

## WHY NO BREAK-UP – SO FAR?

*Bob Tait*

‘The country is at the crossroads. The path it takes will determine its international standing and define the way people lead their lives.’ These were the ringing opening words of a leader in **The Herald** for Tuesday 24 April 2007, nine days before the election for the Scottish Parliament. The leader writer was teasingly referring to two countries and two elections: France as well as Scotland and the French presidentials as well as the Holyrood election. The piece asserted, baldly at first, that much was at stake for both populations. ‘If anything, the stakes [in the Scottish election] are higher as the outcome will go a long way to determining whether this country remains in the Union or, in the coming years, sues for independence.’ But then came the invidious comparison and an unmistakeable tone of exasperation. In France, 85% of the electorate had turned out for their first round of voting. In Scotland polls were showing that between a third and a half might not vote at all.

In the end, over 48% made no choice at all, an astonishingly large number – some hundred and forty thousand – made choices so obscure that they had to be disallowed and the accepted result was barely decisive in any sense. The path forward was anything but clear. Ambiguities, ambivalences, degrees of indifference, lack of widespread popular excitement or clashes over *any* of the issues at stake: all of these characterised the long, limping run up to polling day. They remain not only the most revealing features of the pre-election period and of the ways people actually voted, or didn’t, on the day. They also provide the biggest and most important clues to connected puzzles. How have we got to where we are? Where are we heading and might the itinerary include statehood for Scotland? Why has there been no break-up of the Union so far:

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*Bob Tait has been writing about Scottish culture, society and literature for four decades; he is a former editor of Scottish International Review and subsequently worked mainly as an educationalist who also did some broadcasting and book reviewing, and worked on the development of housing associations in the north east of Scotland.*

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that is, one resulting from shifts in people's commitments – transferring them from Britain as state and supra-nation and to Scotland as nation and state?

Whatever else Scottish people arrived at on 3 May 2007, it wasn't precisely a crossroads. Crossroads have a clarity in which the direction of travel, before and after the intersection, is as plain as on a swatch of tartan. What we got on that polling day was much more of a tangle with twisting lanes and slip roads converging at odd angles from mists and disappearing into the future in numerous conceivable directions. What made for and configured those curious Scottish events of May and the situation in which we now find ourselves?

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The present situation stems from deep and ongoing changes in British as well as Scottish society since 1945. These amount to a transition from high modernity to late modernity.<sup>1</sup> The changes fall into two broad categories: material and cultural. It's the specific cultural changes that decisively account for where we are, politically and socially, and provide the clues – so full of intriguing ambiguities – as to where we are heading.

So what has changed? In 1945, the societies of the West – to varying degrees triumphant, battered or defeated – were still largely based economically on producing many things, from primary commodities to radios, from within their own territories. In our case, these were mainly British goods with British components produced by British firms. This required, as it had before the war, assembling large cohorts of the population in squads, rigidly and hierarchically ordered, for the expected long haul back to recovery and through to prosperity on that basis. Mass manufacture, mass consumption and mass – or class – politics regulating mass provision of new and improved welfare services and, especially in Scotland, housing: these were all among the hallmarks of high modernity. In much of western Europe, societies kept faith with some aspects of high modernity for the first couple of decades or longer after the war: maintaining not only tightly centralised, hierarchical and often opaque forms of power but also homogenised forms of organisation and provision – all within clearly bounded geopolitical territories. Britain was just such a territory and the immediate postwar period marked a high point of its unity both as a state and a society (granted degrees of administrative autonomy that developed in Scotland, all entirely consistent with that being so). That period shaped up into a peak in people's perceptions of Britishness as a set of conditions and parameters for many aspects of their lives, including their political affinities and allegiances. It remains a peak, and an admirable peak at that, for many

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older Scots and Britons, including many of the postwar ‘baby boomers’: many of whom were in the first biggish cohorts of Scots from lowly social backgrounds to enjoy reasonably satisfactory standards of living if not quite high affluence. Not least importantly, it stands as such a peak for Gordon Brown, judging by how he has supported some of his recent invocations of Britishness with references to great British national enterprises such as the NHS.

What happened next, materially and most of all economically, in these Western societies is well known. So only the changes most pertinent for present purposes need be highlighted. First, the exigencies of and opportunities for production, sourcing, labour, markets and corporations led to forms of ‘de-industrialisation’ within home territories and redistribution of production and capital first among developed nations and then much wider afield, ushering in the current form and phase of globalisation. Secondly, developed societies in the West converted, to varying but always significant degrees, to services-based economies supplemented almost as much by the production of ‘virtual’ goods – designs and ‘solutions’ – as by actual ones. To that extent, their economies became knowledge economies and societies became information societies. Thirdly, late-modern consumers, unlike their high-modern predecessors, now find themselves in markets in which they are comparatively spoiled for choice as to the kinds of goods and services they might buy, aspire to or readily enough acquire by accepting any of a wealth of invitations to put themselves in debt. In all three sets of changes, Britain has been somewhat to the fore. The first set of changes altered particular societies’ geopolitical relationships as well as capacities to provide domestically owned sources of jobs and goods. The second set brought new and more diversified ways of making a living in a greater variety of organisations by type, size, ownership, provenance and location: although, importantly for present concerns, there were considerable regional and local variations in the extent and timing of these developments, in Britain as elsewhere. The third set of changes greatly widened the range of products and services over which individuals’ choices, preferences, moral and social concerns and even whims have come to play an expected and legitimate part. Taken together, these three sets of changes provide some of the main hallmarks of late modernity.

It is the cultural aspects or concomitants of these changes that matter here. In our case, the three sets of changes noted above have unsettled, modified or displaced familiar (high modern) British and Scottish parameters: particularly as regards what many in the population variously perceive as sources and kinds

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of occupations, opportunities and provision of protection, support, security and welfare. Chief among the parameter-setters thus affected have been the state *qua* provider and protector, patterns and kinds of occupations, the organisational contexts of these, social-class identities and solidarities, political parties, types of communities and neighbourhoods, family patterns and relationships, education and its destinations and (especially in Scotland) the provision of housing. Also specially worthy of note is the third set of changes and their consequences: the greatly increased diversity of items that are at least apparently, and as a cultural given, both available and subject to consumer choice. Over the past three decades or so, people have had time to grow accustomed to two important changes in parameters of consumption and aspiration. As producers and providers have been obliged to make parameters of choice wider and more flexible, customers have got used to setting their own parameters of choice, consumption and expectations. These are two changes that are as evident now in how political goods are sold and bought as they are in Tesco's or Sainsbury's or on the internet. And they have brought now familiar knock-on changes in attitudes. With extension of choice (however much it is still steered) has come some increase in consumer impatience with what providers offer, some scepticism, willingness to switch brands, even fickleness, idiosyncrasies and eccentricities in choices: all this rather than the simplistically slavish mass or class conformity to norms presumed by some mid-twentieth century marketing, cultural and psychological theories.

It is also a mistake to suppose that societies have, in this process of developing late modern features, become atomised: subject to narrow kinds of individual self-interested rationality, or worse. *Pace* Margaret Thatcher and James M. Buchanan, Friedrich Hayek and other believers in variants of public choice theory, we humans still operate in somewhat affiliated groups and from varied, not to say mixed, motives. It is, however, the case that the composition and characteristics of social groups mutate over time and, under the impact of our three sets of changes, a particular kind of alteration has occurred. It has supported and facilitated the cultural aspects and concomitants of the material changes underlying late modernity to no small degree.

As older forms of community, solidarities, allegiances, affiliations, nationhood and societal cohesiveness have somewhat weakened or even in some respects broken down, people have developed new forms of connections, attachments and orientations that are no less culturally and psychologically important, indeed necessary. People have linked up in social and cultural networks that are more varied and variable for a higher proportion of populations than were

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any of their historical precursors; and these networks weave and overlap within and across geopolitical, local and other older boundaries: again, to a greater extent than hitherto. For convenience, the term ‘vari-net societies’<sup>2</sup> can be used to refer to all this: but with the proviso borne in mind that the vari-nets are no respecters of societal boundaries. Late-modern social and cultural vari-nets readily stretch beyond national boundaries as they serve people’s varied economic, occupational and social needs and purposes. The imperatives and facilities of late-modern economies and communications ensure that they do so. The term vari-net is used principally to capture the following features of this phenomenon. Variable networks are based on interests and priorities and transient or enduring affiliations and attachments that arise from these. Such networks can therefore themselves alter in composition as interests and other connecting factors change. Individuals now link up in series of varied and variable networks of this kind over their lifetimes and typically belong to several of them, accommodating differing needs and purposes, at any given time. Individuals may operate in some networks not shared with even immediate and otherwise close neighbours, friends, co-workers and relatives.

Complicated? It certainly is; and complications are what this phenomenon brings to people’s priorities, choices and motivations. Fortunately, there are overall effects especially relevant for present purposes. Four in particular stand out. Vari-nets open adults up to interests, priorities and choices which they didn’t have earlier in life and which aren’t predictable from socio-economic group of origin or even from current, broad socio-economic standing. This matters here because it allows adults to diverge somewhat from patterns of earlier socialisation. Secondly, in taking their cues from vari-nets as to priorities and preferences, individuals’ choices may not square or chime readily with those of others in their vicinity or with takes on issues and choices presented in manifestos or at the ballot box. When the latter is the case, people may decide not to bother buying into anything on offer, just as they might in any shopping mall. Thirdly, people have to juggle with competing priorities and values of networks to which they belong: classically, career network values and priorities are apt to clash with those of family networks. Fourthly, people can be and often are at least semi-detached from institutions, issues or choices that do not seem to bear directly on their range of priorities: people tend to vary in how, and how much, they identify with institutions, people or places.

Two further things need finally to be emphasised about the emergence of social and cultural networks, whether of the kinds identified by Manuel Castells or these vari-nets. The first is something that hasn’t happened, although some

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have thought it would. National, state and civic institutions have not been supplanted by transnational governmental and corporate institutions and their associated networks. Granted, the powers, functions and modes of operation of national and local institutions have changed. But all of these remain consequential. What is more important still here is how people relate to these institutions and their doings. That has most definitely changed over the past sixty years. As a result of the kinds of changes just outlined, people are liable to regard governmental institutions of any kinds as corporate monsters much like any other kinds: in existence presumably to provide services at a price but just as likely to create inconvenient burdens and obstacles that have to be either put up with or got round. Immersed as they are in juggling with aspects of their own lives in a range of vari-nets, people ordinarily have little time or patience to spare for the agendas and goings-on of governments. Leave that stuff to the career politicians, technocrats and lobbyists and the oddballs who write about them: unless, of course, there is a good scandal or drama to enliven the evening news show.

With all this in place, it is time to consider the Scottish case more closely, bearing its British context always in mind; and it is high time to return to the question that is central for this particular piece. Why has there been, as yet, no break-up of the UK resulting from people in Scotland opting for Scottish formal independence or statehood?

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It was more like a farcical traffic accident than an orderly election, a pile-up of accidents. Mercifully, the casualties were heaps of dead ballot papers and merely dislodged members rather than actual corpses. The result could hardly have better illustrated one of the main arguments of this article. Which is: that any resolution of the independence issue, either way, is likeliest to be the product of accidental convergences of electoral wishes and half-wishes as peculiarly translated by electoral algorithms. It is less likely to be as a result of some large majority being strongly, passionately, definitely and clearly committed either to Union or Scottish statehood.

Meantime, as others have pointed out, definite public support for Scottish independence lies somewhere around or below 30%. Let's not quibble about what question is asked, yielding what answer: current support for Scottish statehood falls, by any count, well short of a majority of whatever kind. Conversely, considering that over 48% of the electorate abstained from voting at all on any issues, it can hardly be said that people flocked to the polls to

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demand or endorse the continuation of the Union either. What this brings out is an important point here. Having the Union is a default position. To have it, people need do precisely nothing. They may, of course, vote for a party that is currently formally unionist. But the ambiguities of any general election are such that no one can tell whether they did so in May because they were agin independence or strongly for the union or in three minds about both or because of any number of things or people they favoured or disliked. The extent to which votes for currently formally unionist parties expressed definite commitments to the Union is far from clear. But among those without strong or settled feelings either way, the default status of the Union must be assumed to have had some weight: again, no one can tell how much. What is clear enough is why the Union has that status. The Union has an apparatus, facilities and a history of connections and experiences all in place. In that people value ongoing facilities and past as well as present connections, and the constitutional and political machinery of union ain't all that broke, a vote that in effect sustains union is going to seem less risky than one that might lead to something untried and untested. In those circumstances, the SNP's strategy on the independence issue of 'try before you buy' seems to have been pretty smart and to have played well enough for them, if only just.

A further point about default positions and their attractions, especially in the absence of strong countervailing fears or desires, concerns the SNP. It too had come to occupy a kind of default position: as the party likeliest to be able to provide an alternative Scottish Executive team to conduct the current range of business of Holyrood. Where else could those voters turn who merely felt it was time some other bunch had a shot, just to see if they could do any better? This default factor has set us up for one of the scenarios some foresee as a possibility. It is the 'Quebec' scenario, in which large numbers of people get into the way of voting for an independence party without thereby necessarily meaning to endorse its principal aim or expecting it to be realised.

Ever since the election, commentators have been busy figuring out the intriguing range of political scenarios it has opened up. A common feature of most of the scenarios suggested is their emphasis, surely correct, on how much political developments in Scotland will now depend on political developments to do with Westminster. Maybe David Cameron will contrive or connive in English discontents over the West Lothian question and supposedly unfair subsidies to Scotland to lever Scotland towards independence. Maybe Gordon Brown will hit the SNP with a pre-emptive referendum on independence in an effort to secure a mandate for himself down south and to put the independence

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issue back in a closet for another generation. Maybe the Lib-Dems are angling for a deal with Labour over PR for Westminster, which might account for how they've been playing their cards up here lately; and maybe Gordon Brown will take that deal as a price to be paid for keeping Labour in (at least shared) power at Westminster. Any of these or other moves could lure, nudge, push, shove or tip voters in Scotland in one direction or the other on the constitutional issue. So they have to be considered and, besides, it's great fun doing so.

But the focus of my central question and concern here is quite different. It is about why, so far at least, there has been no political break-up of the UK resulting from any sufficiently powerful shift in perceptions and feelings from commitment to the UK (as state or supra-nation, or both) in favour of Scotland as state as well as nation. There is certainly a range of feelings and perceptions on the matter of political independence or formal statehood as there is on the quite different, and yet connected, matter of the sense in which Scotland or Britain count as nations – or as 'the nation' – for people in Scotland. The range, evident not least in the 2007 election campaign and its results, runs from strong commitments and anxieties for some to much more mixed, confused or tepid feelings either way for far many more.

Here, in outline, is the answer offered to that central question. For people in Scotland, there have been considerable changes since 1945 in what Britain and Scotland *mean*, in quite down to earth and practical terms, as societies and nations. Likewise as regards the British state. These changes have occurred because of the impact of features of the transition from high to late modernity already outlined. Many attractions and benefits of the Union have remained, although in somewhat modified late modern forms. At the same time, aspects of the Union have weakened or have come to seem less attractive to many people in Scotland. However, *different* aspects have weakened or become drawbacks for different sets of people within the population: e.g. British foreign policy for some, particular bits of British legislation for others; and the scatter of perceived merits and de-merits has tended to balance out rather than tip decisively against the Union.

Within Scotland, this period began with perceptions of Scotland *qua* nation that were weak, not generalised through the population and apparently largely irrelevant in the eyes of most Scots. The period continued with cultural divisions and mistrusts by region, locality and class. These have compromised the emergence of Scotland as an *imagined* viable community, let alone as an actual nation or state. This was an important factor in the 1970s, for example,

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during the first time Scottish political independence figured as a live and hot issue. For all that, it is also true that a majority of Scots now identify themselves, when asked, as primarily Scottish rather than primarily British. But this must be treated with great caution.

It is likeliest that being Scottish means somewhat different things, and carries differing weights, for differing people depending on social and cultural background, interests, knowledge and motivations. It means different things within differing vari-nets. People may, and certainly sometimes do, identify with different highly selective aspects of Scotland or Scottishness rather than with a single shared or perceived totality. They may identify rather more strongly with parts of Scotland than all of it: those internal mutual mistrusts have not entirely dissipated. The term Scottish is at least sometimes used metonymously: part or parts standing for the whole. Correspondingly, the same has become true of the term British. As the high modern systems and organisations that defined Britain in the earlier part of our period have declined or disappeared, there has been that much less of a cohesive totality to identify with. Many greatly value and identify with aspects of British society and culture, past as well as present, nonetheless. This includes many who identify themselves as primarily Scottish. There need be no strain or contradiction in doing so. But identification has become more selective over our period and selections more variable. That is part of the effect of the emergence of the vari-net society; and, of course, many of the vari-nets that people in Scotland inhabit are partly and often predominantly British. What else could they possibly be, with or without political independence? The implications of that rhetorical question notwithstanding, fears about damage to or loss of British connections have undoubtedly influenced people's stance on the political independence issue.

No outline, however brief, of the influences and pressures on people's perceptions and feelings about their situation in Scotland, and its British context, would be complete without reference to three connected matters. One consists of economic and social factors with powerful cultural concomitants. The other two are issues to do with actual and perceived viability and competences. The principal economic factors are these: markedly increased dependence on external sources of capital, already very plain by the end of the 1960s; subsequent phases of 'de-industrialisation', initially followed by relatively high levels of unemployment although eventually ameliorated by the appearance of new jobs, many of them with poor prospects and uncertain durability; and over-dependence on public sector activities, not least as sources

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of jobs. The principal social and cultural concomitants are equally clear. They have included the break-up of many formerly relatively cohesive communities, neighbourhoods and older supportive social and cultural networks as well as widening gaps in interests and perceptions between the relatively secure and, modestly, affluent majority and a dismayingly large indigent minority. If ever a territory presented as a candidate for the application of a good dose of post-neoclassical endogenous growth theory<sup>3</sup> and its instruments, that candidate has been Scotland since the Second World War.

All of this has borne on perceptions, inside and outside Scotland, of the society's viability – especially with regard to 'going it alone' – and of the range of competences available within Scotland and through the society as a whole (and not merely among its home-based politicians). The two questions, of viability and competence, have been rubbed against each other to produce long smouldering fears and doubts. Thus the question of viability has not merely been one to be answered by cool calculation of economic opportunities, risks and threats; it has been complicated by worries about whether or not we have the kinds of people capable of rising to the challenges presented. In some respects, these worries present as questions about confidence and even as, in themselves, symptoms of wider kinds of lack of confidence. But here again we must be very careful. Some kinds of confidence have no doubt been undermined, or simply not given chances to develop, by Scotland's many debilitating experiences and traumas during our period. But, to avoid over-generalisation and misidentification of the key kinds of confidence needed, we need to specify which kinds of confidence are needed for, in particular, economic success and recovery. Questions about confidence should take us to underlying problems of shortages of relevant models, opportunities and experience and also to questions of how Scotland's occupational and educational system have combined, as an overall system of socialisation, to inhibit the development of the most relevant kinds of confidence.<sup>4</sup>

So much for the outline of the overall package of perceptions and feelings and pressures on both that have characterised Scottish society, in its British context, since 1945. A full analysis calls for consideration of how all this has played out and still plays out by region, locality, social class and the vari-nets to which people now, so to speak, subscribe. Scotland, like any other complex late modern society, has a cultural configuration rather than a unified culture or identity. That is, such societies and their cultures have to be defined in terms of overlapping strands of cultural factors and features – and, just as importantly, in terms of how those sometimes competing or divisive strands are held in

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tension or partly resolved within a society. Within even the generous space available here it is not possible to perform that analysis in detail. Instead, the remainder of this piece focuses on just three over-arching features of our Scottish and British cultural configuration and on conditions under which Scottish statehood might be arrived at. The three selected over-arching features justify attention in view of the arguments presented thus far. They are: older and continuing attractions and benefits of the Union; the problematic and mixed effects of late modern conditions on both Scottishness and Britishness; and the effects of Scotland's overall system and processes of socialisation.

Political unions, however initially contrived or imposed, survive in the longer term on account of the facilitative features and opportunities they offer enough people on either side of the erstwhile divide. 'Enough' people here refers to some combination of sufficiently influential minorities, perhaps constituting some overall majority of the populations concerned, perhaps not. After its dubious beginnings in 1707 and after some rather shaky early decades, our Union offered enough Scots sufficient facilitative features and it continued to provide protection, opportunities and a wide range of cultural benefits to enough people: certainly until after the Second World War and, in some respects, to the present day. Nor should we forget or underestimate the extent to which one of the benefits was peace within mainland Britain and within Scotland itself. One of the reasons David Hume so strongly supported the Union, after all, was that it provided sufficient effective force to forestall or see off any return to the appalling internecine conflicts then of such recent memory and with two further flare-ups during his lifetime. Those particular divisions and conflicts are in the past and, we may reasonably hope, safely so. However, Scottish fractiousness and, more importantly perhaps, fears of fractiousness are not. Never mind that many social, cultural or religious divisions and conflicts have come and gone or died down in Scotland *within* the time of the Union: a perception or fear remains, still perhaps remarkably widespread, that if Scots are left to their own devices they will pretty soon end up squabbling with each other over whatever pickings are going. My guess – and it can only be a guess – is that such fears are grounded, in so far as they have grounds, in two things. One is that set of worries, already noted, about viability and competences and a fear that the pickings may be poor or ill-divided, at least for most. A second comprises memories of seriously hard and insecure times for a great many Scots and of times, a very few generations in the past, when a minority of fellow Scots grabbed much of the pickings while many lived in squalor or the threat of it: until, that is, a British welfare state – in which so many Scots participated enthusiastically and prominently – came to the rescue.

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The postwar welfare state was indeed a joint project for the peoples of the UK. Along with British national utilities, transport facilities and large British firms and organisations, the agencies of the welfare state helped create very real and palpable kinds of British unity. Surmounting all of this was a British government. Although struggling in the postwar years with huge problems of debt, reconstruction, offloading an empire and losing in consequence much of its status as leadership of a great world power, British governments still played on the big stages of the world and conveyed impressions of prestige and influence. British Prime Ministers still rubbed shoulders with American presidents, presenting at least an illusion of being on equal footing, something others have tried to maintain ever since. At home, the extended reach of high modern governments combined with canny manoeuvring of Scottish politicians to ensure that Scotland acquired elbow room: qualified kinds of autonomy that, all things considered, compared rather favourably with the kinds of autonomy enjoyed by other small nations, formally independent or not.<sup>5</sup> Much the same could be said of important Scottish sections of important institutions of civil and political society, notably trades unions and the Labour Party, although effective autonomy varied by issue and in degree. The Union had also long fostered by and large friendly relations between Scottish and English people. And, although the numbers of English-born people resident in Scotland increased to present numbers – some 450,000 – only later in the century<sup>6</sup>, the general ease with which this has happened owes much to British conduits and connections extended during and after the war. Very clearly, these amicable relationships are among the most highly prized benefits of the Union. True, nasty anti-English resentments do occasionally flare up. But the last thing most Scottish people want, including those who vote expressly for Scottish statehood, is friction with English neighbours whether they live next door or hundreds of miles to the south. In this regard, as on other inclusiveness issues, it surely has to be acknowledged that the SNP's long term positions and actual behaviour have been highly creditable, dealing effectively with small anti-English factions. As the movement for political independence became politically more effective in the final quarter of the century, it turned out to be very different from the kinds of blood-and-soil nationalism or ethnic nationalism or exclusive cultural nationalism that characterised earlier phases of European history and still characterise parts of the world undergoing very different kinds and phases of historical development. In its very lack of a core ideology, in its not promoting an 'ism' in any of those senses, the SNP reached its maturity and effectiveness as a noticeably late modern kind of political party.

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Many of the organisational edifices and trappings of British high modernity have gone, mostly over the past twenty-five years or so. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the Barnett formula and its effects, it is going anyway and with it the old role of the British state as ultimate guarantor and provider. The prestige and credibility of the British government on the world and European stage has weakened. The welfare state is not what it was and has, indeed, developed distinctively Scottish features and priorities within the context of the Union, particularly since devolution and under a unionist coalition. The balance of advantages over disadvantages of some of Scotland's kinds of dependence on incorporation had come into question by the 1970s, as had the fit between specific British policies and Scottish needs. For all that, significant and valuable British connections remain: captured now selectively in the British vari-nets which most Scots occupy. Those benefits are still more than sufficient for many Scots to continue to put a premium on their British interests, attachments and affiliations while insisting – rightly – that they are just as Scottish as those who put a premium on the Scottish dimension of their interests, attachments and priorities. This is precisely what we should expect to find in a late modern vari-net society. Their high modern, postwar predecessors would by contrast have been more likely simply to be amazed at the suggestion that that there was any serious choice to be made between their Scottish and British interests and priorities at all.

The 1970s through to the 1980s have to be revisited here because they represent important transition points in the story. The early days of North Sea oil production, the then possibilities that Scotland could become an energy-rich and money-rich country, the very failure of the first attempt to find a devolution settlement, the at first gradual and then rapid erosion of much of Scotland's industrial base, the disruption of many 'traditional' communities and social networks, the ways in which Mrs Thatcher's governments accelerated shifts in Britain and in Scotland from conditions of high modernity to late modernity: all of these mark that middle of our period as one of transition. Some of those changes were already evident by the early to mid 'seventies. On the other hand, many of the features and facilities of postwar, high modern Britain were still in place: however glaring the imbalances in fortunes by class and British region, however strident the discontents and protests – industrial and generational, economic, class, cultural and political – that dominated the TV news. Yet by October 1974 the SNP had 11 MPs at Westminster and 30% of the popular vote in Scotland. Even more remarkably and tellingly in its way, perhaps: earlier in 1974, Scottish schoolteachers had gone on strike, officially – a strike called by that most sedate of institutions, the

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EIS. It was like all your favourite aunties – or uncles – running off with the milkmen. Many teachers themselves reacted with incredulity, with a feeling that they were sinning against their own nature, since their role had been for so long to stand as bulwarks of conservatism and respect for elected or appointed authority. Yet there it was: the representatives of the most important of Scotland's distinctive national institutions, education, in revolt against their terms, conditions and pay although not yet against the constitutional basis ultimately behind that deal. Strange and yet to be revealed things were stirring in the ground beneath our feet, the first fractures appearing. Still, a period of transition is just that: a period in which things are not quite as they recently have been, but might seem to be so; and a period which has yet to develop fully into a future that cannot as yet be fully foreseen or foretold.

In 1975 I contributed a piece to a book, a collection of articles, called **The Red Paper On Scotland**, arguing that people on the left in Scottish politics should join or at least work constructively with the SNP.<sup>7</sup> The editor perfectly fairly summed up my contribution by saying in his Introduction that I argued 'that a breakaway Scotland would be one [please note that 'one'] important lever against multinational capitalism and that there is a radical base within the SNP which would be enhanced through its fusion with socialists.' A modest enough proposal, I then thought and still consider it. The editor was, of course, Gordon Brown. He rebuffed the proposal, as did the great majority, if not quite all, of the other contributors. He and others preferred instead to go directly for a downward redistribution of wealth and power under the aegis of the British state and eschewing intermediate constitutional and institutional reforms that might make those objectives at least half-way achievable: proposals which, for lack of essential specifics, seemed to me then and still seem to me now quite mysterious and implausible. At all events, the shift of lefties into the SNP, to the extent it occurred, was then still almost a decade in the future. And enough of the arguments and dreams of young political activists and thinkers back then. The more important point is that what Gordon Brown and others articulated at the time was felt, as a reflex and another kind of default orientation, by so many members and supporters of Labour (to go no further to the left) and the trade unions. They had, moreover, whether they acknowledged this or not, some of their staunchest allies in the CBI and the Tory party as well as, to be sure, among the Scottish public at large. A great many people quite understandably felt in the then circumstances – some through the soles of their boots and others, perhaps, through the needles of career compasses – that such defence as could be mustered against depredations and such powers as could be exercised to relieve deprivations could and should come from the British

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Labour movement. Those organisations were, after all, in place and could however edgily help achieve and then support power at Westminster. What the SNP then offered seemed a perilous leap in practical terms as well being ideologically or tribally alien. This reflex was all the more understandable in Scotland because Labour had established so powerful a hegemony at local level, not least importantly as provider of affordable housing for around half of the entire population. No great surprise, then, that the first offering of a modest form of devolution in 1979 crumbled like the half-baked cake it was: spoiled in the end as much by the scepticism or masterly inattentiveness of some of its Labour cooks as by confusion, puzzlement and worries among the voters at large.

No one foresaw the Thatcher years and the almost two decades of Tory government, as how could they? However much could then and subsequently be blamed on Mrs Thatcher, many of the economic, social and cultural changes to which she was mother or midwife were to prove irreversible: and this for reasons set out at the beginning of this piece. That is, neither Britain as a whole nor Scotland in particular could go back to the future: a future once upon a time promised by the visions, organisational structures and means of provision of goods, services, jobs and security that characterised high modernity. However, since many of the woes of the Tory years appeared to have a clear fount of origin in Westminster, the political remedies sought understandably focused on restoring a British Labour Government; and so, for a while, devolution as well as Scottish independence fell off the popular as well as political agenda. The interesting question is, why did devolution come back on? Why, moreover, did it come back on as an early priority for New Labour after its accession to British power in 1997?

A mixed, not to say mixed-up, bag of perceptions and priorities surely played their part: they always do. New Labour's success had come from the development of new competences and sensitivities as regards what would sell or play well with sections of the (British) population: no longer huge cross-sections or supposedly homogeneous social-class sections, now rather subtler configurations of interest groups. These political perceptions were decidedly late modern rather than high modern. There were groups in Scotland, probably stacking up into a majority of sorts, straddling traditional party allegiances, who wanted enhanced and more accountable attention to Scottish issues? Fine: let them, in 1997, eat a new and this time more carefully cooked devolutionary cake. Sceptics who might have cried fretfully about the dangers of slippery slopes – much heard back in 1979 – could be hushed and kept on-message.

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Besides, especially as they enjoyed the early flush of electoral triumph, there were many in Scottish Labour ranks who simply could not believe that the Labour hegemony could be seriously threatened. Not up here. Heroic or complacent assumptions were made to that effect. Given the electoral and parliamentary arithmetic, Labour would surely remain for a very long time in a position to dominate a coalition or conduct a minority administration. Risky, perhaps; and yet perhaps not very. The trade-off that many equally relied on was that this form of devolution, to this extent, really would represent the settled will of the Scottish people and that it would kill off the independence issue once and for all.

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Ah well: things haven't turned out quite like that. Nor could they. This is so partly for a familiar kind of reason in political history: unexpected contingencies – or, in Harold Macmillan's famous phrase: events, dear boy, events. Iraq, apart from anything else, has been such a factor. Such reasons aside, the oddly unsettled and unresolved situation we find ourselves in arises for reasons especially germane here. Late modern conditions, and vari-nets in particular, have problematic consequences for political settlements old and new and for structures – of states, nations and cultures – old and new. Britannia isn't what she was and doesn't mean what she did: which is not in the least to say that she has ceased to be meaningful. She certainly is, but in modified ways such that she can't deliver the same wide range of goods to the same wide range of people. Stands Scotland where she did? Most certainly not. Although the conditions of high modernity drew aspects of Scottish interests and priorities together, welding them into British structures, Scotland was far from a perceived or actual cultural unity as a nation back then. The subsequent breakdown of older industrial communities and solidarities did not transmute by and large into forms of Scottish national solidarity or orientation. To the contrary, as references to the 1970s and 1980s have indicated. Those older forms of solidarity and social networks, with their rich cultural meanings, were often hostile to nationalism. Nor do the new forms of social configuration in travel-to-work areas around out of town shopping centres, call centres and scatterings of sheds in bleak industrial estates readily foster concepts of joined-up nationhood. The kinds of integration Scotland has and the degrees to which it is integrated remain problematic under late modern conditions, particularly as regards the extent to which it represents for people the primary framework and focal arena within which they conduct their lives. Vari-nets with their

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component practical priorities, connections and emotionally important attachments all ensure that that needn't be so, although it may be so.

It is also the case that under the conditions of late modernity, structures old and new – including those of state and nation – have to be marketed as deliverers of goods to now sceptical consumers inclined to discontents and very varied motivations for and commitments to buying in to them, if they buy in at all. At the same time, re-structuring is a pesky fact of late modern life. Indeed, the apparently endless churn of re-structurings in organisations of many kinds is one of the sources of discontents. However much this upsets and unsettles people, it is something they now have to live with. Restructuring of large and important commercial, governmental and state organisations is itself a special and important form of vari-netting. It is brought on by the needs of governing and other corporate agencies to deal with competitors for power in their fields, to adjust to exigent and changing operating conditions and, not least, to try to persuade those they are presumed to serve that they are doing so. Whatever else the people of Scotland can now safely bet on, they can bank on being asked to accept and legitimate further changes at Scottish, British and European levels in how they are governed. At least, in our kind of democracy, people will at some point be presented with choices, however craftily crafted and however steered. But, partly because of the confusions and stresses of these restructuring processes themselves as well as the varied motivations and commitments people bring to them, the outcomes have become harder and harder to predict or secure. Witness the debacle when the French were, all too confidently, asked to vote on a new European constitution endorsed by their president.

What we can hope to do is identify conditions that will favour one direction of travel rather than another. Suppose, then, the direction of travel to be considered is statehood for Scotland, formal political independence. As others have rightly pointed out since the recent elections, that remains perhaps a distant possibility and, currently, perhaps not the likeliest one. Although the present settlement doesn't look stable enough to endure, because questions about it are going to keep coming up in Holyrood and in Westminster too, there are alternative stopping off points some way short of formal independence. More than one political scenario has it that voters in Scotland will in the end settle for further extensions of power over domestic affairs, over some aspects of economic management, along with perhaps some kind of inclusion in British dealings in Europe. On past form, this kind of scenario has some face plausibility. Given concerns earlier referred to about the

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competences of home-based politicians, the present devolution settlement may well have appealed to many voters in that it gave some control over the house-keeping to Holyrood while leaving the really big and important decisions to Westminster. So some minor extensions of powers along similar lines and for similar reasons may prove acceptable again; or it may prove naggingly unsatisfactory. What would it take to go beyond that point on the spectrum of possibilities?

Enough people in Scotland would, of course, have to decide that a Scottish government and state could better serve their varied interests and priorities. This is, in one sense, obvious to the point of tautology, unless an independence settlement were somehow imposed by some kind of *force majeure*. However, the point is both subtler and substantive if one puts the stress on ‘varied’ and reckons with vari-nets in which people’s interests and priorities tend to diverge and are not inherently focused on a national agenda or national community. In that case, independence could come as a result of a highly contingent, even coincidental, convergence at the ballot box of people with rather differing interests and priorities. People might arrive at polling stations as a result of very particular and even idiosyncratic motivations and priorities for being there. Where they would overlap would be as a result of deciding, from their varied points of view, that a Scottish government offered specific competences and services, on any stage, that would respect and enhance the interests, priorities, connections and attachments of the kinds of vari-nets that variously mattered to them. The apparently odd, but actually not so odd, implication is that Scotland could acquire statehood without the acquisition being powered by nationalism.

For this to happen, further conditions might need to be met and would, at any rate, favour it. It would certainly help if there were a considerable increase in the numbers of people in Scotland who became used to running enterprises, social as well as purely commercial, that have to fend for themselves. This would bring an increase in experiences and models of kinds of independence other than political independence. It would also reduce a particular kind of dependence: on the public sector, and hence taxation, as a source both of occupations and funding for projects. True, these non-political kinds of independence do not simply transmute into demands for political independence; nor do they transfer automatically or simply into the competences then to be found in parliaments and governments. But they would provide Scottish society with much needed forms of experience, models and perspectives to supplement those it already has. It would, in particular, help

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alter the landscape of opportunities and thereby our customary modes and parameters of socialisation.

A shift in long-established Scottish parameters of socialisation is almost certainly needed. In the sense relevant for present purposes, socialisation refers to a combination of educational processes with actual and expected patterns of occupations, opportunities and roles. Educational systems and processes do not of themselves create those patterns of occupations and opportunities, any more than they create (upward) social mobility. Educational systems and processes do, or can, facilitate social mobility: depending on available patterns of occupations and opportunities and on the perceptions of teachers (among others) as to the kinds of occupations and roles open to or attainable by those being taught. These often tacit perceptions, assumptions and expectations feed through to those going through the educational process. And, with that link, the overall socialisation system is complete.

The Scottish education system has long been an astonishing phenomenon. Long before it developed its current scale and form, many Scots could and did rely on it to provide them with a kind of portable capital: knowledge and know-how. Knowledge and know-how are even easier to carry around than money: which, in any case, was in rather short supply for the majority of Scots over many generations. While knowledge and know-how didn't necessarily or all that readily turn to gold, they did open doors to positions that were relatively secure and moderately furnished with money. No wonder Scots have so long insisted that education should be a matter of public and universal, not private, provision of opportunities. For much of Scotland's modern (post-17<sup>th</sup> century) history, economic exigencies and paucity of *economic* opportunities saw to it that educational opportunities were, for many, opportunities to fall definitively at relatively early assessment hurdles. The system, and the teachers who often selflessly served it and their pupils, are not to be blamed for that. As for those who succeeded educationally, the destinations and roles awaiting them might be generally modest; but for many they brought other compensations. For many, these were the compensations of performing valued public services and earning modest status and success by doing so. No wonder that in Scotland the public service ethos has remained so strong. The *size* of the public sector is another matter, accountable for largely in other ways. Conversely, the size does not explain the ethos and its pervasive, durable appeal in Scotland.

This is all, in its way, well and good up to a point. It is a form of socialisation that fitted the economic opportunities and pitfalls of high modernity, with their associated social imperatives, relatively well. It fits the opportunities, risks and

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threats of late modernity much less well: requiring, as these late modern conditions do, kinds of agility and risk-taking not dreamed of in that older educational philosophy. Again, responsibility for making the necessary changes in this socialisation system and process must not and cannot be laid on teachers: certainly not solely or primarily on them. Readers will, no doubt, have detected chickens morphing into eggs and back again in the last few paragraphs. Which has to change first, education or the landscape of opportunities? The answer is less likely to lie in a blueprint than in a tumbling sequence of events or developments that have to be seized on as they pass. At all events, appropriate changes in our socialisation habits are needed if Scotland is to deal with its problems under whatever constitutional dispensation. And what dispensation is it to be? Might we pass a crossroads in the mists? On current map readings, that remains anyone's guess.

*June 2007*

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<sup>1</sup> *The terminology 'high' and 'late modernity' is used throughout to highlight phases in economic, institutional and wider cultural features of modernity from the 1930s to the present. Decades either side of the Second World War saw high points of undue confidence in planned, relatively rigid and large-scale forms of corporate organisation based either on private or state capitalism: thus high modernity. These features have since then been complicated by or somewhat given way to more varied and variable corporate and social structures: thus late-modernity. 'Late modernity' is used in preference to 'post-modernity', a term that usually connotes more fundamental and complete breaks with previous phases of modernity. In rejecting the modern/post-modern dichotomy, I agree broadly with Anthony Giddens (in, for example, **The Consequences of Modernity**, Polity Press, 1990); and even as late as the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, our living conditions are still far from altogether post-modern.*

<sup>2</sup> *My thinking in this piece owes more than I have space to say to the work of Manuel Castells. See, for example, **The Power of Identity** (Blackwell, 1997), Volume II of his three volume **The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture**. My analysis diverges from his, however, in some key respects. His social networks are largely economically focused. Vari-nets (my terminology) comprise a wider range of interests, priorities and attachments. This being so, I have avoided hijacking one of his key terms: network societies.*

<sup>3</sup> *A phrase for which Gordon Brown has been perhaps unfairly mocked: from a speech, 'New Policies for The Global Economy', 27 September 1994.*

<sup>4</sup> *For a rather different approach to and treatment of confidence issues, see Carol Craig, **The Scots' Crisis of Confidence**, Big Thinking, 2003.*

<sup>5</sup> For an illuminating comparative account of the development of Scottish autonomy, see Lindsay Paterson, ***The Autonomy of Modern Scotland***, Edinburgh University Press, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> For being English in Scotland, see Murray Watson, ***Being English in Scotland***, Edinburgh University Press, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> ***The Red Paper on Scotland***, edited by Gordon Brown, EUSPB, 1975. The title of my piece is 'The Left, The SNP And Oil'.