

REVIEW: SCOTLAND'S PARLIAMENT

James Kellas

Brian Taylor, **The Road to the Scottish Parliament**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, Revised Edition 2002, pb, 195 + viii pp, £14.99, ISBN 0 7486 1759 0.

Brian Taylor, **Scotland's Parliament: Triumph and Disaster**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002, pb, 327 + viii pp, £14.99, ISBN 1 902930 41 X.

Two books for the price of one? Well, no, more like one book for the price of two. Despite the claim of the author that **The Road to the Scottish Parliament** is an 'entirely new book' (p.viii), and different from **Scotland's Parliament**, no fewer than four chapters are to be found in both books, although with at times a somewhat different content. This is curious, to say the least, and no doubt annoying to a reader who has shelled out for both books.

A more substantive point is how Taylor treats his subject. Take Scottish identity (one of the repeated chapters: 'Identity – What Makes a Scot?'). Despite the millions being spent on research on this topic, some of which has already been published (mainly by the academics David McCrone, Lindsay Paterson and John Curtice), Taylor keeps references to these to a minimum, preferring an impressionistic approach. This is all right in its way, but many readers would like more 'hard data'.

Perhaps neither book should be reviewed by an academic. This is popular journalism, with an emphasis on the anecdotal and the couthy. 'Please, read and enjoy', says Taylor in **Scotland's Parliament** (p.viii), and it would be mean-spirited and no doubt snobbish to cast aspersions on an author who has worked on the Aberdeen **Press and Journal** and now gives nightly

James Kellas is emeritus professor of politics at Glasgow University.

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commentary on BBC Scotland. Most will in fact enjoy what Taylor has to say, and political scientists are not noted for their understanding of contemporary politicians, whom they rarely meet.

It is nevertheless disappointing that Taylor's claim to give 'the inside story of Scotland's Parliament' (back cover of **Scotland's Parliament**) provides us with very little that we did not know already from his public pronouncements, which were no doubt carefully vetted by the BBC for risky and perhaps libellous investigative journalism and potential offence to the politicians, who have a bad habit of refusing to appear on programmes they disapprove of.

This raises the problem of the media in a small country such as Scotland. Sometimes the best insights into Scottish politics come from journalists working in the safety of papers down south such as the **Guardian** and **Independent**. Their editors cannot be pressurised in the way Scottish editors can. The networks linking the politicians with media personnel in Scotland are close, and have been subjected to analysis in the **Sunday Herald** and **Scotland on Sunday**, in unusual flashes of self-examination. Books such as **Open Scotland? Journalists, Spin Doctors and Lobbyists** by Philip Schlesinger, David Miller and William Dinan (Edinburgh, Polygon at Edinburgh, 2001), and Murray Ritchie's **Scotland Reclaimed: The inside story of Scotland's first democratic parliamentary election** (Edinburgh, The Saltire Society, 2000) are revealing on the political pressures on the media in Scotland. The latter book, by the **Herald** Political Editor, really is an 'inside story' as promised, and shows how the Labour Party blackmailed the **Herald** by withdrawing advertising in order to get acceptable coverage in the 1997 election. Luckily, the editor, Harry Reid, gave Ritchie full backing. Schlesinger and his colleagues are equally sceptical of the openness of the new Scotland, reproducing the **Sunday Herald's** 'power map' on p.20. They conclude: 'We did not expect to find what we did and in many respects we have been sobered by our analysis' (p.268). They discuss the issue of a BBC TV Scottish News at Six, something that Taylor, rather typically, steers clear of, even if it does show a rather sharp light on Scottish versus British identity.

In general, Taylor is balanced in his approach to all subjects, yet he claims to be tenacious in his interviewing technique ('My creed...is to give them absolute hell, on every occasion'. **The Road to the Scottish Parliament**, p.112). Surely not. He has not offended the politicians, as have some

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journalists in Scotland (Iain Macwhirter and Lesley Riddoch share the prize for maximum offence on the BBC). He is most interesting when discussing personalities such as the party leaders, the 'English question' (otherwise known as the 'West Lothian Question') and the 'European Question.'

His balance sheet of 'Triumph and Disaster' is firmly on the side of Triumph, but his 'Look to the Future' (**Scotland's Parliament**, ch.16) is cautious and ambiguous. Devolution will 'steadily strengthen its [the Parliament's] place in Scottish life', but independence will not *necessarily* (his italics) follow (p.317) (but then again it might come in some circumstances – but these are not specified). Only the Liberal Democrats will be displeased by his ruling out a federal solution (p.307), but then they do not seriously back that anyway, do they? Europe is a challenge to Scotland, but there is no conclusion as to what to do.

So he remains 'professionally detached' (p.112), and gives both sides of most questions. That is all very well, and is often the professional characteristic of academics ('on the one hand, and on the other'), who tend to annoy students and readers because of this. The nationalist monthly paper, the **Scots Independent**, runs a feature on Scottish political journalists, giving their 'political leanings'. For better or worse, Taylor does not appear at all. Had he worked on the **Sunday Post** (and there seems no reason why he should not), he might have been tempted to say 'Help ma Boab! Jings! Crivvens!' But that would be taking Scottish identity too far, in a post-modern, post-nationalist Scotland. On the other hand...

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