

REVIEW: SOCIAL POLICY IN SCOTLAND

Richard Parry

Gerry Mooney and Gill Scott (eds), **Exploring Social Policy in the 'New' Scotland**, Bristol: The Policy Press, 2005, 282 pp, hb, £55, ISBN 1-86134-595-X; pb, £19.99, ISBN 1-86134-594-1.

The inverted commas around 'new' in the title of this valuable edited collection say it all – is the book analysing and even-handed on the cautious and derivative approach of the McConnell administration? The editors explain that they see many continuities between pre- and post-devolution Scotland, especially in structures of inequality of power and wealth. They advance this perspective in distinction to the 'everything has now changed' approach of the devolution enthusiasts (some not a million miles from this journal) and to the attempt by Gordon Brown and associates to put Scotland in a vanguard of a modernised new Britain that new Labour is building. They speak for an older tradition, well expressed by Brown himself in 1975 in his introduction to **The Red Paper on Scotland** that 'the social and economic problems confronting Scotland arise not from national suppression nor from London mismanagement (though we have had our fair share of both) but from the uneven and uncontrolled development of capitalism and the failure of successive governments to challenge and transform it' (p.8) (the book is mentioned, but not this particular quote).

Chapters on specific services – criminal justice (Hazel Croall), health (Carol Tannahill), social work (Iain Ferguson) and education (Margaret Arnott, especially good) – are set alongside cross-cutting ones – gender (Ailsa MacKay and Morag Gillespie), racial inequality (Philomena de Lima), and urban policy (Charlie Johnstone and Chris McWilliams). These are thorough and careful and give us detail on many Executive policies. Occasionally they are catalogues of facts or trends. We could do with more on the internal

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decision-making processes in the Executive on matters like social exclusion and gender mainstreaming. Generally (the education chapter excepted) the role of politics and political personalities is downplayed even where it might explain changes like the focus on crime and anti-social behaviour by the McConnell administration. The smoking ban is applauded as a 'courageous' decision (p.212) without explaining how it came to be made. There is little about the Scottish Parliament and its role in policy development. The policy-making capacity of the Executive to generate new approaches remains one of the most problematic aspects of devolution.

The most distinctive chapters are those by one or more of the editors, also involving Lynne Poole and Usha Brown, on general political and governance issues. These present the history and institutional structure in more of a theoretical framework than is often found in Scottish policy writing, generally putting a less positive spin than usual on the extent and the value of distinctive policies. In contrast, Welsh policies are praised. This veers close to being a political manifesto ('... there are alternatives, but there needs to be a political will to pursue them in the face of New Labour dominance' (p.45)). This is especially evident in Alex Law's chapter on 'welfare nationalism', an astringent commentary on the competitiveness agenda that the Executive have embraced after 'business capture'. Fine, if you agree that 'protection against the the imposition on Scotland of a regime of deepening public sector austerity was, after all, the *raison d'être* of the Scottish Parliament' (p.79). The conclusion is pessimistic and hints at the disappointment some will feel that devolution has not been a vehicle for fundamental change.

It is refreshing to have this substantial and trenchant book written from a critical perspective. The authors set out detail rather than take refuge in generalisations. The book will be a useful briefing and stimulus to thought for all involved in Scottish politics and policy. The spelling of Sewel (as in motions) with an extra 'l' is a rare error. It is up to date through 2004. There are suggestions for further reading and recommendations of websites. The strong team of mostly west of Scotland-based authors will have much more to contribute in the years to come, and The Policy Press is to be congratulated for the paperback publication of another book on Scotland.

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