The anxiety of parochiality may not be as strong as it once was but it certainly has not disappeared. There have always been those in Scotland and elsewhere who believe that devolution makes you stupid. There will always be those who believe that whatever dignities the Scottish Parliament may give itself, it remains a glorified parish council (as Tony Blair once so infelicitously put it). If such views are in decline today and may be identified as the last gasp of stern unbending Toryism, the anxiety continues in other forms. In their thoughtful introductory chapter, Hassan and Warhurst refer to its contemporary expressions. These are the 'stories' of the new Parliament as

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the representative of 'a narrow group of vested interests'; as a 'toy-town' institution; as the voice of 'South Lanarkshire Council'; and as the embodiment of an administrative style of tax and spend which other democratic polities have left behind. Such stories complement different political agendas but they share a common cultural dread, a dread of narrowness and inwardness, a dread of being forever behind the game.

The anxiety of parochiality is an anxiety which reason can easily address. A moment's thought will show that there is none so parochial as the self-conscious cosmopolitan and none so cosmopolitan as the self-conscious parochial. Cosmopolitanism has the unfortunate habit of always being elsewhere and parochialism has the equally unfortunate habit of discovering its equivalent wherever it goes. Rather like Alain de Botton's view that a holiday is not an escape because we have to take ourselves – with all our problems – along, so too is devolution a journey on which the Scots – with all their talents and with all their limitations – are collectively embarked. If public affairs in Scotland can be parochial that can be so everywhere else. In itself, that is no bar to Scotland's contribution to larger things. It was not the case in the past and is unlikely to be the case in the future. Janice Kirkpatrick's essay on 'The identity that cannot speak its name' struggles with this anxiety of parochiality, brashly asserts the need 'to break away from old habits' but never really succeeds in doing so. Indeed, she retails a fragile sensitivity about Scottishness at odds with her call to self-confidence and in this she is faithful to a recognisable disposition. It is a disposition not without its irony. 'For now', she argues, 'Scotland remains a silent member of the foursome that makes up the United Kingdom. In law, Scotland may be an unresolved entity but it is a nation and therefore deserves an unequivocal name'. How often do we hear that said by Scots, especially against the confusion of British with English? It is rather surprising, therefore, that she describes the architect of the Scottish Parliament, Miralles, as Spanish when he might have preferred the unequivocal name of Catalan. The Scots may not be so hard done by after all.

On a different level of parochial anxiety is Tom Nairn's contribution. It can only be described as an example of the Higher Blether. Higher Blether is the discourse of Higher Populism. And Higher Populism is at one and the same time flattering and contemptuous of the people it flatters. It is flattering because the style provides intellectual depth and erudite sophistication for a range of national prejudices and grievances. It is contemptuous because the

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Scottish people are obviously not intelligent enough (or are they too parochial?) to grasp the world-historical significance of their present condition. Nairn's is a peculiar example of this anxiety since it is presented within the logic of endism. Since he already discerns that the end of devolution must be the break up of Britain then surely only parochial limitations of mind prevent every other Scot from discerning it too. If, as Nairn argues, the 'Scots really know what has to be done to the Treaty of Union' failing to do so is not only illogical but also despicable. Would it not, Nairn concludes, 'be best to anticipate it now, or as soon as possible?' A curse, in other words, on the provincial indolence of fellow Scots. The great good sense and value of the other contributions to this book is their lack of Nairnite certainty and impatience. They convey intelligently the ambiguities of modern Scotland. Little, they suggest, is really that clear. On the other hand, what many of these chapters express, in varying degrees, is the second anxiety, the anxiety of influence.

The anxiety of influence is Harold Bloom's term for poets who experience 'belatedness', a desperate sense that everything great has already been said. For Bloom, this compels both a 'misreading' of what went before and an assault upon tradition in order to create space for originality and creativity. Amongst other things, it involves the use of hyperbole. The translation of this literary anxiety into modern Scottish politics is detectable in **Tomorrow's Scotland**. Hassan and Warhurst, for example, are critical of the Scottish Parliament's continued reliance on Westminster, especially the extent to which numerous Scottish Executive initiatives copy Westminster policy. They propose that a 'modern Scotland has to define itself versus the old, and has yet to speak internationally'. In his chapter on Scottish Labour, Hassan argues for 'renewal and redefinition which does not replicate the failings of the UK New Labour project' while Lindsay Paterson elegantly and eloquently distinguishes the philosophical basis of Blairism from the Scottish version of social democracy. James McCormick's propositions on this distinctive Scottish social democracy conclude with the realisation that the new politics demand 'more than a Parliament, a new generation of politicians and a programme for government'. Much of tomorrow's Scotland must be made over again. Moreover, two contributors write of Scottish politics undergoing 'dramatic' changes since the 1997 general election (Nicola McEwen on the SNP, Peter Lynch on the Liberal Democrats). If there is a stylistic political tendency in this collection, it is one of adjectival and adverbial inflation.

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The anxiety of influence is perhaps understandable in a devolved system which self-consciously defines itself in terms of the 'new', possibly the most over-used word in this book. While apparently more rational (concerned with structures, practices and outcomes) than the anxiety of parochiality (concerned with *amour propre*) the anxiety of influence is equally unfortunate. As the English philosopher Michael Oakeshott has argued, tradition is not a fixed and inflexible manner of doing things. It is not a groove along which people are condemned to live out a narrow political existence. It is a flow of sympathy with the past and is open to modification. To the outside observer, especially one living in Northern Ireland, the Scottish debate on devolution has been defined by an admirable rationalism. It is a reasonableness which Joyce McMillan (not Joyce Macmillan as she is called in this book) once called Scotland's 'quiet nationalism'. That tradition should be acknowledged as a valuable part of the new Scotland just as much as it was a valuable part of the old. Unchecked, the anxiety of influence is in danger of cutting off that flow of sympathy, not only within the United Kingdom but also within Scotland itself. If there is less anxiety about the influence of Europe that appears to have just as much to do with a parochial fixation on London as it has to do with a cosmopolitan embrace of Brussels.

Tomorrow's Scotland is an attempt to encourage 'big thinking' about politics and to advance the construction of a 'philosophy for celebrating the diversity and divergent polity of the UK'. These are noble aims and this is an interesting beginning.

July 2002