

THE BEGGARS' BANQUET SCOTLAND'S PLACE IN EUROPE

Derek Bateman

CORPORATE TOURISM

It was billed as Scottish Week in Strasbourg but its political failure and the signals it broadcast about Scotland at home and abroad ensured it will be remembered as a vainglorious jamboree, a marketing man's Darien Scheme.

The Week was a title created by the publicity department at Scottish Enterprise in Bothwell Street, Glasgow and an English-based PR company to promote Scotland - in the most amorphous meaning of the name - to Europe, also in the same non-specific, all-consuming sense. As such it had nothing at all to do with the December 1993 plenary session of the European Parliament with which it ran parallel and the only meaningful point at which the two occasions abutted each other was in the exhibition space in the Palais where strip banners hung like mediaeval jousting pennants proclaiming that Scotland was a place where quality came first.

This is the kind vapid salesmanship which those who migrate to the Alsace capital for the monthly plenaries have come to expect. One month it's Corsica, the next it's the Cotswolds. Brochures are scattered on coffee tables detailing the quality of life and economic advantages of each area, and marketing departments from Galway to Greece have justified their next year's budget. And, like holiday brochures, they cause no more than a blink of the eye in the Palais de l'Europe where concentration is focused on dispatching reams of parliamentary business in the space of a four-and-a-half-day frenzy of legislative energy.

To be fair to Scottish Enterprise, their northern colleagues from Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Scottish Office - who took the opportunity to blow a pro-European smokescreen over the visiting domestic media - this

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was nothing more nor less than anyone else from the Community fringes attempts from time to time as an elaborate aide memoire to the legislators of their continued existence. There is also a queue for the limited exhibition space and, to be prosaic, it was Scotland's turn. The increasingly frantic PR staff were quick to point this out in the face of intensive questioning from journalists about both the meaning and cost of the exercise (estimate £100,000). Thus: Why was a plane chartered to bring in dignitaries for the day? Why were chefs flown in to cook for them? Why were they meeting no one of any importance in the EU? Why were Scots employed in the Palais not invited to the banquet until after their absence was pointed out by MEPs?

This journalistic blood lust was to provoke flashes of retaliation. One Scottish political journalist was physically thrust into a corner by a PR official and challenged to deny that he would be writing off the event as a waste of money in his paper that weekend. Privately, like others present, the journalist accosted had been puzzled to find himself seated at the fulcrum of a central institution of Europe listening to a kilted Bill McCue rendering 'By Yon Bonnie Banks'. As a parody of Hogmanay television it was deemed a success. To those in the media with a working understanding of EU mechanics it was embarrassing - ersatz culture cloaking substantive ignorance. This was corporate tourism not hands-on politicking. With some of our leading companies represented it was clear that there was no lack of insight into practical business matters relating to European trade; so what they or their hosts thought they might gain by joining an overnight package tour to France was obscure. The most plausible explanation came from a financial executive who said it had appeared to be a high-powered government-backed initiative, something it would be counter productive to refuse.

SCOTS IN EUROPE

Scots who consider themselves 'communautair' wrestle with the complexities and incongruities of their country's schizophrenic association with the European Union, as it must now be called. Usually this is done on the basis that it is problematical belonging to the new (European) Union when you still haven't worked out your place in the old (British) Union. Such Euro-Scots regard their country's inclusion in the Twelve as a kind of constitutional country membership...full use of all facilities except on competition days and no voting rights. Therefore they are obliged in the company of full member states to deal themselves a hand according to the game of the day. To the Germans, they can characterise Scotland as a Land, powerful enough to have a seat in Cabinet, rich enough to own the lion's share of Community oil and

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fish, and clever enough to be the base for its electronics. To the Irish they can share complaints about being stuck on the periphery, impoverished enough for half the land mass to qualify for Objective One aid and sharing Irish disbelief that we don't claim full membership.

At least the Scots who are 'in' Europe, either physically or merely intellectually, are attempting to work out this convoluted equation which is one few others among the present Twelve need to confront. To be, for example, Dutch in the EU is to scan the Community radar for signs of change without seeing your own blip appear on the screen as an unanswered question. Just what should Scotland's relationship be? How would it alter after a change of government, and how would independence be made to work?

Yet the impression left by the Tartan Tour was that Scottish Enterprise apparently saw such dilemmas in much the same simplistic way that Conservative ministers characterise Scotland's role. For Europe, read Business. For Scotland, read Tartan. As Arnold Kemp, editor of **The Herald** and one of the free-loaders, wrote: 'We had stepped into the White Heather Club, circa 1960...why had we brought Granny's Heilan' Hame to Strasbourg?' Clearly because Granny is still the embodiment of Scotland nearing the millennium, at least among our national leaders.

Amongst these leaders is the government for whom the Scottish Secretary Ian Lang had first accepted an invitation, then was obliged to decline and was replaced by his 'European' minister Lord Fraser of Carmyllie, whose presence contained its own irony. Since unaccountability is a persistent right-wing Conservative charge against the European Commission, and powerlessness an equally common Tory complaint against the European Parliament, it was doubly ridiculous to find in such a European context an unelected - indeed a specifically rejected - politician out of a chamber whose views can be, and are, overturned at will by the government. In this case the lack of a seat in the Commons, though, was an advantage for the Scottish Office since Mr Lang was detained in London by the official Opposition's abandonment of parliamentary 'usual Channels', which allow pared voting and agreed timetables.

STRUCTURAL FUNDS

Lord Fraser, visibly cheered at the scale of the imported largesse, was a more than adequate replacement, and had the pleasure of reiterating Mr Lang's announcement to the Westminster parliament the same day that responsibility

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for the European Social Fund in Scotland was being assumed by the Scottish Office from 1994. This was, he said, in keeping with the principles contained in the White Paper on Scotland and the Union - **A Partnership for Good** - which addressed measures to strengthen the UK and Scotland's place in it. The transfer of the ESF, which was then administered by the Department of Employment, was another step in devolving responsibilities, according to Scottish Office officials. However, in reading the briefing notes attached to the press release, the reality was more opaque: 'The Secretary of State for Employment continues to have overall responsibility for ESF in Great Britain as well as for the administration of GB-wide programmes under Objective 3 and 4 including actions in Scotland,' it stated, undermining the impression cultivated by the minister of state of decision-making powers devolving to Edinburgh.

Like so much else in the tautology of subsidiarity, the ESF issue had come in through the revolving door and gone straight out again. That this was selected by civil servants and ministerial advisers as the flag to wave both to our partner/competitors and the transplanted domestic media displayed shallowness of insight and complacency of news management. ESF monies will now be 'managed' by St Andrews House rather than by Caxton House in London in the same way as have been other key elements of the Structural Funds - European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and European Agricultural Guarantees and Guidance Fund (EAGGF). This is a paper transfer in which the ultimate decision-making rests in London, and it comes at a time when the regulations are being re-written under the terms of the Edinburgh Summit of December 1992. Even the winding-up of existing programmes - those under Objectives 2 and 5b in Scotland - will continue to be carried out by the Department of Employment. The system which formally ended on 31 December 1993 is to be replaced by Community Support Frameworks (CSFs) with budgets so far uncertain.

During the same plenary week the Parliament voted through its recommended changes to the EU budget in which it switched ESF resources from Objective 4 (aid for the adaptation of industry and production) into Objective 3 for combating long-term unemployment and integrating young people and others excluded from the labour market into working life. Although this programme seems particularly suited to Scotland's jobless needs, this area of ESF money will remain the preserve of the Employment Department, and, oddly, will not transfer to Mr Lang.

Lord Fraser did tip his hat to Brussels by conceding that the funds supported a range of projects 'which would not otherwise proceed' if left to national

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budgets alone, ignoring the same principle in reverse where projects stagnate for the lack of national resources while European funds lie unclaimed, a phenomenon identified by the regional commissioner Bruce Millan whose complaints about lack of take-up in Scotland has put him at loggerheads with the Scottish Office. To present the ESF management transfer as a kind of 'Scottish coup in Europe', then, was an inadvertent declaration of how tenuous is the Edinburgh-Brussels-Strasbourg link and how limited ministers' understanding of it remains.

It was, simultaneously, an admission from the European minister's own mouth that he believes Scots are happy to see Europe and its institutions as an interest-paying bank account. Thus, EU membership is justified... so long as the cheques don't bounce. Lord Fraser also ignored the hidden debate about Scotland's scramble to be classified as Objective One (covering Highlands and Islands), and Objectives 2 and 5b. Presented as a political victory over Brussels by national and local politicians - SNP MEP Winifred Ewing included - and giving access to the golden goose of EU funding, the categories are in reality official recognition of economic decline, de-industrialisation and social dislocation. To be in Objective One, where the full panoply of funds are offered for areas falling behind the average, is the EU equivalent of being homeless and unemployed. As the Irish in Strasbourg are more ruefully used to admitting - the more funds you qualify for, the more proof it is of national failure. Oysters and haggis en croute may have topped the Scottish Week menu but the VIPs were attending a beggars' banquet.

As far as convincing the media that this switching of ESF in-trays was at once both devolutionary and communautaire, the Scottish Office delegation found to their irritation that the usual rules did not necessarily apply. The old PRO's dictum - that the amount of good press would be in exact proportion to the level of hospitality - was knocked askew by journalists' prior perception of the trip as a hall-marked, gilt-edged junket of a kind rarely found nowadays and one in which they could incriminate three-quarters of Scotland's ruling elite. (It was a sign of how compact a coterie that elite is that Winifred Ewing found the arrivistes from Scotland included two of her political opponents in the June European elections, albeit in different disguises - Hamish Morrison, Liberal Democrat, chief executive Scottish Council (Development and Industry) and Mark Tennant, Conservative, Chase Manhattan Bank.)

The motive behind what was derided by the Mid Scotland and Fife MEP Alex Falconer as a 'quango banquet' may have had something to do with the spring 1994 termination of local enterprise company (LEC's) contracts and the bidding process to replace or renew them. It may not have been

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unconnected with the string of adverse stories about LEC mismanagement and conflict of interest among directors who were benefiting, usually indirectly, through public development funds. It certainly had little to do with eye-to-eye contact with anyone plugged into the Euro network. As Falconer pointed out, with ill-disguised astonishment given his own Euro-sceptic credentials, only eight out of 114 on the banquet guest list came from outside the UK. One of them was Egon Klepsch, the German Socialist president of the European Parliament, to whom Campbell Christie, general secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress, had formally presented a petition from the Coalition for Scottish Democracy calling for a parliament in Edinburgh.

SCOTLAND IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

As the drone of the pipes died away and the Scotch mist cleared, the Parliament was churning its way through the week's session in which cameos of Scotland's true relationship with the European institutions were laid bare, and the tensions that provide our politics with their familiar brisk tempo began to reverberate in the Palais.

The main area of interest to the Scottish MEPs was fishing, which, being strategic in nature, is cocooned in regulations, quotas and treaty amendments so that it requires specialist members of the Parliamentary secretariat, constitutional advisers and fisheries lobbyists to decipher the precise meaning of each decision. For 24 hours after a committee debate on Iberian access to Scottish waters and the Irish Box, it was possible to find at least three different interpretations of what had been decided. Even after the vote in full plenary session, opponents were each claiming victory. Whoever is entitled to claim success - in what by European standards is a minor spat - may not be known until after the end of the century, and this uncertainty has left a pall over the viability of the Scottish fleet.

The problems for the Scots and the Irish derive from the success of Spain and Portugal in convincing the Commission that the treaty under which they acceded to the Community in 1986 should be changed to allow their fleets to fish in Scottish and Irish waters. They were barred on accession until the year 2003 as a fish stock conservation measure. But having fished out their own waters, and moved on into African seas in an apparently inexorable expansion, they called for the treaty relaxation which would open northern fisheries to them in 1996.

The different tactical approaches by MEPs revealed underlying differences of political ideology. Fundamentalism underscored Nationalist Winifred Ewing's line of absolute opposition and she approached the threat to Scottish

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fishermen as if Scotland was already a full member state. She claimed that such a change was a treaty 'amendment' and therefore required both unanimity in the Council of Ministers and formal ratification by all 12 member-state parliaments. This was effectively a blocking measure. Aided by Irish MEPs she lost on the legal definition when it was ruled that the relaxation was merely an 'adjustment', requiring only majority vote approval in the Council.

Henry McCubbin - Labour MEP for North East Scotland - who cannot for party reasons take a 'Scotland first and Scotland last' approach - fought a tactical game by acknowledging the force majeure of the Commission's decision and, as a Socialist Group whip, organized votes around the question of 'relative stability'. In essence this is a retrospective safety net which prohibits any change in fisheries policy which threatens to fracture communities dependent on the industry for economic viability. Only if their fleet had a record of fishing in waters used by those communities over a 10-year period from 1986 could the Spanish be given legal access. By virtue of their exclusion in 1986, this, according to McCubbin, rules out Iberian vessels from Scottish waters. This was a pragmatic, and, given the numbers of Spanish MEPs in the Socialist Group, a politically sensible course for McCubbin to follow, as it allowed him to present the package as something for everyone in a compromise reminiscent of Labour in Westminster, when Scottish interests (instance, an Assembly) conflict with those in England (instance North of England resistance).

It mirrored too the fault lines at home between Labour and the Nationalists with the SNP insisting a vital 'national' interest was at stake and unswerving opposition was required. Mrs Ewing was scornful of Mr McCubbin's amendment, because of the Spaniards' record in disobeying fisheries law and ruthlessly cleaning out fisheries. She may in years to come be proved right. In the meantime both North of Scotland MEPs are conducting a media dog-fight to convince voters in their constituencies that each of them was correct.

Whatever the treaties say, the reality is that the EU is no different from any other political powerbase, vulnerable to insider dealing and threats from the most powerful. Spain got what it wanted because of the influence it can muster behind a national interest; Scotland conceded because in UK priorities fishing is marginalised and the seven Scottish Socialist MEPs know they must trade votes within their group, the largest in the parliament.

Despite having so many other forces ranged against their country, Scotland's eight MEPs still generally follow well-worn paths of domestic politicking. Mrs Ewing stands alone and shows no signs of flagging under the weight of

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isolation, while the seven Labour members vote together but divide relatively neatly into left-wing Euro-sceptics - the group soubriquet is Tankies - and Pragmatists, Mr McCubbin being further out on the Federalist wing than the others. Broadly, domestic lines of demarcation have been transplanted to Strasbourg but the main interest and, for many the main hope, lies with the skills developed by, particularly, David Martin, Ken Collins and Henry McCubbin, all of whom are rising through the European Parliamentary hierarchy by mastering the technical minutiae of legislation and decision-making processes. As a result they are schooled in a non-confrontational culture of political activism that some at least inside the pre-1992 Constitutional Convention identified as fitting for a future Scottish legislature. It is based on the achievable and on wider common interest, and is surprisingly non-partisan. But the rawness of the relationship with the Nationalists, a throw-back to domestic political tradition, poses the question of whether that enlightened culture could be re-created in a Scottish context.

In their differing ways, both Mrs Ewing and Mr McCubbin had to come to terms with the realpolitik of European affairs, and, in their respective viewpoints, both were equally right on the fishing dispute. There can be little doubt that Mrs Ewing's assertion is correct that as a full member state Spain has immeasurably more persuasive powers than Scotland and, like the Ravenscraig closure before it, a vital national asset such as fishing can better be protected from that position of power. A country cannot cut itself out of fisheries law, but within the Council and, through a permanent representative office in Brussels, the sheer weight of resistance can be made plain and trade-offs negotiated. Fishing is a minority interest in the rest of Britain, so much so that leading Conservatives, including the former Scottish chairman Lord Sanderson of Bowden, have argued that responsibility for it should be moved to the Scottish Office. It is rarely treated as a do-or-die issue for UK ministers. In contrast, fishing observers note the role played by Manuel Marin, the Spaniard who was fisheries commissioner and who is now a vice president of the Commission operating on the inside of the Euro machine and representing one of the most powerful lobbies in Spain, the fishing fleet. It is organised differently from Scotland's: conglomerate companies, not families, own one of the largest and most modern of world fleets serving an insatiable demand. By comparison, Britain's fishing interests are minimal, restructuring is piecemeal, and political support is often rhetorical rather than actual. Shades of Lord Fraser's announcement on the Social Fund....

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