

## **REVIEW: READING TOM NAIRN**

*Roland Sturm*

Tom Nairn, **After Britain: New Labour and the Return of Scotland**,  
London: Granta Books 2000, 324pp, pb, £ 8.99, ISBN: 1862073228,  
hb, £15.99, ISBN: 1862072930.

Tom Nairn, **Pariah: Misfortunes of the British Kingdom**, London/New  
York: Verso 2002, 176pp, hb, £12.99, ISBN: 1859846572.

Reading Tom Nairn one cannot help getting carried along. His writing is – as Yasmin Alibhai-Brown remarked in a letter to the author which can be found in the Appendix to *Pariah* – indeed 'wonderfully seductive and intensely intellectual' (p.163). But what for? What is the argument of his books?

One answer could be: they are attacks on the British state and the political elites who do their very best to sustain a political enterprise which is doomed. Nairn's books belong to the type of 'decline of Britain' literature, a category of publications to which he contributed in 1977 with his classic **The Break-up of Britain**. Like one of his heroes, Karl Marx, Nairn remains strong on criticism of the rotten and corrupted regime he sees but, again like Karl Marx, he has difficulties with the substance and especially the details of promising alternatives.

Not that he has no general recipe, namely big plans such as a written constitution with some form of 'new "quasi-federalism" – a confederal or other partnership scheme' (**After Britain**, p.143) or 'Scottish independence', 'more authentic autonomy in Wales, and a more consequent (and more constitutional) awakening of English identity' (**Pariah**, p.137). It is also understandable that in 2000 the author hesitated to look at the realities of devolution in Scotland in greater detail. But in 2002 it is no longer helpful to

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reiterate the self-colonisation accusations against the political class in Scotland without an effort to find more concrete evidence, which may exist in Scottish political life and the work of the Scottish Parliament.

Institutions of society are in Nairn's view only results of an ideological conspiracy which can go one way or the other, and this may be the reason why he shies away from more specific and more detailed analyses. Take for example proportional representation. When introduced for elections in Scotland and Wales it is, in the author's view, a device to ensure that Plaid Cymru and the SNP find themselves 'forever bogged down in compromises with representatives of the reasonable (or British-minded) majorities there' (**Pariah**, p.87). PR for general elections is, however, described as a good thing, and the rogue is now first-past-the-post which Nairn calls 'a lethal electoral system' designed to contain political alternatives and to render it 'extremely difficult to change the system from within' (**Pariah**, p.31). The simple truth is, though, that PR does not cause voting decisions and therefore should not be blamed for political outcomes.

The inability of political elites to acknowledge the true state of affairs and to join him in his analysis of the outdatedness of the British state are in Nairn's view a major cause of the 'misfortunes' of the British (no longer United) Kingdom. The ideological veil which political elites stubbornly refuse to lift has a name: Britishness. Britishness is both a state of mind and synonymous with a political system which Nairn characterises as parody-democracy, as a 'diseased descendant of representative oligarchy' (**Pariah**, p.70). Whether Britishness is something progressive or the final straw of the conspiracy of Thatcherite Conservatism and Blairite 'preacherly populism' (**Pariah**, p.82) has ignited an interesting debate. Bikhu Parekh, for example, has argued that 'We are British but also English, Scottish, Irish or Welsh, Catholics, Protestants or Muslim, and so on. A liberal society respects these non-political or subnational identities for both moral and prudential reasons.'<sup>1</sup> And Yasmin Alibhai-Brown stressed even more emphatically that Britain should be a 'cosmopolitan state' (**Pariah**, p.164).

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<sup>1</sup> *Bikhu Parekh: 'Being British', in: **Government and Opposition** 37(3), 2002, p. 309.*

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Tom Nairn comes to fundamentally different conclusions. For him, 'Britishness' has passed from being one of the soundest properties on the international ideas-mart (liberal, trustworthy, decent, first among equals, 'Mother-of' this-and-that, Progressive haven, etc.) to being a down-market left-over – not quite a slum, but 'heading in that direction' (**After Britain**, p.297). Britain, in his view, 'must first be saved from Britishness' (**After Britain**, p.72). This cannot be achieved by devolution, because devolution is a clever device to secure the dominance of the 'imperial Nurse' (**After Britain**, p.178). Nairn seems to assume, however, that somehow once the Nurse is kicked out – as she most definitely deserves – all will be well in Scotland, and Wales, and even in Northern Ireland.

The only worrying result of a break-up of Britain, he argues, is England, which needs to find its role. Here we come to another problematic aspect of Nairn's argument. Not only does he assume that the liberation of the Celtic fringe will automatically revive democracy there, he also equates to some extent democracy and nationalism as long as he talks about Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. But what exactly is meant by the 'civic nationalism' (**Pariah**, p.158) he finds so attractive? Patriotism? Or something new and, if so, where in the real world can it be found?

England is, in Nairn's view, a different matter. He does not rule out that England retrogrades to some kind of ugly racist society, narrow-minded and frustrated. A constitution could help avoid this fate, he speculates – and comes to the surprising conclusion: 'Democracy is not a popular instinct or the simple prevalence of a majority: it is a constitution, or nothing' (**After Britain**, p.86).

A constitution not based on social consensus is, however, an empty shell. Constitutional strategies to implant democracy which did not have the support of broad political majorities have, so far, never survived for long. A constitution for England (or Britain) may be fine to do two things. It can modernise Britain by replacing the doctrine of 'parliamentary sovereignty' by what is already common sense in Scotland and Wales, namely the sovereign power of the people. And it can define ways in which disputes between England and its neighbours can be settled peacefully as long as they are still under the roof of one state.

A constitution will not solve the problem of national identity, nor will it function as an insurance policy against the ugly sides of nationalism. And

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why on earth should we go on accomodating nationalism in Europe? This is the 21st, not the 20th ,19th or 18th century. If Nairn thinks, as he does, that Europe is a good thing, at least when it challenges the British state and houses Scotland, why does he not acknowledge that Europe is only available for those who are ready to restrict nationalism, to transfer national sovereignty (and money) to Brussels and to accept a wider European identity? Dual identities which he despises in the British case are not per se bad. They are essential for successes of European integration.

A last word of warning. Federalism, so readily embraced by Nairn, can be as much a problem as a solution. The fine print one has to read carefully in this context should include information on the degree of autonomy in policy-making for regions, on their powers to raise taxes independently from the centre and on guarantees for a regional voice on the EU level of decision-making. This catalogue may not be complete, but it is sufficient to demonstrate the problems 'after Britain'. More is needed than the conviction to be on the right side of history and the intellectual capabilities to lay open the weaknesses of the British polity. We therefore look forward to Tom Nairn's conclusions he draws from his criticism, especially when he takes into account the recent years of Scottish self-government. If these conclusions focus on independence for Scotland, one would probably want to know which social forces are willing to back independence, which institutions he believes are adequate for the great task and into which direction the renewal of the nation he envisages should go, especially because his discussion of the British and Scottish party system is not particularly flattering for any of the existing political parties.

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