

Constitutional crisis in Scotland: a prelude to independence?

by Katherine Kanter

As we go to press, William Waldegrave, chief Minister of the British Foreign Office, has fulminated against the unilateral declaration of independence by Lithuania, which, he warns, does not "meet the criteria" of the Foreign Office for independence, namely, control over its foreign policy and control over its own territory. Few people outside the British Isles however, realize that the background to Waldegrave's utterances, and to England's almost hysterical refusal to face the reality that Germany will be reunified, is not just panic fear to lose their grip over Western European policy. Waldegrave was also addressing the nationalities problem in a place called the United Kingdom.

The most important of these nations is Scotland, joined, as the story goes, by a "voluntary" Act, called the Treaty of Union, to England in 1707, but as a separate nation. The Scots Parliament was dissolved into the Parliament at Westminster, and from that date, the country has been under English rule, although its Church, its legal system and its schools have remained entirely distinct. Since May 1989, when what the British government persists in viewing as "disturbances" erupted in China, Hong Kong, and then in Eastern Europe, unrest has suddenly made itself felt in Scotland. Why? How does an entire nation, stumbling from pillar to post for two centuries, suddenly realize that its survival as a nation is threatened in a fundamental way?

These are not the gloomy reaches of outer Russia, where benighted women lumber around in headscarves. In Scotland, you are dealing with a highly educated, sensitive people who read and reflect upon what is happening to their country. By conservative estimate, there are at least 250,000 unemployed out of a workforce of about 2.2 million people, 50% higher than the average for Britain as a whole. Over the last decade, the shipbuilding and steel industries have been gutted, as the British government, following the official anti-industry religion preached by the bizarre Duke of Edinburgh, has pumped virtually all available liquidity into financial services, office buildings, and electronic gadgetry for southern England.

Thirty years ago, Scotland's capital Glasgow had over 1 million inhabitants, earning a fair living in heavy industry.

Now it has only 750,000, a collapse sold to the public as an "ecological improvement." In 1979, engineering industries employed twice as many people as the financial sector; now it is 50-50. In 1979, the ratio of people employed in services relative to manufacturing, was 2 to 1; now it is almost 4 to 1. In terms of Scottish ownership of Scots business, the picture, over the same decade, is that of a country becoming a "banana republic," but without the benefit of either the bananas, or the republic.

'Invisible hand' strikes again

According to figures supplied by the Scottish National Party, between 1983 and 1986, 321 Scottish firms were taken over by foreign companies, leaving only 98 major Scottish-owned public limited companies. Bankruptcies rose from 1,400 per year in 1987, to 2,500 in 1989. The latest issue of *Scottish Economic Bulletin* shows net capital spending in Scottish manufacturing falling from £866 million in 1985 (25% higher per employee than the U.K. average), to 735 million in 1987 (0.6% lower per employee than the U.K. average).

These appalling figures are no accident of the "invisible hand" so oft kissed by the Adam Smith Institute. This is British government policy. The Scottish Development Agency (SDA), a body ruled from London and which purportedly exists to develop Scotland, was given new guidelines by the British government in 1980: not to invest anywhere private-sector funding might be available, and not to make projects last longer than three years. In 1977-78, industrial investment made up 25% of the SDA's budget; by 1985-86, it was 2%.

To ice the cake, it was the SDA itself which last month leaked a document, oddly entitled "The Challenge of Opportunity," which reports baldly that output in heavy industry in 1989 remained below output of 1973! For some reason, the very government which rammed through the policy, cried scandal at the report. Businessmen like Charles Gray of the Strathclyde Regional Council, not normally found in the camp of fire-and-brimstone nationalists, put out in February a call to Scots financiers to "get behind their own steel indus-

try." Gray told the press: "It seems to me that British Steel does not want a Scottish steel industry which could be a real threat to the English industry, and new investors must be sought." It would not be hard to ground Gray's fears: For example, the British government has drawn up plans for the Channel Tunnel which do not even raise the possibility of high-speed rail links to Scotland.

Waves of emigration

But there is worse. There is no clearer statement of how you feel about the situation of your country, than leaving it. Many people have said to this writer: "We have lost all hope. Anybody with any enterprise gets out." In the 19th century, Scottish emigration exceeded that of Ireland. Since the turn of this century, over 2 million Scots have emigrated, 650,000 in the last 30 years alone. That is three times the size of the City of Edinburgh, and remember, we are talking about a country which now has only 5 million people. Some 900,000 of those 5 million are pensioners, and of those, 30% need government subsidies to survive. The birthrate has dropped to become the lowest in the British Isles, an unmistakable sign of terrible morale. Estimates vary slightly, but demographic projections show that by the year 2000, the population of Scotland will be down to the level of 1901, i.e. about 4.4 million people.

And the young people who would be the Vaclav Havels to lead their nation are fleeing the debacle. About 40% of all graduates of Strathclyde University in 1989 will leave Scotland to find work. In 1984, 16% of graduates of Glasgow University left Scotland to find work; by 1989, it was 33%. Out of 24 graduates of the Glasgow Nursing College in 1989, only 8 were able to find work in their country. Applications to emigrate to Canada were up by 50% in 1988 over 1987. Some 27,000 people will leave Scotland for good in 1990.

There is one other country which looks like that: Argentina under International Monetary Fund rule, on the verge of another coup d'état, where passport applications are 2,000 per day, and where the current "joke" doing the rounds is: "Argentina, 30 million inhabitants. One million live well, two million work as their slaves, and the rest of us are no longer needed."

Destruction of a culture

So if there is an endangered species in Scotland, it is definitely man. In spite of the country's somewhat rough and rude exterior, and contrary to the views of the Duke of Edinburgh, the Scots could not be replaced by "several hundred rare species of flora and fauna" in European culture. By their bent for science and engineering, by their powerful and extraordinary use of the English language, the Scots are the Italians of an otherwise boring and pragmatic English-speaking world. But yet we read in the London *Financial Times* that fish farming "threatens some of Scotland's most stunning scenery," and an Edinburgh daily writes without a

blush, that ecologists are worried that the new Scottish Nature Conservancy Council, once it splits this year from the English one, will be taken over by "councils more interested in jobs than nature protection."

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), which is not precisely a republican organization, is now using satellites to map, literally, each square mile of Scottish territory to be in a position to oppose "developments" which threaten wildlife! In January, a "senior investigative officer" of the RSPB accompanied two police officers on a search of the home of an amateur photographer in Aberdeen, who was charged with the criminal offense of disturbing a falcon's nest! It reminds one of a recent *Sunday Telegraph* article reporting blandly that an entire Indian tribe is about to vanish because of the laws protecting the Bengal tiger.

In early February, precisely in referring to the new Scottish Nature Conservancy Council, the House of Lords Select Committee intoned that "devolution must not become disintegration. A broad United Kingdom perspective must be preserved. The United Kingdom's commitment to nature conservation must be unimpaired." Of course, the Lords were partly voicing the fear that the Scots, with their healthy industrial outlook, would trample all over the best-laid "get rid of the people" schemes. But they also let slip what truly preys on the collective lordly mind: the looming dissolution of the Treaty of Union.

The rise of Scottish nationalism

The Lords are not alone in their concern as alarm bells go off all over, not least, from the Labour Party, which, like the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, is not precisely a republican organization. Recently Mr. Bernard Crick, a well-known and rather competent Labour Party analyst, wrote in the *Observer* under the title "The growing threat from Scotland": "Even the most cautious Scottish Labour MP's know that it is Labour's great, perhaps last chance, to keep nationalism as a constitutional nationalism. . . . What neither Thatcher nor Hattersley can grasp, is that what is at issue is not nationalism versus unionism (Tory or Labour), but constitutional versus separatist nationalism. . . . The tail will wag the dog. The Scottish question will show that the whole [English] doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty no longer sustains but threatens the unity of the United Kingdom." Still shriller articles have appeared in the *Telegraph*, calling for strengthening the monarch's powers to fight what the paper quaintly calls "Celtic nationalism." And the *Financial Times* headed its year-end supplement on Scotland: "A Political Time-Bomb," remarking that only 20% of the population claim to be satisfied with the present constitutional status of the country, while 27% favor independence outright.

In mid-January, a Constitutional Convention was held in Glasgow, ostensibly to pull together those forces which desire to reestablish the Scots Parliament, though it was boy-

cotted by the Scottish National Party, and of course, by the Tories. To the complete astonishment of most observers, the convention broke out into a brawl over the real issues. One Labour MP, Dennis Canavan, said: "The sovereignty of the Scottish people is inconsistent with the sovereignty of the United Kingdom parliament, and when we signed the Claim of Right, we were in effect, challenging the sovereignty of the U.K. Parliament." Perhaps Mr. Canavan, and those who seconded him, were only acting out a role, testing the waters of the feeling of the people, while the convention in the end adopted what was in effect a weak Labour Party document leaving all control over defense, foreign affairs, and major economic decisions to London. But the genie was out of the bottle.

In 1953, a groundbreaking lawsuit, *McCormick vs. the Lord Advocate*, was taken out by two Scots lawyers against the Crown, impugning the right of the Queen to call herself "Elizabeth II of Scotland." At the center of the argument, which today prevails in the streets (though at the time, it did not prevail in the courts) was the characteristic doctrine of Scots political thought, namely, the issue of the sovereignty of the people, as opposed to the English doctrine of the sovereignty of Parliament, or, in fact, the Crown-in-Parliament. Only the former doctrine is coherent with republican thinking. When American republicans refer to government of the people, they refer to the philosophical truth: that sovereignty cannot be delegated, because in the end, all men being equal before God, sovereignty flows from the will of individual souls, which concert themselves to decide for their nation. Concretely, in the short term, and in the case of Scotland, this means that a government like that of Mrs. Thatcher, who has 10 Tory MPs out of the 72 Scots MPs, cannot long rule another country. But Mrs. Thatcher will go, and the problem will remain, so long as England rules Scotland, and England remains an imperial, malthusian, and monetarist power.

As for the Labour Party, it is in a "Catch-22" situation. If the party does not support a separate Scottish Parliament, with considerable powers, it will lose much of its support in Scotland. Twenty percent of all Labour MPs come from Scotland. Scotland is tired and bony; plump England is where the juicy pickin's are. Were the Scots MP's to withdraw from Westminster, or to have their voting rights reduced there because of Scotland's separate powers, the whole usefulness of the Labour Party to the Establishment, namely, to hold the Union together and control popular unrest from whatever quarter, would be lost, along with the juicy pickin's. At that point, the Scottish National Party, which is for independence but on condition that the Queen and her successors remain the head of state, would be the Establishment's last resort. As for the rest, given the well-earned hostility toward the British Empire among civilized peoples, were Scotland to set her sails for freedom, tears might well be shed, but not of sorrow.

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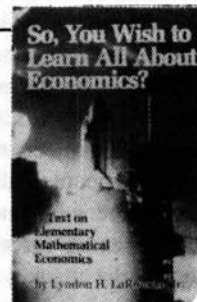
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