

## REVIEW: GRASPING THE THISTLE

*Brian Taylor*

Dennis MacLeod and Michael Russell, **Grasping the Thistle: How Scotland Must React to the Three Key Challenges of the Twenty First Century**, Glenadaruell: Argyll Publishing, 2006, 256 pp, pb, £7.99, ISBN: 1902831861.

It would be easy, so very easy, to tease. In truth, the authors stick their chins out so far that it seems almost churlish not to land a light cuff or two. Also, it seems instinctively Scottish. Disdain is so often our default response to anything novel, challenging or counter to the prevailing orthodoxy. I hope I can, mostly, resist the Caledonian whinge although, to be frank, vile self may get in from time to time. Perhaps, on reflection, it might be best, it might be neatest, to get the grouching out of the way first.

This book sets out to offer an alternative vision of Scottish governance, both under independence (the authors' preferred option) and under an interim arrangement, billed as the New Union. This latter state of (dis)grace – delete according to taste – would see all power transferred to Holyrood, except foreign affairs and military command, which would remain at Westminster.

So here goes with grouse number one. The authors are rather too fond of promoting their vision as 'radical'. The word is heavily over-used, from the back page blurb through Mike Russell's introduction through the three main sections on democracy, the economy and the environment. As a proud pedant, I regard the word 'radical' in much the same light as 'well-known'. If a person is genuinely well-known, then the adjective is redundant. If a person is not well-known, then the description is incorrect. Ditto, to some extent, radical, especially when the verdict is self-addressed.

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Grouse number two. Perhaps understandably, the authors permit little personal predilections to gild the simplicity of their vision. There is a lengthy section on mineral exploitation which the sensation-seekers might skip. Dennis MacLeod made his money from mining. Later, we are informed that cultural Scotland provides a 'rare example of where more spending is needed.' Aside from politics, the estimable Russell has made his name in the arts and the media. Still, this is a very minor grouse, a moorland red rather than a chunky capercaillie.

Grouse number three. The bold claims of free thinking are just a mite undermined by the 'Author's Note' from Mike Russell, slipped in at the start of the tome. Mr Russell, a former MSP, has been adopted as a Scottish Parliamentary candidate by the Scottish National Party for the 2007 elections. In the little note, he says that if there is anything in the book which counters the SNP's 'portfolio and strategy' – and there is – then it is the party line which takes 'absolute precedence' in so far as Mr Russell's role as a candidate is concerned.

Apparently, the authors sent an advance copy of the text to sundry influential thinkers, including one A. Salmond, the leader of the SNP. Mr Salmond denies being utterly disgruntled with the content. It would appear, however, that he was less than grunted. Changes were made in response to comments received from a range of sources. The author's note was duly attached. Again, it is all too easy to mock. However, I for one am inclined to be charitable. The vast majority of political candidates (of all parties) eagerly embrace Disraeli's dictum: 'Damn your principles, stick to your party!' Cheerful self-flagellants, they scarcely require whipping by the party machine.

Mike Russell has ventured from partisan politics into the realm of sentient thought. It is understandable that courage was ultimately tempered a mite by the considerations of candidacy.

To the substance, then. I found the book impressive, intriguing and well-argued although, to lodge a caveat, it was seldom all three at once. It opens by posing a challenge to the present system of democracy which the authors characterise as sterile, inflexible and unproductive. They propose a system whereby there would be three Chambers in the Scottish body politic: the people themselves, their elected representatives and a directly elected government. Decisions by chamber two, the MSPs, would only have interim force, pending ratification by regular referendums of the people (chamber one.) Later in the book, they

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advance the notion of a Citizens Commission to enact such reforms. This group might initially comprise 2000 names selected from the electoral roll, led by a 'mentor', a respected figure. From that group would emerge a working convention of 200.

MacLeod and Russell envisage that their planned reforms might generate opposition from what they call 'professional politicians'. I suspect they may be right. They note further, towards the close: 'We have no fear in saying that there are, no doubt, things in this book which may be impractical'. Once again, no arguments from me. I think there are problems with their proposed structure. Would people participate in the referendums to a sufficient degree – or would it only be those who are motivated to block change? The authors say they have no wish to 'emasculate' elected members. But, regardless, would that not be the outcome? What practical change, other than the entrenchment of division, would be effected by separating the representative and governmental strands of politics?

However, again, I am inclined to understand more and condemn less. It is healthy, indeed joyous, to read politicians criticising the over-weening power of the party system. It is frankly uplifting to find politicians who bring a sceptical eye to bear on political structures, addressing seriously and with subtlety issues far beyond the core choice of the Union or independence. Their particular solution may not find favour. Frankly, I do not expect the Citizens Convention to be convening citizens any time soon. However, in a world of bogus political certainty, enforced by bogus partisan division, it is pleasant to encounter a touch of insightful iconoclasm.

In particular, it is attractive to find the authors willing to challenge orthodoxy within the party to which they have given their loyalty. They say, for example, that the SNP should end its 'outmoded' boycott on talking with the Tories about any future arrangement for governing Scotland. They say the SNP should end its opposition to Scottish membership of NATO. Of more immediate significance, they offer new thinking on the nature of independence in this inter-dependent world – and on the possible route to independence.

The SNP presently faces a hideous dilemma. It needs devolved power in order to call a referendum on independence. To gain that devolved power, it needs a chum, a coalition partner. The Greens may be chummy – but, equally, may not have enough MSPs. The Liberal Democrats may have the numbers – but do not want to be chums as long as the SNP insists upon a referendum on

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independence.

As I write, the two parties, Lib Dems and SNP, are sporadically staring each other down. Quite understandably, neither will give way – and certainly not ahead of Holyrood elections. The pressure is, perhaps, greater upon the SNP. They have not had a taste of power yet – and good chums are so hard to find. However, sidelining the referendum would risk splitting the party. Alex Salmond is not in that business.

Looking on, MacLeod and Russell sound exasperated. They write: ‘A nationalist government should therefore honestly say that it will hold a referendum on independence when it believes – and the people believe – our nation is ready to make that step. At that time and no other.’ They place a premium, then, upon gaining power and wielding it sensibly, rather than the timetable for a referendum. Which, to the gradualist SNP thinker, is fine and dandy. But our Holyrood electoral system was deliberately designed to prevent the emergence of a purely ‘nationalist’ government, at least without a majority of the popular vote. We are likely to be talking coalition for the foreseeable future. The SNP’s coalition partners would have a say. A substantial say. Right now, the Lib Dems say no, strenuously, as long as the SNP insist on that referendum. Which they do.

So what else? In truth, I found the section on the environment a little thin: featuring, for example, an outbreak of fence-straddling on nuclear power. The segment on identity was better: particularly the assertion that the First Minister’s favoured slogan of ‘the best small country in the world’ sounds like a line from ‘The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy’. Undoubtedly, for me, the most substantive section of the book deals with public spending and the economy. With vigour, indeed positive glee, the authors set out a low-tax, low-spend, high-growth vision for Scotland. They cite Adam Smith with happy abandon, lauding his free-market teachings as ‘common sense’. More particularly, they urge 12 per cent efficiency savings in the public sector over four years. ‘It is important,’ they say, ‘to recognise the magnitude of the problem we face in bringing radical economic change to the bloated corridors of power in Scotland.’

Ministers and officials who might fret about the impact of such spending restraint are advised that they have a chance ‘to shine and become heroes leading the country to new economic heights.’ Step forward Citizen Elvidge, Hero (Second Class). Seriously, it is a refreshing change to find politicians

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willingly – indeed eagerly – abstaining from the customary auction for votes, founded upon hiking up public spending offers. That is not the same as saying their agenda will command instant favour. There would undoubtedly be substantial opposition to their proposals, for example, to introduce further private competition in the NHS. However, is it not valuable at the very least to question the scope of the productive output in the NHS from the expenditure input? More generally, is it not intellectually healthy, as the authors assert, to offer a challenge to the ‘prevailing orthodoxy’ regarding the provision of public services by the public sector? To test that orthodoxy in order either to strengthen it or overthrow it?

Kirkcaldy’s finest economist, I suspect, would have no hesitation in saying yes. Is contemporary Scotland similarly amenable?

*November 2006*