

REVIEW: SCOTTISH SOCIAL WELFARE UNDER DEVOLUTION

Richard Parry

John Stewart, **Taking Stock: Scottish Social Welfare under Devolution**,
Bristol: The Policy Press, 2004, 171 pp, pb, £19.99, ISBN 1 86134 523
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From the leafy suburbs of Oxford Brookes University, Scottish historian John Stewart has assiduously kept up with developments in Scottish social policy between 1999 and 2003 and produced a most useful, basically chronological account. It is very nicely written and always clear. The structure is not ambitious (issues and points one after the other) but it is appropriate and easy to follow. The author has digested an impressive range of reports, websites, briefing papers and newspaper articles with skill. The book should have a reasonable shelf-life until nearer the 2007 Holyrood elections, though in areas where the Executive sets out its achievements and objectives every year the reliance on 2002 material in much of the book is a drawback. Policy Press are to be congratulated on the paperback release of a book in this field, to be followed by a collection on Scottish social policy edited by Gerry Mooney and Gill Scott in 2005. The book is produced to the Press's normal high standards, with a moving picture of Donald Dewar and a young child on the front cover.

The book is welcome and overdue. John English's **Social Services in Scotland** has not been revised since 1998 (fourth edition, Mercat Press, Edinburgh) and Mono Chakrabarti's **Social Welfare – Scottish Perspective** is mostly on pre-devolution policy, though not published until 2001 (Ashgate). Both of these edited books are limited and descriptive. Politics textbooks tend not to cover social policy in detail. Scottish-based social

*Richard Parry is Reader in Social Policy, School of Social and Political Studies,
University of Edinburgh.*

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policy academics like me may feel a note of reproach that it took a colleague based in Oxford to put this material together. Students and practitioners will find it useful, and it should find a place in Modern Studies courses in schools.

The book is basically a review of policy developments in the context of the academic literature. Chapters take us through financial issues; poverty and inequality; children and education; and health policy. The material is somewhat over-weighted to the pre-1997 background and to UK social policy since, reflecting Stewart's argument that these are important to an understanding of what has been happening in Scotland. The health chapter, including a discussion of free personal care, is the best in setting out an analysis of what has happened since devolution. One omission, acknowledged and explained by the author, is the lack of anything on housing. This is a gap since there has been important policy action in this area – e.g. local authority stock transfers, the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, the role of Communities Scotland and its incorporation within the Scottish Executive. Stewart goes too far in suggesting that this is justified not just because of reasons of space but because of changes in tenure patterns that predate devolution and have reduced the state's role as a housing provider. Housing policy is much wider than this. The coverage of social work services, especially in relation to criminal justice, is another gap now looking more serious with the importance of anti-social behaviour as an organising principle for social policy. It is more defensible to exclude social security, though again the detailed interactions between the Executive and the Department for Work and Pensions on matters like housing benefit and the New Deal are revealing.

The book is accurate and well-informed, an intelligent discussion well aware of policy developments and literature. The method is that of narrative contemporary history: there is no claim for a social science theoretical framework. There are no tables at all to convey statistical material: this is a gap in chapter 2 on income and expenditure and chapter 3 on poverty and inequality, although the detail is accurate. A lot of unfamiliar material from within the Executive and from those commenting upon it has been uncovered. The book is rather too dependent on lengthy use of secondary sources but the author has a good sense of how to handle them and a good feel for detail. It is interesting to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the narrative, literary approach to this material. Contemporary history uses documents and sometimes interviews to force a historical method on to events once seen as too recent to justify it. Official websites and now requests under the Freedom of Information Act enable us to build up a contemporaneous record that

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demands rapid consolidation and writing-up. The websites of the Parliament and the Executive are expanding faster than our ability to make sense of the material in them, and the traditional skills of the historian in handling the written record are of application to even the very recent past. Books like this may not break vast theoretical or even analytical ground, but they do facilitate further research and reflection.

The conclusion evaluates devolution in the context of long-standing Scottish themes such as communitarianism and a dislike of privately-produced welfare. 'Taking stock' is a modest conceptual position from which to approach these issues. But the concept is useful in promoting thought about the point when we actually should take stock. The initial agenda of the devolved administrations was driven by new Labour perspectives set between 1997 and 1999, that strange pre-dawn era in which devolution was needed as a political project but not necessarily as a policy project, because conservatism had been replaced and internal markets were being dismantled. Devolution enabled Scotland and Wales to put a barrier between them and the later reversion to market-driven and choice-driven policies at the UK level. Stewart makes the argument that Scotland is a defender of a welfare state tradition from which England is diverging – 'who is diverging from whom?' as he asks. That conclusion has become conventional wisdom and might suffice in the first term of Holyrood, but a less passive agenda is now being put in place, driven by an economics-based notion of social policy as a facilitator of supply-side skills and resources. Approaches like Stewart's that take a service-by-service approach (and an incomplete one at that) to 'Scottish social welfare' run the risk of getting left behind with the stocktaking as the enterprise is rushing off in another direction.

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