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LAND REFORM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Scotland plc

A major land reform bill is passing through the Edinburgh parliament. Off-shore islanders are now buying and managing their land and within a decade, the country will be owned and run quite differently.

by Alastair McIntosh and V er ene Nicolas

Scotland recovered its own parliament in July 1999, after 300 years of rule from Westminster, and three of its first eight legislative priorities were land reform. And they tell us about the history of globalisation far beyond Scotland itself.

The British minister of state, Brian Wilson, spoke in June last year to the London committee of the powerful Scottish Landowners Federation – it has 4,000 members and they claim to control 80% of Scotland’s private land. He warned that “an irreversible shift” had taken place “in public policy towards land ownership in Scotland”. Land reform was now “a litmus test by which the parliament and executive would be judged” (1).

His colleague, deputy Highlands and Islands minister Alasdair Morrison, warned well-funded interests who were lobbying to weaken the parliament’s resolve: “Landlords have for generations been obsessed with control, but today are gripped with fear at the prospect of losing the illegitimate power they’ve exerted over Highland communities ... Notice has now been served on rapacious landowners who have abused wealth and privilege. An unstoppable reforming process has begun” (2).

On 3 May 2000 the Scottish parliament voted unanimously to abolish feudal tenure, ending feudalism’s 900-year grip on most of the nation’s 8m hectares. But this legislative move was largely sham. It still leaves power even more concentrated than in most Latin American countries: 1,000 people – of Scotland’s 5m population – control nearly two-thirds of the private land. This, says Wilson, justifies a progressive programme of “normalisation, because by any reasonable standard, the pattern of land ownership in Scotland is abnormal and undesirable”.

The alternative model – which scheduled legislation in the Scottish parliament will promote – is community ownership. This should give rural communities the right of pre-emption, or first option, to buy their land if and when it is put on the market. Land reform campaigners hope that this will be specified at a price fixed not at speculative value, but at an economic price set by a government valuer.

People’s revolution

In a community buy-out, tenants become their own landlords as democratically elected trustees or directors of a community land trust. About 10 of these already exist. The most prominent started in 1997 on the Isle of Eigg following a campaign that the then-landlord compared to the French Revolution. Islanders had accused their owner, a millionaire Anglo-German car salesman, of treating their home as his private playground. They said he constrained their business activities, and when they resisted, issued eviction notices. After a long, highly political battle, Eigg's 60 residents (3) (including its Sorbonne-educated official historian) bought the 3,000-hectare island for \$2.3m – about half the price expected before the restless natives spoilt the market. Now, four years after their people's revolution, community businesses have created unprecedented full employment, native forest is being re-established, a new pier is planned and a feasibility study has started for generating Eiggtricity electrical power from wind and hydro.

Exiled islanders have been able to return, gaining secure leases on farmland. And rents now finance the local infrastructure rather than a landlord's boats, planes and vintage cars. Says Isabel MacPhail of nearby Assynt (another community buy-out that was once the sporting ground of the meat baron, Lord Edmund Hoyle-Vesty): "It is like the end of colonial rule – gradually our imaginations are unchained".

It is this sense of decolonisation that has turned Scotland's land reform into flagship parliamentary legislation. Underlying these consequences of devolution is the Scottish constitutional principle that sovereignty rests, not with the Queen in a London parliament, but with the people – with what the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath, Scotland's first constitutional instrument, called the Community of the Realm.

Scotland' original parliament was given up in 1707 under the Union of Parliaments, a process that began with the 1603 union of the Scottish and English crowns. It was driven through the 18th century by England' fear of invasion. This fear was justified, because Scotland' Auld Alliance or Entente Cordiale with France made England vulnerable to an allied assault on both northern and southern flanks.

However, the 18th century Scottish parliament was not democratic. Run by merchants and feudal landlords, it was more interested in access to England' expanding colonial markets than in the sovereign wishes of its people. In the face of opposition and riots, the unpopular 1707 Union had been forced upon the Scottish people. Referring to the bribery that lubricated the deal, Robert Burns, Scotland's national poet, later said: "We were bought and sold for English gold; such a parcel of rogues in a nation".

Popular resistance to the Union grew as a reaction against capitalist and modernist values, and culminated with the Jacobite uprising of 1745 when Prince Charles Edward Stuart landed from France, raised a Highland army, and marched to within 200 kilometres of London. But recruitment during the campaign was disappointing. And an expected French pincer movement under Marshal Saxe never left Dunkirk. Overextended, poorly led and disheartened, the Jacobites retreated.

The following year they were defeated in the last battle ever fought on mainland British

soil – Culloden. In reprisals, Highland villages were burnt, women raped by the crews of British naval ships, and young men forcibly transported from communities like Eigg into slavery on the plantations. To this day some Caribbean blacks trace a Scottish mixed ancestry.

Repressive measures after Culloden, such as banning the kilt, destroyed cultural confidence and leadership structures. Land ceased to be a tribal asset valued for the number of people it could support and became a privatised market commodity, valued for the wool that improved breeds of sheep could yield. In the Highland Clearances of the 18th and 19th centuries, half-a-million peasants were forced out of their homes, providing a destitute labour supply for the industrial revolution and soldiers for the British Empire's famous Highland regiments, and filling New World emigrant ships. Too often the oppressed became oppressor in the territories of other dispossessed peoples (4).

The British state that emerged by the late 18th century had become, says Linda Colley, "an invention forged by war. Time and time again, war with France brought Britons, whether from Wales or Scotland or England, into confrontation with an obvious hostile Other and encouraged them to define themselves collectively against it. They defined themselves as Protestants struggling for survival against the world's foremost Catholic power. They defined themselves against the French as they imagined them to be, superstitious, militarist, decadent and unfree" (5).

Britain's fulcrum position – socio-economic and military – between the rest of Europe and America can be seen, historically, as an extension of the imperial project which is now seen in globalisation's Anglo-American international business culture. From Napoleon through to Hitler; from the Falklands to Afghanistan, war, including the national totem of nuclear weaponry, continued to define national identity.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher relished this, speaking fondly of the Anglo-American "special relationship" with President Reagan. But, in the end, it was the stimulus of her socially divisive regime after 1979 – founded on American neo-liberal economics – that convinced 74% of Scots in the September 1997 national referendum to vote for restoration of the Scottish parliament and a distancing from London (6).

Re-imagining history

"The creation of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, and the increased prominence of Scottish and Welsh identities, have profound implications for people in England", says an 1 October 2000 report from a commission chaired by Lord Parekh, *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (7). "Britain is a recent creation, and colonialism and empire were integral to its making", the report continues. "Dominant stories in Britain need to be changed ... How to re-imagine English, Scottish and Welsh history so that it includes everyone; how to understand identities in transition; how to balance cohesion, difference and justice; how to deal with racism."

Writing in *Scottish Affairs*, the Historiographer Royal for Scotland, Professor TC Smout, has explored Scotland as “a famous enigma to students of nationalism”. Identity is civic and geographical rather than ethnic. This, he suggests, offers hope that Scotland can build a multicultural society that avoids discriminative exclusion. “Modern Scottish identity”, he concludes, “is much more firmly allied to a sense of place than to a sense of tribe ... Because tribe does not matter and place does, there is unlikely ever to be ethnic cleansing in Scotland” (8). Such a potentially inclusive vision contrasts with the xenophobic nationalisms of a Haider or Le Pen. It suggests that a people can be proud of national identity without injuring others. It is reflected in the Scottish National Party’s slogan, Independence within Europe.

For the time being, devolution has successfully enabled Tony Blair’s New Labour party to fend off the Braveheart factor. The Scottish National party plays the Labour party cat-and-mouse in opinion polls. Devolution grants Edinburgh power over most things except defence, foreign affairs and macroeconomics. Blair hoped that that Britain would be reborn as “cool Britannia”. The undecided of Scotland replied, “Only if you mend your ways and stop interfering”.

How can a nation acquire a new consciousness? “Once in many generations”, said Canon Kenyon Wright, who chaired the executive of the Scottish Constitutional Convention that steered the new parliament into existence (9), “there comes to a people the chance to take their destiny into their own hands, to say with confidence who they are and what they want, and to reshape their society in line with their vision. That time has come for Scotland.”

He chaired a national values discernment process, *People & Parliament*, (10) in 1998 to get the nation to think about itself – cultural psychotherapy – by asking 3,500 people to complete three statements. The first issue stimulated reflection by exploring identity (“We are a people who...”). The second stimulated vision by exploring aspiration (“By the year 2020 we would like to see a Scotland in which...”). And the third stimulated action by exploring political process (“We therefore expect our parliament to work with the people in ways which...”).

A rural community group said: “Despite centuries of amalgamation we retain a sense of national identity based on traditional regard for equality, social justice and universal education”. A group of scientists responded: “We have different needs from London and do not approve of imperialism”. An adult education class said: “We have a distinct national identity as well as district and local identities”. And Glasgow schoolchildren said: “Community spirit and making people feel welcome are very important”.

The responses reinforced the importance of land, demonstrating a strong sense of place. This was the primary contributor in creating a sense of belonging. From that arose a sense of identity, and this nourished a sense of civic responsibility through beauty, compassion, valour and participation. Only a few expressed xenophobic sentiments. Most emphasised values of social and ecological justice.

A more recent study found that black and ethnic minorities did not feel as included as white Scots believed they were (11). But a powerful cultural emphasis on the “sacred duty” of hospitality and fostership provides a cultural foundation for working on social inclusion. As a Gaelic proverb puts it, “The bonds of milk are stronger than the bonds of blood” – nurture, or choosing to belong through fostership, counts for more than lineage. People belong if they are willing to cherish, and be cherished, by a place and its people.

Who is a Scot? “It’s all about embracing multiple identities”, says Prince Emmanuel Obike, a health service executive who lives in Glasgow. “I’m Nigerian, I’m Scottish and I’m Jewish! That’s multiple identity for you, and that’s what it means to be a real Scot.”

Translations >>

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