

## **REVIEW: ADMINISTRATIVE DEVOLUTION**

*Richard Parry*

James Mitchell, **Governing Scotland: the Invention of Administrative Devolution**, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 259 pp, £50.00, ISBN 0 333 74323 7.

Many will reach for the bookshop shelf eager to see a book by James Mitchell of the University of Strathclyde about Scottish government under devolution, only to feel disappointment not just in the prohibitive hardback-only price but at the non-contemporary subject-matter. It is in fact based upon work done in the early 1980s for Mitchell's doctoral thesis and is a reminder that, as well as being one of the leading analysts of Scottish government and politics, he is also a master of the archives – work in which is going to receive a new lease of life as the official work on devolution mark 1 in the 1970s becomes available after 30 years. The action in the present volume is mainly set in the period from the 1880s to the 1930s and has the appeal of a historical study of an age now retreating from memory, but it also has many resonances for our understanding of what has been happening since 1999.

In a sparkling introduction worthy of a wide readership, Mitchell sees the Scottish Office as a 'a pressure group representing Scottish interests within British central government ... it is not unusual that a Department has a client group with which it interacts forming a series of policy communities, but the Scottish Office was unusual in that this client group was a nation' (p.2). This task mixes symbol and substance, and the later chapters use detail archive material to trace how it was carried out. Most of this relates to administrative procedures in particular functional areas like education, agriculture and the poor law. The detail here is certainly thesis-like and the chapters distinct

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from one another, but it is good to have secure archive-based appraisal of the early history of Scottish administration by a political scientist, following H.J. Hanham's pioneering work in the 1960s.

The 'invention' that Mitchell describes is the consolidation of disparate boards and commissions into an administrative organ around the office of the Secretary of State for Scotland, first mooted in the 1880s (p.40) but taking years to achieve. The process culminated in the establishment of the Scottish Office in St Andrew's House, Edinburgh, in 1939 as the corporate devolved Scottish administration, with the 'departments' within it non-statutory subdivisions (the original Scottish Office from 1885 was different, a small group of London-based officials serving the Scottish Secretary, an office newly-established after popular agitation in Scotland).

The road from 1885 to 1939 was rocky, as Scottish pressure for administrative devolution faced English reservations about lack of uniformity within Britain. This kind of tension – still felt in the 1970s devolution proposals, but much muted by the 1990s – is well traced by Mitchell in fields like law and order, education, agriculture and health. The administrative arrangements he describes were an obsolescent jumble – with education in theory run by a committee of the Privy Council – and the merits of transferring responsibilities and personnel from Whitehall to Edinburgh a constant background theme. The argument that, with Parliament in London, ministers and senior officials should be there also held sway for long. Any change was liable to be characterised as a 'slippery slope' to home rule and independence. This debate interacted with a strong Scottish sentiment in favour of locally-based boards, some of which were created late in the day (especially Health in 1919) even as Boards were being turned into ministries in England. It took two reorganisations, in 1928 and 1939, before an Edinburgh-based but non-board structure won the day. Mitchell traces the shifting political currents beneath these debates with insight and a care for detail.

The interest of this for today is that the repatriation of Scottish administration to Edinburgh also marked the submersion by the Whitehall administrative civil servant norms of the Scottish and professional norms of the experts who previously ran the boards and commissions. Instead of an externally-focused central administration closely tied to what would now be called service delivery, there was to be a generalist cadre orientated to the political management of issues by their ministers. This had great benefits for the

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corporate cohesion of the Scottish Office, especially after finance and personnel management were unified in the early 1970s, and it has been carried forward into the Scottish Executive, which has avoided departmental 'silos' weighing in on behalf of ministers. But it also represented a rejection of an earlier Scottish tradition of local, expert administration, an equivocal attitude to local government, and civil service behaviour set by Whitehall norms. Some of the early problems of devolution can be traced to this approach.

One of the chapters in the book is based on recent work by Mitchell – a discussion of territorial financial mechanisms, including the much-mentioned but little understood Goschen formula. Mitchell traces this authoritatively from Goschen's budget speech of 1888 onwards and shows that it was originally an attempt to apply a 'fair shares' formula to United Kingdom public finances. The exchanges between Scottish and Treasury officials quoted in the chapter have a contemporary ring. Mitchell regards Goschen's 11/80ths formula as a crude and arbitrary fraction of limited practical application that became a myth of financial justice for Scotland (p.174). This important chapter should not get lost from the literature on the Barnett formula and fiscal autonomy.

Mitchell's book is full of elegantly-expressed detail and is a treat to read for students of modern Scottish history and politics. There is a delightful couple of pages for Lord Fraser's attention on the building of St Andrew's House, with Ramsay MacDonald's suggestion that the cost should be tolerated because 'every bankrupt country in Europe can find money for such a worthy undertaking' (p.145) and the opinion of the Home Office in 1938 about possible air attacks on it that 'Edinburgh is not particularly high on the vulnerable list, although of course, it is on the way to Glasgow' (p.146).

The concluding chapter sets out in fairly brief compass Mitchell's thesis that the evolution of the Scottish Office is an underrated factor in the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. Using historic institutionalist theory, he suggests that once the Scottish Office was in place 'the status quo was on the side of Scottish distinctiveness' (p.209). Because Mitchell's data in the present book come from the period before the Scottish Office became an integrated entity in 1939 – and only operating with full force once devolution became a political theme again in the early 1950s – his conclusion is setting out the need for a history of the 60-year life of Scottish Office from

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1939 to 1999 based on archive study, one which he would be uniquely qualified to write.

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