

## THE OUTWARD IMPACT OF DEVOLUTION

*Neal Ascherson*

Quotations from the **Red Paper**, above all from its foreword by Gordon Brown, may be all too deconstructable today. But it is the job of critics, 25 years on, to use these quotations for a work of reconstruction – trying to empathise a way back to that very distant political context in which Gordon Brown's words were so liberating. The recent history of Scotland, looked at in one way, has been a succession of moments in which men and women read something, or heard someone, and exclaimed to themselves: 'Yes, that's just what I always privately felt. But I assumed it was a forbidden thought. I never expected to hear somebody say it out loud. And I never expected to hear so many thousands of other people exclaim: "Yes, that's what I always felt ... "' At such moments, a locked mental door swings open. These are epiphanies, and the 24-year-old Gordon Brown was responsible for one of them.

Among the unlocking passages in that famous foreword are these. 'Scottish socialists cannot support a strategy for independence which postpones the question of meeting urgent social and economic needs until the day after independence – but nor [sic] can they give unconditional support to maintaining the integrity of the United Kingdom – and all that that entails – without any guarantee of radical social change'.

And this. 'The gross inequalities which disfigure Scottish social life ... have been obscured by a debate which merely poses the choice between separatism and unionism'.

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*This article is the corrected form of a paper delivered at the seminar to commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of **The Red Paper on Scotland**, held at the University of Aberdeen on 1 December 2000. Neal Ascherson's most recent book, **Stone Voices**, is reviewed by Brian Taylor elsewhere in this issue of **Scottish Affairs**.*

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Or this. 'What this **Red Paper** ... seeks to do is to transcend that false and sterile antithesis which has been manufactured between the nationalism of the SNP and the anti-nationalism of the Unionist parties'.

At the end of his foreword, Brown made what was to become the classic case for radical devolution to an assembly with enough economic powers (including taxation powers) to change people's lives. 'There is nothing inherently anti-socialist about economic devolution'. He stated: 'Labour must respond to the "demand for more control over our own affairs" not by asking how "maximalist" or "minimalist" assembly powers can avoid separation nor by becoming masters of the last ditch – resisting change until it becomes inevitable – but by deploying every available level of government to increase the control working people have over their own lives'.

At the beginning of this introduction, Editor Brown complained that the Kilbrandon Report had entirely failed to set off any Great Debate. Instead, 'dominated by electoral calculations, nationalist and anti-nationalist passions and crude bribery, it has engendered a barren, myopic, almost suffocating consensus which has tended to ignore Scotland's real problems – our unstable economy and unacceptable level of unemployment, chronic inequalities of wealth and power and inadequate social services.'

Most of all this now seems less unambiguous and astounding than it did at the time. The most startling element, a generation on, is Brown's cool, almost opportunistic handling of the term 'independence'. We do not want a sterile debate about constitutional change for its own sake, he seems to be saying. But we can at least contemplate a long and stubborn onward march, to devolution and on through it and beyond it all the way to independence – if that is the only way to bring about socialist policies in Scotland. This is Gordon Brown's cautious glance at a slogan invented by Jozef Pilsudski, in the years when he was an armed-struggle socialist fighting the Tsar for the liberation of Poland: 'Independence is impossible without socialism, and socialism is impossible without independence'.

So if the alternatives are either independence or that 'barren consensus' at the expense of Scottish working people, should a socialist not prefer independence? At this point, Brown grows indistinct. That last question about alternatives may be implicit in some of what he wrote here, but it was not a question he articulated himself. He talks without fear about 'the rise of nationalism', but he is disinclined to take the SNP at their face value. He

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remarks that 'the SNP's "new politics" which "reject class warfare" presumes the familiar priorities of wealth and power over people', and he suggests that nationalism is less about 'the nation' than about the perceived gap between 'the experience of [Scottish] people as part of an increasingly demoralised UK and their (oil-fired) expectations at a Scottish level'. Brown claims – inaccurately, as reading the book shows! – full agreement among the **Red Paper** essayists that Scotland's problems 'arise not from national suppression nor from London mismanagement (although we have had our share of both) but from the uneven and uncontrolled development of capitalism'.

Looking at the list of his 29 (all male) contributors, Gordon Brown does seem to have been the youngest of them, perhaps much the youngest. And yet in retrospect he appears more cautious than most of them. His analysis obviously owes much to Tom Nairn, but he commented that Nairn was 'pessimistic' because he suspected that the failures of socialism (read: Labourism) had made nationalism unstoppable. And he could be nowhere near as bold as Bob Tait's conclusions in the **Red Paper**. Bob accepted (he had recently joined the party) that the SNP were not going to go away and that they posed a choice for the Left which was not avoidable. 'The choice is between support for the SNP as a progressive force in our historical context, and continued attacks on or aloofness towards it, seeing it as a merely anachronistic, populist, chauvinist movement ... I am arguing for the first choice'.

Re-reading the **Paper**, it is this sanguine, almost welcoming acceptance of the SNP as a legitimate and authentic political force which surprises me. Many, if not most, of the contributors were Labour men. And yet there is no trace of the almost hysterical fear and hatred of the SNP which were to deform Labour's political campaigning in the years ahead. Nowhere does the **Red Paper** oppose an image of noble working-class internationalism to the 'selfish' or even 'fascist' character attributed by Scottish Labour to 'narrow nationalism', although that sort of abuse was already being volleyed at the SNP every day in party speeches and press releases (and of course repaid with vitriolic interest!). Ray Burnett's chapter, taking a very different stand to Bob Tait's, insists that the SNP are a reactionary bourgeois movement where no socialist should seek a home – but he is contemptuous of Labourism too, hoping that 'national consciousness' in Scotland can somehow lead on to 'revolutionary consciousness'.

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Within a year, there was much less room for this sort of lucidity and tolerance. A number of the **Red Paper** contributors were to leap aboard the death-ride from exaltation to disaster which was Jim Sillars's 'Scottish Labour Party'. Those who did not leave 'The Old Labour Party', as the SLP prophetically named it, were squeezed breathless by the party's fierce closing of ranks against knaves and traitors. Both parties, Labour and SNP alike, were soon to impose the dogma that independence and devolution were totally incompatible and mutually exclusive ideas. They tried to force the voter to choose one or the other. But that distinction was never anything like so absolute in public opinion, which felt – still feels, I guess – that the substance of self-government is much more important than the constitutional category. In this sense, it may be that the **Red Paper** people were the last Left group to be close to the instinct of the people of Scotland on the national question – closer than the Labour leadership under Harold Wilson or even John Smith, certainly closer than the Blairites or the SNP.

What impact did the **Red Paper** have outwith Scotland, and what impact did its authors hope that it might have? Before tackling that, it is as well to run over the context of 1975 in the outside world. The Americans were about to evacuate Saigon; Pol Pot was taking over Cambodia. In Spain, the dictatorship founded by Franco was disintegrating. The golden years of the long post-1948 boom were over too, crudely punctuated by the Yom Kippur war and oil price rises. In West Germany and Italy, the state was under attack by armed-struggle gangs of the far Left. In the United Kingdom, the attempt to set up a power-sharing assembly in Northern Ireland had been overthrown by the 1974 Ulster Workers' Strike, while the second general election in 1974 – confirming Harold Wilson's Labour Government in office – had brought no fewer than 11 SNP members into the Westminster Parliament.

The European Economic Community, as it then was, consisted of nine members: France, West Germany, Italy, Benelux, Denmark, Ireland and – precariously – Britain. Of these nine states, only one (West Germany) had a federal or even decentralised constitution when the Treaty of Rome was signed in 1957. The other members of the original Six were to various extents centralised and unitary. By 1975, however, there were already visible signs of change. Italy had developed a system of regional governments, well short of federation. Belgium had begun to divide de facto, if not de jure, into two linguistic regions. And, as the **Red Paper** essays themselves point out, it was obvious that post-Franco Spain would define itself as democratic by the extent to which Madrid power was decentralised – above all to Catalonia and

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to the Basque country. The **Red Paper** contributors were also aware of regional movements for autonomy, based on the politics of cultural and linguistic identity, in Alsace, Brittany and a few other places.

But their own arguments for 'socialist devolution', or whatever the term might be, were overwhelmingly domestic. They were about the benefits to Scotland. To reduce it all unparadoxically, the **Red Paper** is about 'socialism in one country': if the rest of Britain is mired in reaction and decline, and if Scotland has a chance to achieve socialism on its own, then go for it! Many people in Scotland still remember the antidevolution rhetoric soon to be developed by Brian Wilson, by the late Allan Campbell MacLean and others: the argument that devolution was a form of class treachery to the struggling workers of Swan Hunters or Ford Dagenham, that a coal miner at Bilston Glen had more in common with a miner at Tredegar than with a school teacher at Penicuik. The **Red Paper** scarcely notices this type of objection. Indeed, it scarcely mentions the rest of the United Kingdom at all. Gordon Brown's foreword merely says that '[devolution] gives Scottish people a focus for bargaining with Westminster and Brussels [!] – and gives Scottish socialists the chance to lead and influence other regions and other countries'.

Does that mean that the Scots are going to influence and help other British or even English regions? I suspect that Brown meant regions on the Continent as much as, if not more than, the 'development regions' of Britain south of the Border. Finally, though, he does offer a conceivable benefit to England. 'But the real opportunity ... is the challenge to force the pace towards socialism in Britain as a whole'. And that's it – that's all Brown has to say about the rest of Britain. Tom Nairn's contribution analyses the decrepitude of the British state, but is much more concerned with the European echoes of and opportunities for Scottish 'neonationalism'. Ray Burnett denounces the idea that Scotland is chronically the deprived part of Britain, but says nothing about the outward consequences of Scottish national resurgence. David Gow proclaims hopefully that 'the national road to socialism, decried by many Marxists as bourgeois idealism, if not fascism, is no such thing if it is entirely internationalist in outlook and democratic in principle and practice'. Bob Tait does acknowledge the objection that the success of an autonomous Scottish Labour Party or of the SNP would 'sentence the English working class to a long term of Tory rule', but he concludes that this anxiety is merely patronising to the English.

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In other words, the 'British' perspective of the **Red Paper** is almost non-existent. And yet if one is attempting to discuss the external consequences of the **Red Paper** on the 'devo '70s', on the decline of the Tories, on the coming of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 ... then the rest of Britain is the obvious first impact area of all those episodes and changes.

There are political consequences, and there are underground water-table consequences. The first group comprises:

- the presently stalled moves towards English regional government;
- the also-dormant but inherent instabilities built into the devolution settlement; these will reassert themselves (at the latest) when different parties come to rule in London and Edinburgh, possibly bringing the United Kingdom to an end;
- the time-bomb ticking away underneath the present Scottish Labour structure with its Millbank control system;
- the realignment (though it may not be permanent) of the Conservative Party into the position of an ENP, a xenophobic and Europhobic English nationalist movement determined, as a first step, to ensure that English matters in the House of Commons are decided by English majorities;
- the beginnings of discussion, still rather limited and academic, of the idea of an English parliament within a quasi-federal UK, a discussion whose backcloth is the scenario of an England which would always vote Tory;
- the sense among English MPs and political leaders of all persuasions that devolution gives Scotland an unfairly large share of the public-spending cake, but that the Scots have absolutely no sense of reciprocal obligation to the rest of the UK.

Has devolution, in the event, led to the betrayal of the English working class by their Scottish comrades? The very question seems to come from the far side of the grave-like chasm separating those brave and likely lads of 1975 from the state we're in now. And whoever betrayed the mineworkers of South Yorkshire and South Wales in the 1980s, it was not the late Mick McGahey and the Scottish NUM.

The subterranean effects of the process which the **Red Paper** helped so powerfully to launch should, one might assume, include the revival of English

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national consciousness and of English nationalism. But is it so directly an 'effect'? The right question to ask is whether this revival would have begun anyway, with or without devolution in Scotland and Wales. I have no solid evidence to answer that, but I suspect that it would. It was certainly not devolution which set off the decline of 'Britishness', which was already well in train by the mid-1970s. And it would be absurd to relate the sea of English (almost never British) flags brandished by the tearful millions in London during 'Diana Week' in 1997 to the imminence of the Scottish referendum on devolution a few days later. The Cross of St George may have become the flag of the heart down south, as opposed to the Union Jack flag of the state, but that seems to have little to do with the reordering of the constitution.

A poll published in **The Guardian** in November 2000 told part of the story. Those who felt 'English, not British' increased from 7 per cent in 1997 to 17 per cent in 2000. Racial prejudice and prejudice against immigrants were strongest in this group, as were the wishes to 'keep the pound' and to leave the European Union altogether. The poll also registers a slower but noticeable sliding-away from moderate statements of nationality ('equally English and British') towards harder definitions. And yet the reaction to Scottish and Welsh developments was pretty null. As **The Guardian** put it, 'a quarter of people living in England thought Scotland should become completely independent, but the most common response to Scotland's new status was indifference. More than half would be "neither pleased nor sorry" if Scotland were to become completely independent'.

Speaking as a journalist who has covered that particular scene for many years, this comes as no surprise. Even back in the 1970s, in **Red Paper** times, the English popular response to the possibility of Scottish independence was a not unfriendly shrug. 'If that's what they want, then I suppose they had better go. Seems a pity, but it's up to them.' Only in the political class has it seemed momentarily important to keep Scotland in the Union, either for the sake of its Labour votes or – on the Right – for the sake of Ukania's old imperial integrity.

But the re-emergence of English national consciousness, and of an English nationalism, is new. As nationalisms go, it seems to register at the 'ethnic' end of the scale rather than the 'civic' end, which is what shrewd critics like Patrick Wright, acquainted with the ruralist strain in English romantic politics, had predicted in the 1980s. It is clearly insular and isolationist, and there is no trace of the Imperial or Orange instinct to maintain a

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geographically Great Britain. Only time will tell whether the Tory Party under Iain Duncan Smith can catch and tame this populist herd, and whether the 'English parliament' idea might then break out into wider public opinion.

In power, such a regime would offer Scotland no sweeteners in order to remain in the Union. And it seems very possible to me that it might use the pretext of an intractable dispute between the Scottish government and Westminster (over an extension of powers, over the financial relationship) to nudge Scotland out of the Union altogether, much as the Czechs under Vaclav Klaus grew tired of Slovak demands and more or less forced them to take independence. In any case, the cohabitation of any imaginable Scottish Executive with a strongly Europhobic British government would sooner or later be doomed.

In western Europe, regionalism developed rapidly during the 1980s. But after 1989, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the process became much wider and deeper. It was no longer just a matter of the crystallisation of provinces into self-governing regions, within previously unitary nation-states. Existing regions in central and eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia now surged forward to demand nation-state independence. It was a moment in European nationalism comparable only to 1848 and to 1919.

In 1957, it is worth repeating, West Germany was the only decentralised state in the Common Market. By the end of the century, Italy had powerful autonomous regions, Spain had 17 different regions (none with precisely the same competences as any other), Austria as a federation was within the European Union, Brussels had formalised its quasi-federal structure, France (amazingly, for the republic which for so long equated Jacobin centralism with progress) had some 22 regions, while the United Kingdom had at last established three sub-parliaments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Portugal and Ireland are among the Western states which for the moment remain unitary. But they contrast with most of the new applicant countries, the enlargement candidates. The post-Communist nations, especially, are aware that bold programmes for decentralisation are now politically correct and will contribute to making a good impression on Brussels. Some, perhaps, are more serious than others. Poland has overcome old patriotic inhibitions about the dangers of local autonomy and has set up self-governing regions – a leap as bold as that of France. Hungary and the Czech Republic are not far behind. But Slovakia, Romania and other south-east European candidates have scarcely begun.

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How does the new Scotland fit in? Is the Scottish Executive using what powers it has to 'bargain with Brussels', as Gordon Brown hoped in the **Red Paper** that it would? So far, the attendance record of Scottish ministers at EU meetings in which they are entitled to participate has been very poor. But here is another curiosity from that political past of the 1970s, a quotation drawn to my attention by Neil Robertson. 'I was one of the people who first attacked Jim Sillars when he said "separate representation" because I felt that "that was us right on the slippery slope"; if you talk about separate representation, you are talking about separatism. But recently I was in Brussels ... and what frightened me ... is that the regions have no chance to say what they want. Okay, member-states can say what they want... ' Step forward Helen Liddell, addressing the Young European Left in 1976.

Since Helen said that, Maastricht and then Amsterdam created and expanded the Committee of the Regions, with its 222 members, its five annual plenary sessions and its right to be consulted by the EU on some ten subject-areas. The Committee is a benevolent body, without real powers of its own but emitting a soothing, moderating influence on nation-state governments. But here's a strange thing now: Scotland as such isn't in it!

Out of the 24 British nominated members, four are Scots - one of them an MSP nominated (not elected) as the representative of the Scottish Parliament. There are three reasons for this:

- England does not contain any democratic, self-governing regions, with the partial exception of London;
- the British delegation is mostly made up of worthies from local councils, whether Essex or Clackmannan;
- self-governing Scotland has no defined constitutional existence as a distinct entity.

This is in glaring contrast to – for example – Austria or Spain. The Austrian delegation is made up of the *Landeshauptmaenner* (premiers) of the federal states – including Joerg Haider for Carinthia. The Spanish delegation consists largely of the regional presidents of Galicia, Euzkadi, Extremadura and so on. In other words, a normal European country would have Jack McConnell, David Trimble, Rhodri Morgan and Ken Livingstone towering over its delegation as a matter of course.

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This certainly illuminates what UKanian devolution is not. Indeed, it may be true that the Scots had a stronger regional position in 1996, before the last reshuffle of local government. Strathclyde, with some two million inhabitants, could operate in the league of Euroregions as no English county council could hope to do, and Charles Gray, representing Strathclyde, was the only British figure of any consequence in the Committee of the Regions.

Bearing all that in mind, the Committee of the Regions is plainly not a site where the **Red Paper's** 'bargaining with Brussels' can take place. Membership of the Committee is not remotely like the 'seat at the top table' in the Council of Ministers which made the SNP's 'Independence in Europe' slogan so appealing. UKREP, the United Kingdom permanent delegation, has some Scottish content and input, but there is no way in which the current British government will concede to Scottish representatives the right to negotiate directly with the Commission, even on Scottish matters.

Scotland in Brussels, then, exists only at Scotland House on the Rond-Point Schuman where all the pressure groups, lobbies and petitioners hang out, from Scotland Europa and COSLA down to the East and West of Scotland European Consortia. (The exception is South and North-East Scotland, which for some reason dwells apart in the Rue Franklin.) Here Scotland competes with the formidable and long-established permanent delegations of the German *Laender*, now agitating for their own right of sovereign representation in matters which concern them and not the Federal government at Berlin.

Scotland House can and does engage in inter-regional co-operation projects. Some of these bypass Brussels and national capitals entirely. The famous 'Four Motors' synergy established in the 1980s between Baden-Wuerttemberg, Rhone-Alpes, Lombardy and Catalonia, a programme for joint action to develop links from fibre-optic communication to educational and cultural exchanges, proceeded without the participation of Bonn, Paris, Rome or Madrid. The Welsh Development Agency was into 'foreign policy' at this level twenty years ago, as Cardiff dealt directly with Stuttgart. It sounds a healthily subversive prospect. It sounds like a process from which Scotland could in the long term acquire not only wealth but a much greater degree of freedom in the world, perhaps some of those freedoms hoped for in the **Red Paper**. But here opens a wider landscape of larger questions.

It seems to me that European integration has operated as a dialectical development, the interaction of two processes. Both together amounted to the

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leaking away of the authority of the nation-state: one process transferring power upwards to supranational institutions, while the other process transferred it downwards to regions and submerged nations. This leakage has not been uniform; some nation-states have weakened more rapidly than others. But there has also been a tendency to general unevenness: periods when not much seemed to be changing, alternating with periods when supranational integration lurched into rapid movement. The upward and downward leakages of power were apparently contradictory. But could it be that they were in fact linked to one another? Did regional power and aspiration grow most swiftly when the process of 'European integration' was in high gear? And, conversely, would the regionalising process – the insatiable clamour from below for the devolution of more powers – go dormant when the European Union's advance towards political integration was halted?

I think that this is the case. Even before the failure of the Nice summit in late 2000, the second part of this hypothesis was bearing up well. Enlargement was dragging, institutional reform bogging down, the Euro losing popular credibility, in a period when member-states were strongly reasserting themselves and slowing down the pace of integration. And correspondingly, a good deal of the steam built up at Maastricht had gone out of the regional movement. Commission President Prodi dared to tell the Committee of the Regions in 2000 that they should stop rabbiting on about subsidiarity and the remit of this or that level of government. Instead, he said, there should be a 'Network Europe, with all levels of governance shaping, proposing, implementing and monitoring policy together.' In other words, the movement towards greater formal autonomy and sovereignty at the regional level was no longer so relevant.

So, the Europe of the Regions is going quiet. It may well wake up again one day. But how much does that really matter to Scotland?

The **Red Paper** was optimistic and thoughtful about the regionalist movement, when it was in its early stages. Many of its essays load radical socialist ambitions onto the vehicle of an imagined 'Europe of Red Regions', in which the decentralisation of government and the ideal of workers' self-management would be converging aspects of 'power to the people'. But maybe those authors had chosen the wrong vehicle for the job anyway. As it has turned out, 25 years on, devolution within the United Kingdom and

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regional status within Europe could never have gone far enough or fast enough to deliver the socialist Scotland they wanted.

So, is the **Red Paper** essentially a nationalist document? Well, of course it is that. But the independence implied by the **Red Paper's** programme, for a Scotland not unlike the model which had so recently been Allende's Chile, is not on offer. Was it ever? Probably not. But even two years after Pinochet's putsch, it was worth demanding.