

## **PERSPECTIVES ON THE SCOTTISH IDENTITY**

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Scotland is not alone, at the end of the twentieth century, in being concerned with national identity. Concern is international, ranging from the relatively benign anxieties of a country like Australia (what is the relationship between white Australia and aboriginal culture, what is involved for Australian identity in declaring a republic?) to the vicious racist nationalism and loathsome 'ethnic cleansing' of former Yugoslavia.

Nevertheless, Scotland is a famous enigma to students of nationalism. Why did it not leap to arms in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, as Ireland did, or pacifically declare its independence, as Norway did? In the 'springtime of nations' it was not behind in constructing the artifacts of nationalism, which, if independence had followed, would immediately have been seen as its concrete precursors - the Wallace Memorial is the most obvious example, but the restoration of Dunfermline Abbey, with the tower framing in gigantic letters the words KING ROBERT THE BRUCE is even more striking. The church appears to the passer-by to be a shrine to a national royal saint; that Robert's acceleration to patriotic fame began with the murder of a colleague in a church would never be suspected. The flavour of the whole thing is worthy of Belgrade.

Tom Nairn's explanation in the **Break up of Britain** (1977) of why this phase of nationalism never flowered into anything more serious rests partly on the gains that the Scottish middle classes were making in the nineteenth century from the prosperity of Britain and membership of the British Empire. But when the British Empire is gone, and Britain has become among the least economically dynamic nations of its group in Western Europe, why does Britain still not break up? The second and recent springtime of nations, that

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saw, among others, Lithuania break out of the Soviet Union, and Slovakia break from the Czech Republic, had no echoing ripple in Scotland. Surges in national opinion poll support for the SNP, exceeding 30% in 1991, were followed by general election humiliations in 1992, and another cycle of high nationalist expectations followed by debilitating disappointment was concluded. The nationalist cause, far from taking off, rises like a winged duck and crashes back into its pond. This suggests that the explanation lies in something unusual in the Scottish sense of identity.

### **WHAT IS IDENTITY?**

There are, of course, those who would deny there is any common identity possible in Scotland, a small country of quite exceptional regional and cultural diversity. How can a person in the Outer Hebrides, speaking Gaelic, crofting, a member of the Free Church, have a common identity with a person in Glasgow, speaking a Lowland dialect, working as a software engineer, a follower of no religion save Rangers football club? That is to misunderstand the point, and to assume that we have but one identity. To enlarge on a point of Anthony Smith's (1981), the inhabitants of Scotland can be imagined as having concentric rings of territorial identity in responding to the question every human being must ask of themselves: 'who do I think I am?'. And these concentric rings are intersected by other shafts - essentially non-territorial - that also define a person's identity, and may or may not reinforce one or more of the territorial identifications. The argument must now be developed by reference to the diagram on page 103

In this, which is an aid to thought rather than a rigorous model, seven concentric territorial rings stand around the individual imagined to be in the centre. The first is the home and family, mom, dad and the kids, possibly a generation above and below, which is the immediate context of our social identification as human beings. The second is the kin, clan or surname, represented here by a pecked line as an obsolete or vestigial loyalty (for most Scots) but in the past as one of great strength - before the seventeenth century, for example, arguably of greater strength than any of the outer rings beyond it. The third is the identity with locality - 'I belong to Glasgow' - which is singularly powerful in Scotland: the rivalry between the two main cities is famous, but it also means a lot to be a Fifer, an Aberdonian, to come from Skye, or from Caithness. The fourth is nationality, that is to say identification with Scotland, since from the Outer Hebrides to Fife and from Thurso to the Border, there will be an unequivocal answer 'yes' to the question 'are you Scottish?'. Interestingly, there will be no such unequivocal affirmative from Orkney and Shetland, where the talk is of crossing the

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Pentland Firth 'to Scotland'. The fifth is statehood, the answer 'yes' to the question 'are you British?', an affirmative that would in this case encompass Orkney and Shetland with the rest of Scotland. The crux of our whole dilemma is that Scotland is, in David McCrone's phrase (1992), 'a stateless nation', that rings four and five do not coincide, that loyalty to the nation and the state are not the same thing. With England it is quite otherwise. It would be impossible to imagine a Margaret Thatcher, a Winston Churchill or any modern British prime minister to whom a loyalty to a smaller England was distinguishable from that to a larger Britain, or an English population that did not take the Union Jack to be the national flag: but every Scot habitually distinguishes between a smaller Scotland and a larger Britain, and knows that the national flags are the saltire and the Lyon rampant.

To complete our rings, the sixth represents loyalty to the Empire, given as a pecked line as archaic, but certainly of great meaning for two hundred years. The seventh is a dotted line of merely hypothetical loyalties, which Scots (and other nationalities) are sometimes encouraged to have but probably do not have in reality, or have only weakly - for example, as Europeans, as members of a Churchillian 'English-speaking union of nations', or to the United Nations. It is easy to imagine a Scotsman prepared to die for his family, his kin, (perhaps not for his locality; whoever died for Thurso?), his nation, Britain, or the Empire, but surely not willingly for Europe, for the ESU or the UN. Localities have different resonances in relation to an imagined nation. Stirling, Edinburgh and Roxburgh, for example, have a symbolic historical importance to a sense of national identity that Bathgate obviously does not. The resonances of Glasgow, both 'miles better' and 'alive' according to its image-makers, imply an impatience with the symbolic pretensions of communities both worse and dead.

At the other end of our diagram are a representative (not comprehensive) range of other identities which are non-territorial, and which intersect with the concentric circles. Some, such as gender, occupation and class, neither correlate particularly strongly with a Scottish identity nor overcome or affect any national loyalty: to be a doctor is not especially to be Scottish, and to be a Scottish doctor does not bring one remarkably close to a Danish doctor. There is an international workers' movement and an international women's movement, but the workers of the world famously did not unite and the women of the world are equally unlikely to do so. It may be argued that fashionable visual and literary images of the 'archetypal Scot' are often male and often working class (Howson 1993; Idle 1993), but these do not prevent women identifying themselves as Scottish as readily as men. 'Grannie's Hieland Hame' may after all still be as potent an image as the 'Wee Hard

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Man'. Colour is in a slightly different category, since most Scots are white and some find it difficult to accept, say, Asian Scots as truly Scottish: they could take a lesson from Grandfather Mountain, USA, where at the annual American Highland games a native American Indian chief appears dressed cap-a-pie in Macintosh tartan, and with as good a genealogical claim to it as anyone round Inverness. Scotland, like every European society, has a problem accepting colour and immigration, but that does not mean to say that it is a country with a racist reputation: in contrast to parts of England, it prides itself on being quite tolerant. Whether it really is so tolerant remains to be tested. In any case being white confers no important identity between the Scots and other white people across the globe: it reinforces no supranational loyalty in ring seven with 'white races everywhere': Scots are generally assumed to be white, but that fact has no additional importance to being Scottish.

The remaining identities are more interesting, in that they do have important impacts on the concentric loyalties, represented in our diagram at the point of intersection by a solid or a pecked circle, depending on whether that impact is mainly a historic one, or one still active. Language (Gaelic-speaking or English-speaking) is something that has divided Scots, obviously more so in the past when the percentage of Gaelic speakers was much higher. Today it serves to reinforce locality, at least in the sense that Gaelic-speaking Highlanders feel a strong tie to a Gaelic cultural world, but it does not destroy a sense of Scottishness, but rather also reinforces it, as in some nationalist traditions to be a Gaelic Scot is to be quintessentially Scottish.

Religion is an identity that has, in its day, powerfully united and powerfully divided Scots. The arrival in the sixteenth century of a protestant Church of Scotland to which, in a comparatively short time, the overwhelming majority of the population came to belong was an extremely powerful reinforcer of a national identity of being Scottish: it is arguable that even in pre-Reformation times the church, with its elaboration of distinctive Scottish saints and its well-fought battle to stay independent of the Archdiocese of York, was a critical support to the separate identity of Scotland. In 1707, legislation enshrined the independence of a separate presbyterian national church, which both ensured its focus for national identity, yet allowed (Colley 1992) a British protestant sense (allying the anglicans with the English dissenters and Scottish presbyterians) to be a central ingredient in the emergent British identity. Therefore, to be a Scottish presbyterian in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and indeed today, was to be strongly conscious both of being Scottish and of being British, and above all to know that the two were not identical. The nineteenth century was, however, critical, in the sense that

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the established church of Scotland was riven by the Disruption and so could not so readily or monolithically stand for Scotland, and the coming of the catholics created a problem for an 'imagined community' (the phrase is from Anderson 1983). Sections of the presbyterian church, as late as the 1920s, made a determined effort to keep the label Irish on the catholics, and to suggest their disloyalty to Scotland. This, however, totally failed as a denigrating tactic. Today as many catholics as protestants appear in church on Sundays; to be a catholic is regarded as completely compatible with being Scottish; both churches are faced by an increasingly secular society, and religion is probably now of small (though for some not negligible) importance in reinforcing a sense of Scottish identity.

Sport in the late twentieth century surely means more to most Scots than religion in defining an answer to the question 'who do I think I am'. It acts strongly to reinforce locality (Glasgow Rangers, Dundee United) as well as, classically, to reinforce a national Scottish identity and to distinguish it from, and oppose it to, a British identity. There is something here distinctively Scottish. A Texas American would cheer Texas in his state's competition with North Carolina, but if North Carolina won the contest and went on to play a team from Mexico, the Texan in the next round would cheer for North Carolina, as the team that represented 'his country' against Mexico. A Scot would cheer for Scotland in a contest with England, but if England won and went on to play Belgium, all the Scottish cheers in the next round would be for Belgium. It would be unthinkable that an English team could ever represent 'his country'.

Finally, there is the very important matter of military culture. The Scots have been a famous fighting nation for very many centuries: early in the fifteenth century about one in ten males of fighting age in Scotland enrolled in the service of France to fight the English in the Hundred Years War, and in the seventeenth century the proportion cannot have been less in mercenary armies in the service of Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Russia, Poland and elsewhere. The Union diverted all this talent for aggression to the service of the British empire, and the disproportionate contribution of the Scots to the British armed forces was obvious as recently as the Gulf War. No politician since the 1960s has been able to propose the amalgamation or loss of identity of Scottish regiments without calling forth public protests and petitions with a signature list much longer than any in favour of a Scottish Parliament or other political cause. The martial tradition favours a sense of locality ('Save the Argylls'), a sense of Scottish national identity, but also a strong sense of Britishness, since it is in the service of the British state that the regiments fight and die; and similarly it once focused loyalty to the

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Empire. Appropriately, therefore, it attracts Conservatives to its defence at least as much as members of other parties. Colonel 'Mad Mitch' of the Argyll's campaign became a Conservative MP in 1970, and Nicholas Fairbairn is at least as quick to respond to a threat to the regiments as Alex Salmond. Scottish social historians and political scientists, not for the most part being very militaristic in their feelings, have tended to underplay the rôle of the martial tradition in national life.

To re-cap the argument so far, we have tried to suggest that a distinctive 'national identity', that is, a Scottish identity, is embedded in a group of other identities between the family and the supra-national, which include a British identity that does not conflict with but rather co-exists with the Scottish identity; and that many other identities intersect with the territorially-based concentric loyalties, some of which (gender, class, occupation) have little effect on them, others of which (language, religion, sport, military tradition) have a substantial effect, usually along the lines of emphasising that loyalty to ring four is different from loyalty to ring five - that to be Scottish is indeed different from being British, that the nation and the state are not the same, but can co-exist.

There is an important additional point to add in parenthesis here. Modern Scottish identity is much more firmly allied to a sense of place than to a sense of tribe - 'I am a real Scot from Bathgate' has much more resonance than 'I am a real Scot because my granny was a real Scot'. This is at least part of the explanation as to why Scots in Scotland often find Scots in America embarrassing: the latter are emphasising a tribal identity, divorced from every aspect of place and modern Scottish popular culture; their ethnic consciousness based on genealogy seems a false consciousness in Scotland. At first sight, given the importance of kinship in the Scottish past, and its significance even now in Gaelic society, this might seem surprising. But it really is not so. If coherent government was to survive in the medieval and early modern past, it had, in a country that comprised Gaelic-speaking Highlanders and Scots-speaking Lowlanders, already linguistically and ethnically diverse, to appeal beyond kin or ethnicity - to loyalty to the person of the monarch, then to the integrity of the territory over which the monarch ruled. This critical fact allowed the Scots ultimately to absorb all kinds of immigrants with relatively little fuss, including, most importantly, the Irish in the nineteenth century. Today it implies that no-one asks about ancestry in claiming to be a real Scot: it is enough to come from a really Scottish place, like Bathgate. Because tribe does not matter and place does, there is unlikely ever to be ethnic cleansing in Scotland. Settler Watch will fail.

## **NATIONAL IDENTITY AND NATIONAL HISTORY**

To return to the main argument, what is unusual about Scotland is the widespread acceptance that national identity does not have to coincide with state identity: it has been well argued by Anthony Smith (1981) that Scotland is actually not that remarkable, but is analagous to Bavaria within Germany, Catalonia within Spain and Brittany within France, in that concentric loyalties also operate to enable most people there simultaneously to be comfortable with being Bavarian and German, Catalanian and Spanish, Breton and French. But any form of national identity that is not synonymous with state identity is sufficiently unusual to need more examination.

National identities are constructed out of references to history, or, more exactly, to received popular ideas about history that achieve mythic status, irrespective of what modern academic historians perceive to be their actual truth or importance. 'What every child knows' about Scottish history may be boiled down to half a dozen 'mythic' episodes: that Scotland defeated England at the Battle of Bannockburn, thus ensuring Scottish independence in the Middle Ages; that England defeated Scotland at the Battle of Flodden, but that heroic tragedy did not extinguish Scotland as a nation; that Mary Queen of Scots was a tragic heroine, who was eventually executed due to the duplicity of the English queen; that Bonnie Prince Charlie was a later tragic hero, whose defeat at the Battle of Culloden was followed by English atrocities against the Scots; that the Highland Clearances were a tragic episode carried out by Anglicised lairds, if not by actual Englishmen, and (rather more a minority taste) that Red Clydeside was a tragic defeat of the Scottish revolution by an Anglicised set of employers and the British state. All the key myths involve clash with England or 'English' values; all but one are tragedies and defeats from the Scottish side; Scotland is, however, always Scotland the brave. It is a tale operating to infuse a sense of Scottish pride with a concomitant sense of the inevitability of Scottish political failure.

It is, furthermore, compounded by a generally accepted view among Scots that 'serious' Scottish history is of marginal interest, unessential to the education of their children in school or university, because it is construed as either a tale of anarchy and poverty, albeit flavoured by heroism, (before 1707) or more or less the same as English history (after 1707). To this, as Colin Kidd has brilliantly demonstrated in a recent thesis (1993), we are indebted largely to David Hume and William Robertson, who first defined Scottish history as uninteresting because it was unenlightened - it was neither about 'liberty', unlike English history with its tale of securing the rights of property, nor about 'opulence', also unlike English history with its tale of

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evolving empire and economic growth. For the Enlightenment, meaningful history began in 1690 and 1707: what happened before then, in what they thought of as a poor and barbarous country, was best forgotten as it could not instruct. Popular culture did not necessarily swallow all of this: even in the eighteenth century the tales of Wallace and Bruce never lost their following or their ability to fire the blood with ephemeral patriotic and anti-English rage (Miller 1907, 40-1). Yet the persuasiveness of the Hume-Robertson view can be seen even among the radicals of the Friends of the People at the end of the eighteenth century. Muir at his trial accepted a 'plug-in' view of Scottish history, accepting English history before 1707 as having become also Scottish history, and appealing to a tradition of liberty by reference to Magna Carta and the English Parliamentarians of the seventeenth century (Smout 1989, pp.11-12). Only the example of the Covenanters offered immediate hope to those who would make a modern Scottish history of resistance to tyranny. To the historians of the Enlightenment, they were barred from being exemplars by their religious bigotry, but following Thomas McCrie's rehabilitation of John Knox and the radical Presbyterian tradition, identification with the Covenanters became commonplace in left-wing democratic politics at least down to the interwar years.

The Enlightenment thus bade to construct the Scots as a historyless people: they were partly rescued from this fate by Walter Scott, who made use of popular culture as well as scholarship to reconstruct selected episodes of Scottish history as a series of tales. These were certainly entertaining; they were taken to be romantic (though Scott had a close regard to historical truth and great detailed knowledge). The consequence was a Scottish view of Scotland's past as still secondary in all serious matters to England's past, but now suitable for memorialising in various ways. Thus Wallace and Bruce came in the nineteenth century to have their appropriate statues, towers and kirks, the 'very stuff of romance'. Nevertheless, English history alone was, and is, considered the only really serious British history. English history is still considered basically to be about 'liberty' - constitutional development - and 'opulence' - economic growth, and therefore to matter more than Scottish history even in Scottish universities. But Scottish history was (and is) full of edifying episodes and colourful detail: in some late-twentieth century opinions, it can best be studied at university level alongside Robert Burns and folkways in special schools, institutes or centres for Scottish studies. Some ask whether the University of Cambridge would establish a Centre for English studies, for those south of the Border who happen to be interested in England, or those from abroad who regard themselves as ethnically English? This may be too cynical. Such Centres could possibly grasp the nettle of

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opportunity and become points of energy for a rounded exploration of Scottish culture in all its diverse manifestations.

This is to digress. The point to establish here is that, in popular culture, Scottish history today appears as the stuff of heritage industry, colourful and episodic, but basically not serious. It is a poor foundation on which to identify a Scottish nation with a confident and empowered Scottish state.

### **NATIONAL IDENTITY AND NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

Scottish identity is also transmitted through distinctive Scottish institutions, the church, the law and education, which survived the impact of 1707: but in each case their message is as ambiguous as that of popular history. The Church of Scotland we have already partly considered, and its enormous importance in Scottish life before the present century can hardly be over-estimated: nor can its ambiguity vis-à-vis England. The Reformation could not have succeeded without English armed help for the protestant party. The Scottish Bible and Psalms are in English, not Scots. The Union settlement defended the presbyterian church from episcopalian challenge, and, as the Jacobites were episcopalian and catholic, threw the kirk into the defensive arms of the Hanoverians, however little Anglicisation might be to the taste of many of its members. Its history inspired a feeling of difference from England without inspiring confidence to go it alone.

Scottish law was another institution that struck its bargain with the state at the Act of Union, ensuring its formal independence (and thus securing the jobs of advocates and writers from carpet-baggers) and maintaining most of its liberties despite the early inauguration of appeal to the House of Lords. Yet lawyers, by being in the forefront of the eighteenth-century improving movement, became among the greatest modernisers of the age. Before 1745, a proportion of these were certainly Jacobites: it is a sad misconception of Scottish history to see in the Jacobite movement some appeal to an archaic, anti-capitalist, anti-improvement, green past (Pittock 1991). But the majority of lawyers were Hanoverians, pro-English, moderates in kirk politics, warm supporters of Union. In the nineteenth century the growth of parliamentary statute reduced the area of Scottish legal independence in any case. While the legal profession has often harboured nationalists, its dominant tone has been and unsurprisingly remains clearly unionist.

In education, the traditions of school and university were different in 1707, and long remained so. George Davie (1961) has charted the course of their anglicisation, and though Davie has been challenged as to its timing and causation (Anderson 1983), none can doubt that educational establishments

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have remained distinct in Scotland partly by a process of continuous accommodation with the demands of the British state. For example, the Scottish universities since 1981 have avoided compromising on the principle of the four-year degree, but have yielded on everything else demanded of them by the UGC and its successors.

The behaviour of the institutions is especially understandable in the light of the fact that Scotland was not conquered by England, nor colonised by her, but became a partner in a union entered into according to the political conventions of the age, sleazy though these might in some respects have been. That is to say, clerics, lawyers and politicians consented to their relationship to the British state, and can be said in their lukewarm response to Jacobitism not to have done anything too vigorous in the eighteenth century to throw it off.

To sum up so far, both mythic popular history, and the legacy of the distinctive Scottish institutions inherited from an independent past have operated in such a way as both to preserve a sense of Scottish identity and prevent it from coinciding with identification with the state. Unlike, say, in Denmark, in Scotland it has been felt that national history needed another history to complement it, that national institutions needed another institution - the British Parliament - to enable them to work in a modern way. So loyalty to ring four was not enough: loyalty to ring five was needed as well, and it was clearly a different thing.

### **DUAL IDENTITIES**

A dual allegiance to Scotland and to Britain is obviously, and justifiably, an infuriating thing to a nationalist who wishes the nation and the state to coincide in independence. How far back can it be traced? Twentieth-century Scottish political history, at least since the Hamilton by-election, can be interpreted as the Scots wavering between band four and band five depending on how badly they considered they were being treated by London, and using the nationalist vote to extract concessions (such as the creation of the Scottish Development Agency) that would actually strengthen the Union. In the nineteenth century, men like Rosebery found nothing incongruous in demanding a Scottish Secretary and pursuing their careers as Imperialist politicians; and there were many minor figures like James McAdam, who was involved in the building of the Wallace memorial and considered it a monument to Scottish freedoms already won (he invited Kossuth and others to leave momentos in a special room dedicated to European nationalist movements) (Fyfe ed. 1980). In the later eighteenth century, virtually every

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Scot of note from Adam Smith to Robert Burns expressed at one point or another a sense of belonging both to Scotland and to Britain, though in Smith's case reference to his Scottish allegiance is rare, and in Burns' case reference to his British allegiance is fairly rare (though see **Twa Dogs, Ode for General Washington's Birthday**, and **Birthday Address to George III**) (Smout 1989). Was a dual allegiance there earlier? Some Scots at least came forward in the seventeenth century with proposals for a 'more perfect Union of Britain' so that Scotland's needs would not be overlooked in Union of the Crowns, and in the sixteenth century John Major's apologia for dynastic union saw it as 'the conjunction of two historic states' (Mason 1987). A very good case can be made for arguing that the Scots invented Britain: and that they have always been keener on the notion than the English, who misconstrue it as a synonym for England. To argue thus is not, however, to deny that, especially before 1707, there were powerful surges of anti-English feeling that can very fairly be construed as evidence of popular nationalist consciousness. Such was the case on the eve of the Act of Union itself, and Roger Mason (1992) has recently described a similar revulsion against the nobles dealing with the auld enemy in the 1540s.

### **NATIONAL IDENTITY AND NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE**

Two last observations can be made. Firstly, in 1707 Scotland lost her Parliament and her sovereignty was greatly reduced. She has learned to live in the last three hundred years with that fact, and to discover that union does not mean that national identity disappears. England, however, has been riven since 1991 with fears that if Britain surrenders any of her sovereignty to a federal Europe, her identity will go as well: her history has given her no experience of the loss of sovereignty, or of the possibility of survival of identity. Scotland, it seems, fears European union much less than England. Possibly some Scots are attracted to a European union because it offers psychological escape from dependence on London, but, more widely, Scotland may be less paranoid on the subject than England because three centuries have taught the Scots that it is possible to retain distinctiveness within a wider political grouping. This is something to teach the twenty-first century where the clouds of fear and hatred bid to gather round questions of national identity.

The other point is that nothing written here implies that Scottish Nationalism is a cause doomed to failure, or that Scottish independence could never see the light of day. It is possible to agree with Jonathan Clark (1986) that revolutions are not written in the stars, but are made by political mistakes on the part of the ruling order: one can readily imagine a scenario where some

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future devolution destabilises the Union instead of reinforcing it, and no way is found by politicians, especially in a deteriorating economic climate, of preventing a further slide towards independence.

But both those who seek this end and those who resist it should realise how long and how valid is the history of concentric loyalties, that a powerful sense of being Scottish has gone hand in hand with a powerful sense of being British for centuries. It is neither good nor bad. It does not demonstrate some particular moral failing on the part of the Scots if they seem to be reluctant to carry their nationalism further than the football field, as Jim Sillars thinks. Nor does it represent some singular virtue of political insight and innate counthy moderation, as some Conservative politicians seem to think when the vote goes their way. It is just a fact to take account of.

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