

REVIEW: DEMOCRACY FOR ALL

Gordon Lawrie

Jim Crowther, Ian Martin and Mae Shaw, **Renewing Democracy in Scotland: An Educational Source Book**, Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (England and Wales), 2003, 212 + xi pp., pb, £24.95, ISBN: 186201146X

This is a really well-put-together book. Jim Crowther, Ian Martin, and Mae Shaw appear to have cajoled or otherwise blackmailed virtually everyone worthwhile connected with the University of Edinburgh to pitch up something towards their volume of 'sources'. Organised into logical sections – the philosophy of democracy, the Scottish institutions, interest groups, current issues and a small section on Scotland in an international context – each of the sources is in fact a thought-provoking essay from people who have something to say in their chosen field. Some say more than others, and some say it better, but that is to be expected. This is a classic 'dip-in' volume and there really should be something for everyone here.

The best essays are those which examine contemporary Scottish society and politics, rather than the theoretical or historical background. There is a very strong section on the contemporary scene in sections one and two, of which particular mention might be made of Richard Parry's succinct description of the Scottish Executive and Brian Main's piece on the Scottish economy, which seem to benefit from the freshness of the new devolved Scotland bedding itself in. Later sections on issues will naturally appeal more to some than others. For no particular reason, the essays on land reform, poverty and inequality, demographic change, young Scots and sport and leisure grabbed this reader's attention most immediately. Nor does one have to agree with everything written. John Horne's piece on sport sometimes appeared to be a little over-simplified and cried out for a discussion of bowling clubs as a social institution in Scotland, but his views are stimulating all the same. Ian

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Fyfe appears to believe that declining participation in party politics by young Scots is a cause for concern in a democratic society. Personally, I take a far less pessimistic view of declining voter participation rates. In the golden days of electoral voting in the 1950s, most political commentators agree that many voters did so because of occupational class factors and family influences, rather than analysing issues and policies and casting their votes accordingly. In the intervening years, improved political literacy in society, especially amongst younger voters, must have led many to question their supposed 'natural' party alliances, a situation which would lead many to be sufficiently uncertain as not to vote at all. This model of voting would suggest that declining voting rates may simply reflect the fact that voters are capable of thinking more about how they use their vote. There must be something good about that.

The book appears to cover virtually every aspect of Scottish politics and society – at least at a superficial level – which in itself is an achievement. Each essay is followed by some suggested further reading, which is valuable, and by some 'discussion questions', most of which are not. Indeed, some of the discussion questions are rather less accessible than the articles which precede them. Rather than provoke debate, most of these questions would surely provoke stunned silence in the school classrooms, youth groups or even seminars with which this book is meant to be used. If editors wish to include such questions, they are best included in an appendix, safely out of harm's way.

Most of the essays also try to relate their work to citizenship or democracy, although some do so more than others. So Lynn Jamieson on the family and Sarah Cunningham-Burley on health both conclude with sections on democracy, whereas Gordon Kirk's work on the Scottish education system is more of a straight description. It would have been interesting to read Kirk's views on his faculty's decision to stop training Modern Studies teachers as of 2003, and on its likely impact on the democratic development of Scottish school pupils. Roughly 10% of all Scottish pupils still do not get any Modern Studies at any stage of their school careers, and as it is becoming increasingly difficult to fill Modern Studies posts, his essay might have been the most revealing of all.

Nevertheless, **Renewing Democracy in Scotland** should be an excellent introductory textbook for a 21st-century first-year university course on Scottish politics, especially if the interesting further bibliographies were

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further extended. The real problem with the book is that the authors do not *quite* see that as their aim. Instead, the stated aim of this work is 'to facilitate democratic discussion – in the classroom, seminar, youth group or church group'. The essays are intended to be 'authoritative yet accessible', and they most certainly are – to motivated students in first-year politics or Advanced Higher Modern Studies courses – but the editors are being rather optimistic in their suggested other uses. Two examples should illustrate this. They suggest using Tom Conlon's 'The Politics of Technological Change' in a computing class, an extremely readable essay for those comfortable with the literature of political science, but hardly within the scope of a typical Standard Grade or even Higher Computing Studies pupil. The reading age of the text is simply too high. And the idea that Jamie Rennie's piece on 'Sexual Orientation' or Nick Watson's on 'Disability' might be suitable for a school Social Education class will bring a smile to the face of virtually every secondary teacher who has ever had to entertain twenty-five or so sixteen-year-olds. On the other hand, the teachers themselves might find food for thought in these essays, so that their students might benefit second-hand; but as sources for use in school, they will find few takers. Interestingly, Robin Harper – Green MSP and until recently Rector of Edinburgh University, but once a Modern Studies teacher – welcomes the book in his foreword but stops short of commending it for use in the classroom. Even in an academic middle-class school like Boroughmuir High in Edinburgh, most of his students would have choked on this stuff.

The book is more likely to be used successfully in an adult environment, and here the editors suggest uses for local environment groups, young mothers' groups, disability groups and church groups, which perhaps might be more useful, although how effectively all of the participants would be engaged in any discussion remains open to speculation. By no means would every young adult find these sources any more accessible than an older school pupil. However, one can see an effective place for this book in local public libraries, continuing education units, and social work departments, available as a useful tool to foster collective local action groups. And to be fair, the publishers' principal field is in promoting continuing adult education.

None of this would really matter very much if it were not that the whole thrust of the book is to 'renew democracy' and 'to activate citizenship through democratic discussion'. Now one can argue all day about the true meaning of democracy but it is worth noting that if it is important for all citizens in a democratic society to be able to understand the concept of democracy then it has to be reduced to a pretty simple level. Even if we limit the definition of

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citizen to that of 'voter', it has to be borne in mind that anyone who was aged 13 in 2001 is a potential voter at the next UK General Election. If we are to develop citizenship skills properly, then at the very least the great majority of 13-year-olds – say 80% – should be able to form political opinions on issues of the day and make judgements on whether political parties are capable of pursuing their aims. Thus, in my daily environment, a good working definition of democracy is 'when everybody gets a say'. It is possible to explain key political concepts in terms simple enough for quite young citizens to grasp: the secret is, as far as possible, to avoid getting bogged down with descriptions of institutional politics any more than is absolutely necessary. The same philosophy must also apply in adult education. The content must be accessible to all; it is no use if one keeps having to look up words in a dictionary.

If, then, the purpose of **Renewing Democracy in Scotland** is to promote citizenship by extending democratic discussion into communities currently finding it difficult to understand, or otherwise uninterested in the Scottish political scene – schools, youth groups and so on – then it will surely ultimately be judged a failure. This book will interest and appeal to those already politically switched on, such as those already in higher or further education courses in Scottish politics. It *is* a good read for those already motivated. But as an educational source book for those yet to be engaged in the democratic political process, **Renewing Democracy in Scotland** will do little.

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