

A PARLIAMENT FOR A PEOPLE: HOLYROOD IN AN UNDERSTATED NATION

David McCrone

‘The Scottish parliament which adjourned on 25th March in the year
1707 is hereby reconvened’
(Winnie Ewing MSP, opening the first session of the parliament, May
1999)

Recall¹

I have recalled the Scottish Parliament
From hatbands and inlaid drawers,
From glazed insides of earthenware teapots,
Corners of greenhouses, tumblers
Where it has lain in session too long,
Not defunct but slurring its speeches
In a bleary, irresolute tirade
Affronting the dignity of the house,
Or else exiled to public transport
For late-night sittings, the trauchled members
Slumped in wee rows either side of the chamber
Girning on home through the rain.
My aunt died, waiting for this recall

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¹ *I am grateful to Robert Crawford and his publisher Jonathan Cape for permission to cite his poem. It is published in his 1996 collection ‘Masculinity’.*

Scottish Affairs

In her Balfron cottage. I want her portrait
Hung with those of thousands of others
Who whistled the auld sang toothily under their breath.
Let her be painted full-length, upright
In her anorak, flourishing secateurs.
She knew the MPs in funny wigs
Would return bareheaded after their long recess
To relearn and slowly unlearn themselves,
Walking as if in boyhood and girlhood
They'd just nipped down to the shops for the messages
And taken the winding path back.

Robert Crwaford in **Masculinity** (Jonathan Cape, London, 1996)

Hindsight works wonders. Would Scotland have built its parliament if it had known then what it knows now? Probably not. Should it have done so? Indubitably yes. Many of the key decisions in the life of a nation depend less on careful and considered judgement, and more – more often than we like to admit – on happenstance, serendipity, and sheer bloody-mindedness. ‘There shall be a Scottish parliament. I like that’, said Donald Dewar, on whom the title father of the nation sat, like his suits, ill at ease. It was the combined vision of this awkward, accomplished and deeply cultured man with the quixotic, sometimes infuriating, dream of the Catalan, Enric Miralles, which gave it birth, and which left the rest of us working it through, defending its costs, filling in the spaces.

IN THE BEGINNING...

Holyrood was nowhere to be seen: there was a palace, and a brewery. In the initial months after the referendum of 1997 when three-quarters of Scots said yes to the principle, and, maybe remarkably, two-thirds assented to differential tax-varying powers, it seemed to be down to a competition between Calton Hill, the old Royal High School building, and a new-build at Victoria Quay in Leith. Somehow a railway yard at Haymarket came, and just as quickly, went. By early 1998, Holyrood had come from nowhere and got Donald's vote, ostensibly for the bargain basement sum of £40m, a price ticket that would haunt his successors for a long time to come. Calton Hill was too small, and anyway, it was said, a Labour politician had proclaimed it

Holyrood in an Understated Nation

a 'nationalist shibboleth', thus guaranteeing SNP support and Labour hostility from then on: odd, really, for it was Labour who had refurbished it in the 1970s in expectation of the 'assembly' which never came, and defended it with the fervour of the recently converted in the dark days of the 1980s when all seemed lost.

All politics contains mythology, and none more so than the Scottish variety. There is, for example, the view that Holyrood was got up on the Edinburgh to Glasgow train in September 1997, when a surveyor fell into the company of travelling civil servants discussing a site for the parliament building, and casually mentioned to them that a client might just have a site to suit. Then there is accusation that Holyrood was the result of an aversion to Calton Hill on the grounds of its 'shibboleth' status. This is a curious one, because no-one has owned up to it, though the-then leader of the Scottish National Party, Alex Salmond, has his suspicions, telling the Holyrood Inquiry: 'It is not a word that somebody would just take, as it were, off the shelf. It is the word that would be used by an erudite person, which maybe narrows the field somewhat' (para.237; 13 November 2003). He goes on '... Alternatively, Donald is one of the few people who might use a word like "shibboleth". I do not know; I have no knowledge, apart from it appeared' (para. 237, 13 November 2003)².

There is also the matter of the figure of £40m which has become a benchmark set in stone, even though early evidence laid before the Holyrood Inquiry indicates that in the early months of 1999 it was more than double that once VAT, fees, contingencies, IT and temporary accommodation were taken into account (statement to the Holyrood Inquiry by Donald Dewar's Parliamentary Private Secretary, MS-9-001). Sir David Steel, who was the parliament's first Presiding Officer, testified to the Inquiry that declared cost at handover (June 1999) was at least £109m (Holyrood Inquiry, MS-12-003). In truth, £40m would have bought very little, perhaps a modest office block for a town council, which many feared, and some hoped for: kill Home Rule

² *The reference is to the Book of Judges (12,6), where the Gileadites identified and slew the Ephraimites on the basis of their inability to pronounce the word: 'Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth; and he said Sibboleth; for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then he took him, and slew him at the passages of the Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.'* (King James Version)

Scottish Affairs

by limiting its vision, diminishing its purpose: suitable for a peedie, pretendy parliament, the comedian Billy Connolly sneered. Instead, Scotland got its visionary parliament because its leaders, as well as its people, were thrown: good money poured after good, because there was, in truth, no alternative, at least once the process had begun. This, after all, is a parliament: it is not an assembly. It makes laws for the people of Scotland; it rules over matters of key importance to them; it is not their only parliament, but it is the one that matters most to them.

A CITY OF PARLIAMENTS

How, then, are we to read this building? What does it signify? Why is it even here? The short answer is that we have it because it is the express wish of the Scottish people. We asked for it. We did not quite anticipate what form it might come in, but we asked for it nonetheless. It is ours. It belongs to Scotland. Scot-Land. Miralles knew there was something elemental about that land. Elegiacally he observed: 'our proposal is that Scotland is a land, not a series of cities. It demands a construction that is not monumental in the classical sense'. This was not going to be some ersatz baronial confection in the park, a mock gothic edifice which, to some, was how a parliament ought to look. It was to be confectioned out of upturned boats, out of leaves and twigs, and the sceptics mocked. What nonsense: what does he know of us, they asked? Besides, the land of mountain and the flood would soon wash these elements – those boats, leaves, twigs – away. Let us have, they said, something with pillars and pilasters, if not a Pugin-esque little brother, at least something Grand and Scottish. Something more traditional would be better, said Nigel Tranter, who wrote popular history books. The successor to the throne, the Duke of Rothesay, let his views be known that the palace next door was wanting a suitable foil of similar marque. They did not get it, and Scotland, one might add, is the better for it.

The puzzle, though, is this: how do you build a parliament for the 21st century, not the 19th: and, to boot, a parliament for an understated nation? How do you create an institution with so many conflicting demands in a country – a capital city, indeed, with three other previous parliament buildings already? The short answer is that all three belong to other worlds, other times. Edinburgh has the *grandeur* of Parliament Hall, now patrolled by peripatetic advocates and their clients, but in essence a creation of a pre-democratic patrician age: a parliament for the landed elite ruling Scotland

Holyrood in an Understated Nation

into the 1707 Union, an erstwhile parcel of rogues in that nation. Then there is the ill-fated ‘shibboleth’ on Calton Hill, the old Royal High School, the Parthenon model designed by Thomas Hamilton in the late 1820s, described as ‘one of the setpieces of archaeological Hellenism in Europe’³. To some, it looks like a parliament; it feels like one, if the model is that of 19th century bourgeois nationalism, an edifice for an emerging class wresting power from a landed aristocracy, but hardly one for the complex 21st century world. In Jonathan Hearn’s words⁴: ‘It was a style that expressed the rationalism and austere liberalism of the governing classes of 18th and 19th century Scotland, especially in Edinburgh’.

Why, then, some asked, not make do with the Assembly Hall on the Mound, already acting as temporary home until the new one is ready? Why did we need another one? In short, because it belongs to someone else: a national church, which, in the long years without a parliament, took on the mantle and responsibility to speak for Scotland. This too is history. Further, austere and draughty churches are poor models for the politics of the 21st century with their argument and their flyting. Scotland is, for good or ill, no longer a godly realm. In short, the models we have to hand do not fit our needs: Scotland is not ruled by a patrician class, nor by a burgher class, nor by a godly class. Maybe we need a parliament *sans* class; classy, to be sure, but the property of the people, the common weal: a parliament for a new century.

DECIPHERING SCOTLAND

To answer the question who and what is a parliament for, we need to first ask what Scotland is for. What is this country about? It is a seeming bundle of contradictions. It is one of the oldest nations in Europe, established more or less in its present frontiers a millennium ago, and yet there is an important sense in which it can be said not to exist. Evidently, it is not a state in the fully formal sense of that term. Here we enter a somewhat confusing array of terms. Despite the tendency to use ‘state’ and ‘nation’ as synonyms, they actually belong to different conceptual realms. ‘State’ is, in essence, a

³ Miles Glendinning et al., *A History of Scottish Architecture*, Edinburgh University Press, 1996, p.202

⁴ Jonathan Hearn, ‘Big City: civic symbolism and Scottish Nationalism’, in *Scottish Affairs*, 42, 2003, p.65

Scottish Affairs

political-constitutional term for a self-governing territory. 'Nation', on the other hand, is a cultural concept which is not predicated on political self-governance, but upon the sense of felt distinctiveness; the right, if not the practice, of self-determination. In short, the nation is an 'imagined community'⁵, bounded by place, territory, as well as by time, by history. Scotland's people certainly had a sense of themselves as a distinct nation as early as the middle of the 14th century, forged in the wars with its larger and more powerful neighbour to the south. Yet it more or less willingly gave up its constitutional independence less than 400 years later, and embraced union with its auld enemy. In so doing, it transformed itself economically to become the second country in the world to industrialise, and to punch well above its political weight in the context of the greatest empire the world has yet seen.

Why, then, re-invent a parliament given up nigh on three hundred years ago in 1707? A nation once again? Well, no – Scotland has never ceased to be a nation. Scotland is a land, occupied by diverse peoples down through the ages who forged themselves into a community by having sufficient interests in common, and creating social institutions to match, the 'holy trinity' of law, education and religion. But wait, said some: Scots are too like their soudrons, the English, to make that much difference. After all, they speak (a version of) the same language – English; they have been formally protestant since the middle of the 16th century until it ceased to matter much in the 20th century; and above all, they have shared the same state, the United Kingdom, for almost three hundred years. All that is true, but barely touches the issue. Differences like language may, at times, be necessary, but insufficient to explain alternative imagined communities. After all, Americans speak English, and they are not 'English'; so why should the Scots be? The point is that Scotland is not England because the imagining process is different, and it is sustained by a different history, culture and set of institutions. True, not being English matters, but only contra – vis-à-vis – not against, at least not since 1707.

A deeper puzzle remains. Why now? Why the recovery of a parliament almost three hundred years after giving it up? The veteran Nationalist, Winnie Ewing, opened the first session of the 1999 parliament as the

⁵ *Benedict Anderson's phrase, the title of his book **Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism**, Verso, London, 1996.*

Holyrood in an Understated Nation

'mother' of the nation, its oldest elected member, by implying that there had simply been a hiatus between 1707 and 1999. The link between the old and the new, the pre-modern and the democratic, the independent and devolved, was made with some elegance, if some historical inexactitude. Following the Union of 1707, Scotland was always something of an anomaly. It had successfully defended itself against England in the wars of independence at the turn of the 14th century, before helping to create 'Great Britain' under the Union of Crowns when its king, James VI, succeeded to the English throne in 1603. Just over a century later, Scotland and England combined their legislatures in the Union of Parliaments under a single parliament – in London – to form the basis of the United Kingdom. In this venture, Scotland was certainly not a colony; it had not been conquered by England, unlike its celtic neighbours, Ireland and Wales. Rather, it successfully sustained its independence before entering as a (junior) partner into a British state on the verge of developing into the most successful empire the world had hitherto seen. The 'auld enemy' – England – became its newest and closest ally, usurping the auld alliance with France dating back to the 13th century.

In truth, the Union was, and remains, a marriage of convenience – a '*mariage de raison*' – for Scotland. It gave up its parliament at a time when democracy, as we know it, did not exist in exchange for a share in the economic and political spoils of empire, and opportunities for Scots on the make. Our autonomy was underpinned by institutional arrangements which, at the time, mattered more than formal parliamentary democracy. Scotland had its legal, educational and ecclesiastical systems to run its internal, domestic affairs, and as long as these did not interfere with grand affairs of state and empire, then it was left to its own devices. There were occasions such as the Jacobite risings in the 18th century which threatened the authority of the British state, and its system of crown succession, but that state had sufficient power to crush the dissidents and ensure that Scotland was safe for the Union.

The anomaly, meanwhile, was quietly embedded into the British state. Simply put, Scotland was autonomous, with control over its domestic affairs, while governed by a single pan-British legislature in London. For most of the history of the 250 years after the Union it did not matter much. Even after the advent of universal suffrage which, to all intents and purposes, arrived only in the second decade of the 20th century, Scotland, unlike Ireland, was a full and peaceful partner in the Union. Not for it a war of liberation, throwing off

Scottish Affairs

the yoke of a 'foreign' power, as Ireland had done at the start of the 20th century. Scotland was different, ironically, because it had fought for and maintained its independence some centuries earlier, had evolved distinctive institutional and cultural ways of doing things, and took advantage of imperial opportunities out of proportion to its size and status as a power. What would have been the point of throwing off the 'English yoke' if Scots were already self-governing, and helping to run the empire? In truth, there was none, at least until the second half of the 20th century. It was largely the fault of democracy; or to be more precise, majoritarian democracy, the political will of the largest number. Universal suffrage in a state with a single legislature always had the potential for England to assert its numerical superiority over its smaller partners.

In short, the political crisis of the late 20th century arose because of the will of the (British) majority. In the single legislature at Westminster, Scots were never going to outnumber English voters, but for much of the 20th century, it mattered little, for people on both sides of the Tweed voted in similar ways. Only from the 1950s did Scotland and England diverge in their political preferences, a divergence magnified by the vagaries of the electoral system of first-past-the-post. Ultimately, by the late 1970s and 1980s, Scotland got a government England voted for, as it long had done, but by then, it mattered considerably that the ruling party did not have a political mandate in Scotland. So there entered the political lexicon the 'democratic deficit' whereby the political complexion of the British House of Commons was coloured by an English hue regardless of how Scots voted. This translated into a Conservative majority built upon English votes. The final quarter of the 20th century saw the emergence of an explicitly Nationalist party committed to ending the Union and taking Scotland back into formal independence. Faced with Unionism and Nationalism, the dying Labour government of 1979 sought, in some panic, to introduce an 'assembly' for Scotland (and one for Wales), and while a majority of Scots who voted in a referendum in that year voted yes (52%, to 48% against), it was insufficient to overcome rules rigged by opponents of constitutional change who forced the minority government to set a 40% hurdle such that this percentage of the electorate (including those not voting) had to approve before the bill was passed. That Labour government was swept from power later that year, and a unionist Conservative party held sway for the next 18 years.

Holyrood in an Understated Nation

There followed long years of agitation across a wide spectrum of political and social opinion for constitutional change to come about. Labour, initially suspicious of devolution as the thin edge of a constitutional wedge, became a cautious convert to the cause of Home Rule, of a quasi-federal United Kingdom, recognising the distinctive national polities of the non-English territories. The 1979 debacle had persuaded the constitutional middle ground of Scottish politics that neither the status quo of the Union nor formal Independence was the answer. Instead, there was a revival of the concept of 'Home Rule' invented at the end of the 19th century, ironically for Ireland, which left the Union when this modest reform was not delivered.

The language of the late 20th century spoke not of Home Rule but of 'devolution', of power delegated by Westminster to the lower tiers of government: power perhaps devolved, but power theoretically retained at the centre. This, though, was not quite how people in Scotland saw it. The recovery of a parliament in Edinburgh did not imply that the building on the banks of the Thames was paramount, even though it had the power to prorogue the powers of the devolved parliament if it saw fit. It was theoretically possible, but in practice impossible to do, for what was won in the referendum of 1979 was a stepwise shift in self-government, a move further along the spectrum of political autonomy. Scotland's parliament was seen to be a recovery of the old one, not the acceptance of agency status to carry out the wishes of Westminster.

Above all, unlike 1979, it was a 'parliament', not an 'assembly', with those powers not explicitly reserved to Westminster being implicitly devolved to Holyrood. Unlike Wales, the Scottish parliament had the power to make primary law. Indeed, what had persuaded some erstwhile opponents of Home Rule to convert to the cause had been the fact that Westminster could not adequately handle Scottish legislation, passing only a couple of bills a year at the tail-end of parliamentary business. In contrast, the Scottish parliament passed over sixty bills in its first full four-year session.

Has the Scottish anomaly been solved? Yes and no; yes, insofar as a directly elected Scottish parliament is at liberty, within the remit of the Scotland Act, to elect the government it wants and to pass the legislation it thinks fit: no, insofar as new ones are built into the constitutional system, notably that the Westminster parliament has to double up both as a UK and an English legislature, with Scottish (and Welsh) members being able to vote on purely English matters, and, of course, having no direct say in domestic affairs

Scottish Affairs

governing their own constituents (what became known as the West Lothian question after MP Tam Dalziel whose seat that once was). There is also the fact that most Scots, while recognising the primacy of Westminster as the more influential institution as far as Scotland is concerned, also think that Holyrood *should* be the more important of the two. In other words, there may be constitutional clarification, but in terms of sociological understanding, the relationship between the two parliaments is not clear in the mind of Scots. If what matters most to them are 'home' affairs – schools, housing, jobs – then the focus falls naturally on Holyrood rather than Westminster.

POLITICS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

There is, however, a bigger picture to consider. We are not dealing in zero-sum games here; winners do not take all any more. Even to suggest that one has to choose which level is paramount seems to fly in the face of what life is like in the 21st century, for power does not reside in one place. In short, it is both layered and shared. Europe, Britain, Scotland – we live in a multi-level world of inter-connecting spheres of influence. The language of 'sovereignty', the primacy of one level over the others, does not ring true. Instead, we have much more subtle and nuanced power relations; of open, not closed government. To be sure, the language of constitutional politics is still largely that of absolutes: if *they* have power, *we* won't have any, but that is largely a matter of an inherited political vocabulary derived from the 19th century. This old language spoke in capital letters and loud voices; We, The People; the Democratic Will. The trouble is that people do not listen very carefully any more. Our age is one of lower-case, softly spoken, mixed messages. Politics as a trade is held in low esteem, for there are limits to political achievement these days. The irony is that the Scottish parliament has come along precisely at a time of maximum difficulty for democratic institutions. Our representatives are told: do something, and as quickly as possible, and they more or less accede, for it is a brave politician who replies, in the face of demands, that life is much more complicated than the questioner implies.

We also live in an age in which the vocabulary of democracy is used more and more, but opportunities to implement it are ever more constrained. Above all, the global culture of the marketplace implies that everyone has equal right of access to what they want, but actually conspires to limit choices, judging them appropriate only in the context of the ability to pay the

Holyrood in an Understated Nation

price. Hence, the democracy of the marketplace is a contradiction in terms, for the market delivers, and depends on, inequalities of people's life chances, not their constitutional right to be treated equally. The dilemma for politics in the 21st century is that the extension of the market has reduced its power for manoeuvre, to deliver services on the basis of need rather than the ability to pay, while at the same time the 'consumer' demands more from their political leaders who find it, in turn, difficult to deliver. In short, the language of the 'customer' has superseded, or at best constrained, that of 'citizen'.

The Scottish parliament has been born into this culture of contradictory expectations. In the first place, it is a devolved institution with control over 'domestic' matters, and without the even limited panoply of powers over macro-economic and constitutional matters, such as they are. Secondly, it comes in to a world deeply sceptical of the political craft, and yet one overly demanding on its elected representatives to 'do something'. We can see in the short life of our parliament something of how these contradictions play out. The parliament was born in a wave of high expectations. Much has been made of the alleged fact that these expectations of the parliament in 1997 have been dashed, that the brave new Scotland has failed to materialise in the first four years of its life. In truth, the picture is much more complex. First of all, devolution is the only game in town. Only 1 in 10 want a return to the status quo ante where Scotland was governed directly from London⁶. Around 1 in 4 want some form of Independence, most in the context of a Scotland as a full member of the European Union. The majority of Scots, around 6 in 10, prefer a devolved Scottish parliament to either of these options, and this indubitably has become the new status quo.

We know from these studies of public opinion since 1997 that people in Scotland want a parliament, not so much as an end in itself, an expression of their national identity, but as a means of making a better Scotland in which to live and work. In other words, the vehicle for policy changes was to be the parliament and a devolved government, and in broad terms there has been a decline in people's expectations during the first four years of the parliament's

⁶ *Scottish Social Attitudes surveys are reported in a series of books including: L. Paterson et al., **New Scotland, New Politics?** (Polygon, Edinburgh, 2001); J. Curtice et al., **New Scotland, New Society?** (Polygon, Edinburgh, 2002); C. Bromley et al., **Devolution – Scottish Answers to Scottish Questions?** (Edinburgh University Press, 2003).*

Scottish Affairs

existence. Much, for example, has been made of surveys showing that there has been a fall in the number of people over this period expecting improvements in Scotland's economy, and standards in the health service (roughly, from two-thirds to less than a half), and an even greater one as regards the quality of education. These headline changes, however, conceal more subtle ones, namely, that people have levelled down expectations rather than moved to outright hostility. Further, rightly or wrongly, they blame this downturn on Westminster rather than upon Holyrood, which receives the plaudits among those judging that things have got better. In short, the electorate does not believe that actually having a parliament has made things worse, merely that devolution has not had the immediate pay-off they had initially hoped for in those first few euphoric months. While devolution has not had quite the immediate impact on policy outcomes, there is little evidence that the whole political project of Home Rule has been undermined. Indeed, the most common response to disappointment with the Scottish parliament is to demand that it is given *more* political powers, not fewer⁷.

The downsizing of expectations appears to be happening across most of the western world, and not simply in Scotland, or the United Kingdom. There is fairly widespread disenchantment with the political elites in most countries, as well as with the capacity of political parties to deliver. In other words, the decline in political trust and the efficacy of the system is fairly endemic, and it is Scotland's (mis)fortune to find itself caught up in this tide. While most Scots recognise that Westminster is in practice a more powerful parliament than Holyrood, they consistently prefer (by a majority of 4 to 1) Holyrood to be the more powerful – hardly evidence that the whole devolution project has run into the sand. Indeed, the differential between trusting Edinburgh over London remains at a broadly similar ratio of 3 to 1 even though the absolute numbers trusting either tier of government has diminished. With hindsight, the late 1990s was a period of unusually high expectations among the UK electorate as a whole, as a discredited Conservative government was swept from office in the UK, with the ruling party managing to return no MPs whatsoever in both Scotland and Wales, thus paving the way for constitutional change on a hitherto unforeseen scale in British politics.

⁷ Since 1999, around 6 out of 10 people have consistently agreed that the Scottish parliament should be given more powers.

HOLYROOD STANES

In Walter Scott's novel, **Heart of Midlothian**, Mrs Howden complains: 'I ken, when we had a King, and a chancellor and Parliament – men o' our ain, we could aye peeble them wi' stanes when they werena gude bairns – But naebody's nails can reach the length o' Lunnon.' Scott's character was complaining that she and her neighbours did not have the satisfaction of witnessing the hanging of Captain Porteous, whose soldiers had fired on the Edinburgh mob. Thankfully, the death penalty has been abolished, but the appeal of the quotation to many contemporary commentators, frequently out of context, is that Scots are deemed to be intimate with their politicians, and, at least metaphorically, to be able to peeble them with stanes. While Scottish parliamentarians in 2003 have not exactly been pelted with stones in the Lawnmarket, they have not been showered in bouquets either. Much of this is, in truth, unfair. There has never been a political institution which, in the full glare of publicity, has had to grow up so quickly. Its founding principles – sharing power, accountability, access and participation, and equality of opportunity – ensured that it set for itself the stiffest of examinations. There must have been politicians who regretted making the parliament such an open and accessible place, especially in the face of a critical and competitive press. Those who came from Westminster with its douce and arcane rules and procedures, rarely open to public gaze, probably never recovered from the shock of adapting to the 21st century.

The building of the new Scottish parliament at Holyrood became, it seems, something of a lightning conductor for general political disenchantment. Nailing a £40m price-tag to the mast was always going to make life more difficult than it already was, and appreciating building costs have been, in truth, too good a political story for the media not to run with. Nevertheless, who carries that particular can is not at all clear. Thus, a survey in July 2003⁸ suggested that the electorate were not prepared to blame any single individual or group. The political class of MSPs were deemed most to blame, followed by the contractors, then Westminster/The Treasury, architects and civil servants, with Donald Dewar and the present First Minister, Jack McConnell, taking up the rear. On the other hand, a clear majority of people were prepared to agree with the view that 'when the project is completed, Scotland

⁸ *NFO System Three for The Herald* reported on 7 July 2003

Scottish Affairs

will have a parliament building of which it can be proud', and only about one-third dissenting. The Scottish Social Attitudes survey of 2003 confirmed this ambivalence. Opinion was fairly evenly spread between those who thought it should never have been built (46%), and those who thought it was needed but that it was too costly (45%), with 7% supporting the view that it would all be worth it in the end. To complicate matters, fully half of those who said that it should never have been built also wanted the parliament to have more powers. One is reminded of Walt Whitman's comment: 'Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)' ('Song of Myself', 1855). What these data suggest is that Scots are at worst ambivalent, and at best sophisticated, about the political project of Home Rule and its embodiment in the Holyrood building.

The focus on a 'value for money' debate is an interesting one, because behind it lies important issues of social as well as economic worth. It is in fact a debate confusing value with cost, and it is interesting that political opponents of the whole devolution project, once the battle to prevent it happening had been lost, have sought to reduce its power and symbolism. The initial guesstimate of £40m appears to have been little more than a rough stab at what it would cost to build an extension to the Scottish Office at Victoria Quay, Leith. The leader of the Conservative party in the Scottish Parliament cited a letter from the then Permanent Secretary in the Scottish Office to the effect that 'The £40m figure related to a new build (at Leith) on a brownfield site to a reasonable modern standard' (**The Scotsman**, 20 August 2003). His reaction is interesting; 'That proposal sounded reasonable to me at the time, and it sounds even better now. We could have had an Asda-price Parliament – the politicians responsible for making the key decisions chose not to.' The gulf between a shopping centre model and a custom-built parliament could not be better expressed. Tagging an office-block alongside the headquarters of the Scottish civil service is perhaps indicative of the value placed upon devolution, subsumed under the issue of cost. 'Value for money' has become a code-phrase in the neo-liberal lexicon for low-cost, as well as the use of private financing on a low budget. Constructing a landmark building with a minimum life of one hundred years is quite a different matter altogether.

The rise in costs derives from a number of factors: primarily an inconsistency between the original guesstimates of cost (£10-40m in the White Paper), and their alignment with a brief which resonated with the requirement to create a

Holyrood in an Understated Nation

landmark; the transfer of patronage from the Executive to the Parliament; the subsequent re-appraisal of the brief resulting in a doubling of the required floor spaces to some 33,000 square metres; the prolongation of the design and construction phases caused by this; and the development and resolution of blast protection. All this has given critics something of a field day, notably those sections of the media who were hostile to the whole Home Rule project from the outset, and who found it less easy to attack the project after the 1997 referendum gave it overwhelming backing. There are those keen to point out that one could get so many hospitals/schools for the money, but these tend to be political critics who were never very keen on public investment at all.

Those supportive of the project pointed out the long history of high and sometimes escalating costs of such projects: in recent years, the Greenwich Dome, Portcullis House (an office block adjacent to the palace of Westminster which came in at £250m) and the British Library which ran out at £400m, well above the original cost. Those with longer historical memories recalled the overspends on Wren's St Paul's Cathedral, and Pugin's Houses of Parliament. The journalist George Rosie commented wryly:

Holyrood's delays are as nothing to those that bedevilled Westminster. There were 33 years between the start of the work on the coffer dam in 1837 to the finishing touches in 1870. That's three decades of rows, public sackings, government inquiries, strikes, political interference and cost overruns. All of them set against a background of attacks from publicity-seeking MPs, discontented architects, outraged aesthetes and a press which then, as now, likes nothing more than a rammy in high places.
(**The Sunday Herald**, 1 February 2004).

The taxpayer ended up paying £3m (£175m at today's prices), five times the original estimate. Neither did it escape the notice of some that many of the most spectacular overspends were on London projects. Nationalists in particular found it difficult to be too critical of the project in the light of these spends. If such costly projects were good enough for London, then they felt honour-bound to support a suitably expensive Scottish parliament, while carping at the manner in which spending had risen. Sydney Opera House provides an example that such projects are not all British, and that ultimately

Scottish Affairs

cost considerations can be overtaken by the cultural and architectural symbolism of the building.

There is a fundamental and interesting issue behind the apparent receding popularity of the parliament, and that relates to the 'ownership' of the institution. Put simply, whose parliament is it anyway? This is a serious question which grows out of the long process of Home Rule. The failure of Westminster parties to deliver devolution – and let us remember that a majority voted yes in the 1979 referendum – meant that it was left to civil society to agitate for the parliament. The twenty year campaign since 1979 was waged by a motley crew of campaigners and civil associations from trade unions to churches to women's groups, all unelected, but all donning the mantle of speaking for Scotland. Some parliamentarians like to think that as elected representatives, they alone represent the nation, but that is not how the nation sees it. Parliament became the people's forum, on loan to the political class, as long as they treated it, and them, with some respect, given the partiality of politics in the 21st century. Power sharing – between government, parliament and people – is a three-way system, and not the preserve of any single agent. The Scottish doctrine of 'popular sovereignty' juxtaposed against 'crown sovereignty' as practised at Westminster may be more of an aspiration than a legal principle, but nonetheless it gels with the view that politics, and the parliament, aren't everything. The people are paramount.

Parliament as brickbat reflects how quickly and deeply it has embedded itself in Scottish life. In its short but eventful existence, it has become the institution to be talked about, though not always in a complimentary way. In truth, it is a remarkable institution. It is much more representative of Scottish society than one could have imagined; it has one of the highest proportions of women members (39%) in the western world; it has a multi-party system which places it in the mainstream of European politics: a social democratic party, a regionalist/nationalist one, a centre Liberal party, a right of centre Conservative party, a socialist one, and a Green. In short, it is a rainbow parliament, from red to blue, with all shades in between, including tartan. It has a coalition government which circumvents the notorious elective dictatorships which Westminster usually produces. Despite having limited powers, the parliament has carved out distinctive policies: abolishing upfront tuition fees for students, repealing homophobic legislation, introducing free

Holyrood in an Understated Nation

personal care for the elderly, passing land reform legislation, along with over 60 bills in the first session of parliament.

A PARLIAMENT FOR A FUTURE

So what sort of parliament has been built at the start of the new millennium? What is the grammar, syntax and vocabulary of Holyrood? In its white paper of 1997 called 'Scotland's Parliament', the Scottish Office laid down this requirement: 'It will be an important symbol of Scotland. It should pay tribute to the country's past achievements and signal its future aspirations'⁹. Andy MacMillan, friend and professional colleague of Enric Miralles, and one of the judges for the competition, observed that the new parliament had to be 'dynamic, interactive, transparent, in the spirit of open government; a public building of international significance owned by the nation in an appropriate public setting. Not a rented-back commercial investment in some developer's urban package'. Miralles himself observed that the purpose of the building was to mediate between town and land.

The classical project of the 19th century saw parliaments as tabernacles, sacred groves tended by a professional priesthood equipped with esoteric rituals. The people could look, but they could not touch, and rarely did they understand what was going on, nor were they encouraged to. They could worship from the back, but were forbidden to approach the inner tabernacle. This is the image of Corinthian columns, gothic cathedrals, please-keep-off-the-grass, not for the likes of you. This is the expression of the grand narrative of modernity, rather than the *bricolage* of the 21st century.

To caricature: modern vocabularies are quite different:

old	new
imperial	domestic
closed	open
top-down	bottom-up
transmitting	receiving

⁹ *The Scottish Office 'Scotland's Parliament', cm.3658, July 1997, para.10.3.*

Scottish Affairs

command	reflect
power	legitimacy
town	land
monument	anent humanity
Functionally subservient	Functionally driven
eclectic	futuristic

Miralles tried to express this in his architecture. He described his work as ‘very removed from the task of representing ideal situations’, characterised by ‘strange shapes ... dimensions so far from any ideal ... different topographies’¹⁰. Miralles likened his projects to ‘designs in the weave of a carpet’, calling for ‘repeated actions: a series of movement flows which unite these works, creating common themes, reconciling individual situations, mixing different programs, and extending every construction to form a series of relationships with its surroundings’ (ibid.). Many have observed Miralles’ liking for the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh who, in the words of one commentator¹¹, ‘did not just absorb the potential of plant forms as a source of applied ornament; the principles of their formal evolution informed his designs’.

The site itself is crucial to Miralles’ design. He commented: ‘we don’t want to forget that the Scottish parliament will be in Edinburgh, but it will belong to Scotland, to the Scottish Land’. His key idea was that the Scottish parliament mediated between town and land, and he sought to avoid it translating into a fortress of power. This openness derived not simply from the lines of the site itself, but from the ambivalence with which Scotland as a whole viewed the Edinburgh parliament. It happens to be in Edinburgh, but it belongs to Scotland. Capture must be avoided; its symbolism opens up to the

¹⁰ Tagliabue, B.(ed.) *Enric Miralles, Works and Projects, 1975-1995* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1996), p7; quoted in Hermansen, C. ‘The New Scottish Parliament Building by Miralles-Tagliabue Architects’, *Mac Journal Five*.

¹¹ P.Robertson *Charles Rennie Mackintosh: art is the flower* (Pavilion Books, London, 2002)

Holyrood in an Understated Nation

iconography of the land. And not only the land: the sea. In the words of the poet Kathleen Jamie, ‘an upturned boat – a watershed’¹².

DECODING HOLYROOD

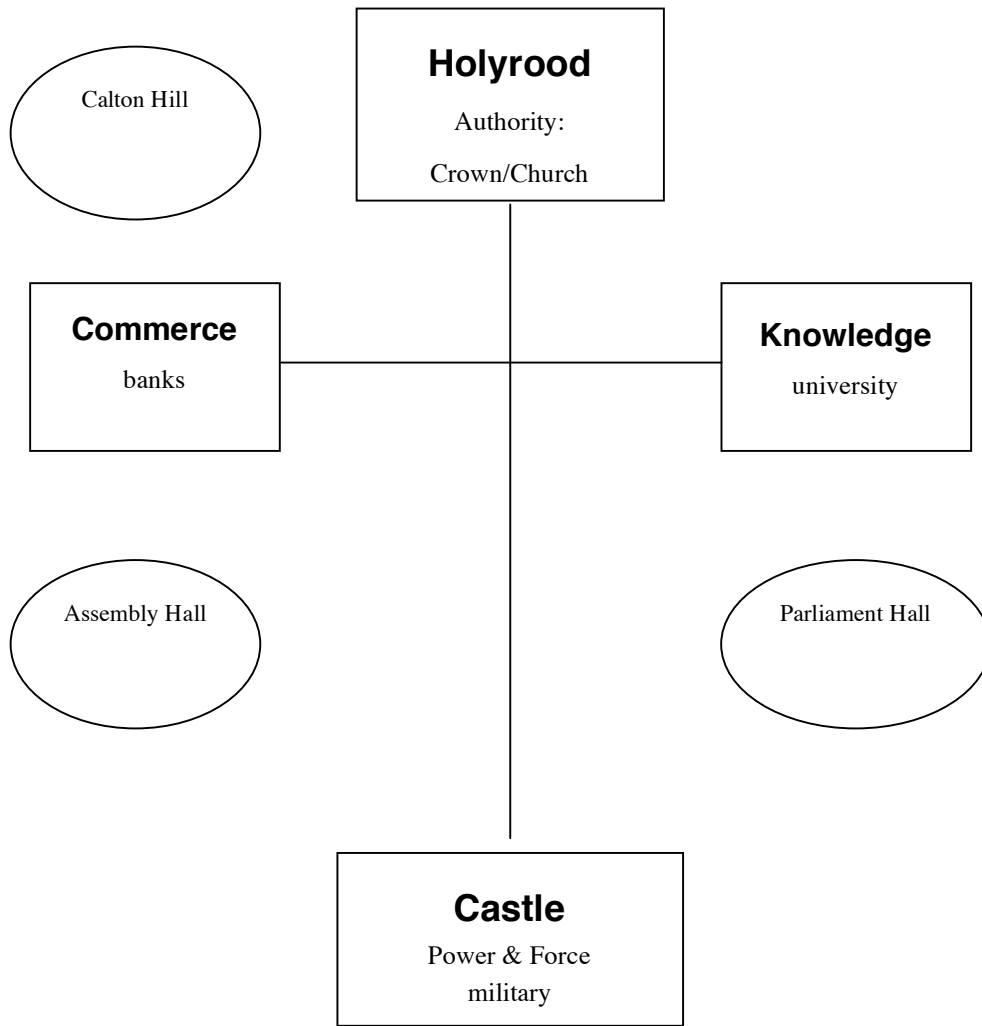
The site itself is a central part of this message. It is not simply the complex of buildings which gives the parliament its power, but the resonances of the landscape. In truth, this is a powerful place with multiple and evocative layerings of meaning. Put simply, this cruciform (holy-rood, after all is the holy cross) is a diagrammatic representation of four of the key bases of power in any society: military, political, cultural, commercial.

The historic source of power is best represented by force or military might, in this instance by the castle. Here is top-down – ‘high’ – power architecturally expressed by the symbol of the fortress, dominating the cityscape: high state power, reinforced by distance on the hill. The limitations of ‘force’, better perhaps captured by ‘might’, in German, *macht*, derive from its naked and overbearing qualities¹³. To work, might has frequently to be present, to impinge directly on the powerless. When coercion is absent, it is difficult to enforce obedience. The coercive capacity of military might is terrifying as long as its agents are able to lay hands on the subjects. Alice’s Red Queen, after all, was only powerful if her soldiers had heads to chop off. Power, in other words and in this context, is despotic rather than diffused.

¹² Kathleen Jamie ‘For a new Scottish Parliament’, in *Without Day: proposals for a new Scottish Parliament*, pocketbooks, 04, 2000.

¹³ The German social theorist, Max Weber, made the distinction between ‘force’ and ‘authority’, *macht* and *herrschaft*, the basis of his analysis of social power at the beginning of the 20th century, in his magnum opus, *Economy and Society*.

Scottish Affairs



Holyrood in an Understated Nation

At the other end, the bottom end of the High Street, lies much more subtle, diffused and longer-lasting forms of power, what we might call 'authority', or 'low' power, in German, *herrschaft*. This is power cloaked or disguised by legitimacy such that people obey its strictures when it is neither obvious nor present. It represents a much more nuanced and intimate form of power – domestic and domesticated. 'Authority' inculcates obedience by becoming routinised through social institutions. In medieval times, this was symbolised through the power of the church, or by obedience to the royal personage of the monarchy, the traditional source of charismatic authority. People obey, in other words, because in some real sense they want to, because it matters to them, rather than because they are coerced. What we find at the foot of the High Street are historic layers of such power: church, king, and now parliament.

The metaphor which comes readily to mind is *palimpsest*, originally referring to writing parchment used and re-used, whereby the imprints of one age are overlain on another, thereby producing a layering of cultures and meanings. The surface is used and re-used to suit the needs and aspirations of the present without eradicating entirely what was there before, which seeps through, as it were, leaving its footprint for others to follow. There is nothing inevitable about this process, however. We gang our ain gyte in the landscape, but we frequently fall in with the steps of those who have gone before us. That is nicely captured in physical space at 'Holyrood', first an abbey, and then a palace, and now in the 21st century, a parliament: – church, king, polity – layer upon layer, drawing up from below the meanings of previous ages and refashioning them for the new. In the middle ages, Holyrood was also a place of sanctuary, religious, criminal and latterly for debtors, whereby those within its boundaries were protected from the authorities¹⁴. Holyrood was one of the largest sanctuaries in Scotland, its girth running round all of Arthur's Seat to the edge of Duddingston Loch. Within its confines people could take refuge, and even set up residence on payment of a fee to the Baillie who controlled life therein. This was no lawless place, but strictly controlled and managed. The system of protection was not abolished until the end of the 19th century, though it is claimed that sanctuary rights in Holyrood Park have never been formally repealed. 'It is

¹⁴ C.R. Wickham-Jones *Arthur's Seat and Holyrood Park: a visitor's guide*, HMSO, 1996, ch.4.

Scottish Affairs

said that the Park is still a place of sanctuary for debtors and the office of Baillie still exists, though whether the modern system and organisations such as the Inland Revenue would take a benign eye /f our old rights and traditions seems doubtful' (ibid., p.31)¹⁵.

All this helps to impart a sense of mystique to the site of Holyrood, a sacral space in anthropological terms within which the normal rules of social conduct do not seem to apply quite in the way they do elsewhere. It is symbolic territory, sacred space, in which certain key rituals and activities are carried out. The symbolism of Holyrood, the layering of its sources of power through the ages, means that it is a much more potent site than, say, an extension to an office block on a brownfield dockland site at Leith. Holyrood has the power to conjure up magic, is able to draw up to itself the symbols and associations surrounding it. In short, the charisma lies partly in the site itself, in its historical and geographic associations. It is coupled with new-build which might harness the old, but is not dependent upon it. In a lecture at the Edinburgh Festival in August 2003, the recently-retired presiding officer of the Scottish Parliament, Sir David Steel, remarked that the late First Minister, Donald Dewar, had commented to him: 'Don't you think, David, that a new Scottish parliament after an absence of 300 hundred years merits a new building and not just a jumble of old ones?' (**The Herald**, 19 August 2003). An unusually literate and well-read politician like Dewar was not proposing a modern office block because it was functional and cheap; he was recognising the powerful symbolism of synthesising the power of the new and the patina of the old. In her testimony to the Holyrood Inquiry, the broadcaster Kirsty Wark, who was one of the competition judges, observed: '... I think his [Donald Dewar's] overriding concern was to get a landmark, a great building for Scotland, for the people of Scotland. I do not think he had any arrogance about what his contribution was going to be. And I certainly do not think he wanted a grand building; grand was never in it. He wanted a landmark building; he wanted something that suggested a new modern Scotland' (Holyrood Inquiry transcript, 26 November 2003, para. 120). In the

¹⁵ *One of the visual icons of the new parliament, the windows on the MSP office block –the wee windaes – are reputed to have been inspired by Henry Raeburn's painting of the minister skating on Duddingston Loch, which is within the environs of Holyrood Park.*

Holyrood in an Understated Nation

case of the parliamentary complex, of course, the old – in the form of Queensberry House – was incorporated into the fabric¹⁶.

The parliament should not simply be seen on a vertical axis on the High Street, but also on the horizontal. Here, it draws upon the two other sources of power and legitimacy, commerce and education: money and knowledge, symbolised by the proximity of the headquarters of Scotland's two major banks, Royal Bank of Scotland, and HBOS (Bank of Scotland/Halifax) to the north, and the University of Edinburgh to the south. Indeed, Miralles liked to refer to his parliament complex as a 'campus', a cloister for reasoned debate and argument, a debating chamber for measured deliberation and decision. In his sketches for the competition, Miralles wrote:

I imagine that a Parliament should be organised like a university campus.
A special kind of knowledge is produced...

Parliaments need to be different places where to think,
to walk ...

The Palace should not be the model.

The Dome should not be the model.

He was also influenced, among others such as Aalto and Kahn, by Le Corbusier, and in particular his chapel at Ronchamp. This can be most easily seen in the public space entrance hall, evocative of cathedral (crosses on the ceiling) and railway station/meeting space.

The parliament addresses the elements, looking up to Salisbury Crags, and the Radical Road in particular: in that respect, more political symbolism. It was conceived by Walter Scott and his friends in the 1820s as a project to employ (radical) weavers who had been dispossessed by economic and technological change, and who became a political symbol for radicals down through the ages. Exiting the parliament, one's eyes are drawn up to the Crags and the Radical Road, a reminder of the continuities between past and present. Parliament is not simply built on the outcrop, but symbolises the

¹⁶ *Queensberry House is also marked out as the home of the parliament's library, and Donald Dewar's considerable book collection, donated to it.*

Scottish Affairs

outcrop, the locale for jostling, arguing, flyting, contradicting¹⁷. The building complex is also designed to be seen from above, for the roofscapes with their distinctive boats motif are a vital part of the design. In other words, this is a building designed to be seen, not simply used.

In Scotland we are never far away from elemental landscape, and it plays a central part in our imaginings about identity. In the Highlands, for example, the Gaelic concept of *duthchas* implies the notion of collective heritage, of a hereditary, elemental, connection to the land. Much of the controversy about land has derived from a sense of the indissoluble and inalienable right of people to the land on which they have lived and worked¹⁸. 'Country', too, carries its own set of meanings. The cultural sociologist Raymond Williams pointed out that: "country" can mean both a nation and part of a land; the "country" can be the whole society as well as its rural area. In the long history of human settlements, this connection between the land from which directly or indirectly we all get our living and the achievements of human society has been deeply known'. 'Country' in other words, has come to stand for the essential values and images of place, hence the fusion of land and nation. Further, national identity frequently depends on an association with landscape, topography mapped, elaborated and enriched as homeland. More specifically, we think of Scotland as a landscape of the mind, a place of the imagination (though certainly not imaginary). Nations have imagined geographies acting as representations of the country. In other words, 'nature' and 'nation' are intimately linked.

It is no accident, then, that Enric Miralles, uniquely in the competition, caught this sense of attachment to land in the building, not only in mediating between town and land, but in Land, in the sense that this was to be a parliament for all Scots who inhabited the space of Scot-Land. This has older cultural and political resonances, for embedded in Scottish identity is the sense of belonging not to a tribe and ethnic group, but a place, a territory. There is useful irony here too in the fact that eligibility to vote in Scottish

¹⁷ Neal Ascherson has made this the central theme of his book *Stone Voices*, which treats Scotland itself as archaeological metaphor, stratified layers of meanings and identities passed down through ages and shaped into new forms by later generations, but never quite losing the residues of the old.

¹⁸ J. Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community*, John Donald, Edinburgh, 1976

Holyrood in an Understated Nation

parliamentary elections is more open than for Westminster, defined as it is as a 'local' election, and hence open to those who are residents rather than citizens. If you live here, you belong here.

Defining 'Scots' in territorial rather than ethnic terms is the reflection of a long history of a country regionally, culturally, and ethnically diverse. There were many different ways of being a Scot, and only the crown, the monarch, had that capacity to impose a shared identity. That is why there is the tradition of referring to the monarch as king/queen of Scots, rather than 'of Scotland'¹⁹. It was the early monarchy, most obviously at the time of the Wars of Independence, which became the rallying institution, the symbol of popular sovereignty, but always on a contingent basis. After all, the famous declaration of Arbroath of 1320 was careful to tell the monarch that if he/she did not do the will of the people, they would seek out another who would: The declaration is best remembered for its declamatory words: 'For as long as 100 hundred of us remain alive we will never submit to English rule. For it is not honour and glory for which we fight but freedom, which no man loses except with his life'. What is revealing is the statement immediately preceding: 'Yet if he [the King] give up what he has begun, seeking to make us or our kingdom subject to the king of England or to the English, we would strive at once to drive him out as an enemy and a subverter of his own right and ours, and we would make some other man who is able to defend us our king.' In short, we will accept you if you do our will. If not, not. Thus, there is a body of history and constitutional theory which derives authority less from the crown and more from the people. The monarch has legitimacy insofar as s/he conforms to, and expresses, the will of the people. Why should this delving into constitutional history matter? It does so because this is a parliament for a particular kind of people. At the opening of the parliament in July 1999, Donald Dewar said: 'This is about more than our politics and our laws. This is about who we are, how we carry ourselves.' We draw up our own history and traditions, our sense of self, and embed them in the fabric of our new parliament.

¹⁹ *Sir David Steel, the first presiding officer of the Scottish parliament, addressed the monarch as 'Queen of Scots' at the formal opening of the parliament on 1 July 1999.*

EPILOGUE: ROOTS AND ROUTES

Buildings are not simply bricks and mortar. Behind the controversy over cost, size, completion dates, is a much more significant symbolic battle over what Scotland is and where it is going. Those who fear the break-up of Britain recognise in their own way this symbolism. If the parliament has limited powers, is housed in a modern office-block cum shopping centre, then its power to represent as well as to re-present is significantly curtailed. It is very unlikely to carry the force, the power, to act as a focus for change. In this sense, buildings are not inert, not simply the outcomes of decisions; they have the power to signify and move to political action. They energise by remaking our sense of being a people. Throughout history, political change has frequently involved the capture and occupation, sometimes symbolic, often actual, of key sites: castles, parliaments, palaces and squares. Enric Miralles and Donald Dewar knew in their bones the power of place, both as an expression of what had been, but above all the power to move, to change, to transform. Miralles used his leaves and twigs motif in a highly symbolic way, to evoke fluidity and movement, of parliament running into the land, into Scot-Land. We are dealing here with a terrain of power, the power to charge, to move to action. This parliament is a hinge between our past, present and future. Crucially, it connects roots and routes: reaching deep into the past, reading the signs and symbols, but projecting forward into the future, offering signposts on a journey to an undetermined future. It is this power to move, to transform, to stand for what we wish it to signify. This is not an administrative office block, but the democratic crucible in which Scotland's future will ultimately be decided, and on a map as yet unwritten.

October 2004