

Assembly on

What challenge in Scotland, & to the British State?

Alex Richards casts a skeptical eye

The past two years have brought a revival of proposals for a Scottish Assembly, symbolised in the document '*A Claim of Right for Scotland*'. This was prepared for the previously moribund Campaign for a Scottish Assembly by an appointed committee of the great and the good and has been widely commended as one of the most rational and thoughtful documents of our time. That it distills a cocktail of Lounge Bar prejudices appears to have escaped attention.

This article offers no support to the existing governmental structure. It has no affection for the institutions of the Crown in Parliament. Nor will it be a recitation of such banalities as '*The workers have no country... Nationalism is a bourgeois tactic for dividing the proletariat...*' After briefly summarising the background, it will examine the proposals of '*A Claim of Right for Scotland*' and look at the social strata which produced it and which recognise their aspirations in it; and then look at the uses to which it is being put by social groups elsewhere.

Looking for an Angry Fix

The indecisive result of the March 1979 referendum on a proposed Scottish Assembly casued the fall of the Labour Government. It also dashed the hopes of many within Scottish political circles. Neal Ascherson describes it thus: '*After March 1979, I watched many friends and acquaintances in Scotland begin to disintegrate. Over the previous few years, they had begun to assume a future of interesting, coherent, constructive things to do... This future was suddenly cancelled.*'¹

That trauma was enhanced by the nature of the incoming government, whose blend of centralist authoritarianism and economic liberalism challenged many presuppositions of the political class. The normal expectation during a period of opposition had been business as usual in slightly straitened circumstances. Now doors were being slammed, offices dismantled. The possibilities of alternative power bases in local government were limited. By the mid-1980s, a perception of the British State as '*an increasingly airless room*' (as Ascherson described it in his 1986 Macintosh Memorial Lecture²) was leading to a new politics 'which saw progress not as created through struggle (nor as generated by economic liberalisation), but as facilitated by new constitutional arrangements.

The June 1987 General Election confirmed the Conservative Party in power. Kinnock's 'sensible' Labour Party achieved much the same result as had Foot's Party in 1983 when it had campaigned on '*the longest suicide note in History*' and had been hampered by the 'Falklands Factor'. (The Falklands Spirit was much more toxic in the English political centre than in Scotland, where vestiges of semi-colonial treatment gave people reservations about going along with flag-waving triumphalism.)

While the workings of the electoral system exaggerated the Conservative victory in England, it worked in another direction in Scotland, emphasising a continuing decline in Conservative support. The Conservative Party was reduced to just 10 seats, while Labour won 50. In post-mortem articles, columnists such as John Lloyd urged Labour to look to Scotland, where an apparently sensible Labour Party had avoided the excesses of 'loony Leftism'. The continuity of political representation in Scotland is indeed remarkable, given the periodic scandals over abuse of power in housing allocation, etc.

Inchoate feelings of injustice became evident in Scotland. The ranks of Scottish Labourism, the stolid back-to-the-future brigade, began to see themselves as a National Liberation Movement: '*The irony is that Scotland's quest for a more modern and distinct identity has ended in the clammy embrace of the party historically most hypnotised by Britishness.*'³ After a false start, the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly set up a Constitutional Steering Committee, consisting of a variety of political and religious figures, to report on means by which a Scottish Assembly could be established.

Society against the State?

The starting point for the preparation of the *Claim of Right* was that '*Parliamentary government under the present British constitution had failed Scotland and more than Parliamentary action was needed to redeem the failure*'. (1.1)⁴ Apparently radical in that premise, the document is actually profoundly conservative.

It constantly reduces the crisis in representative institutions to a local matter. The 1707 Act of Union had promised maintenance of the distinct Scottish institution of Church, Law and Education. The crisis in society is repeatedly identified with the non-identity of the law-making body (the UK Parliament) and the population affected by any resulting legislation (2.6, 3.8, 6.1, 6.5, 7.4). This may well be a particular grievance of the Faculty of Advocates and the Labour Party in Scotland, but it is no more uniquely scandalous than the specific anomalies of any other State, now or in the past.

In no State are the interests of the law-makers identical with the interests of the population as a whole. To claim otherwise is to deny differences of class, religion, region, culture. And those who so claim are hiding their own specific interest in a declaration of general injustice. But the *Claim of Right* deals only in the general. Of religious difference, of the Scottish-Irish connection, so important in West Central Scotland, it says not a word.

Throughout, the document employs a static model of 'Scotland', which can be manipulated in contrast to the English State. The page-and-a-half discussing *An Assembly and the Scottish Economy* alludes to 'The North-South Divide', a concept which purports to dynamic explanation but which implies little. (5.6.4) '*Every large state is almost bound to contain within it a series of micro-economies differing appreciably from each other.*' (5.6.1) But a silence follows on whether such differences exist within 'Scotland', as they self-evidently do, and on what relevance these might have to the Assembly question.

To the authors of the *Claim*, the Scottish economy is threatened by takeover of Scottish enterprises by others based in London (5.6.10, presumably thinking of the Guinness affair). In a similar way, Ascherson, one of the most sophisticated of Assembly supporters, summarises the economic history of Scotland since 1979 by saying that '*Industrial employment and financial control of the economy drained southwards...*'⁵ And eastwards, and westwards, we can add, thinking of the contractions by Caterpillar, Wang or Ford. Of this, there's little in the *Claim of Right* except a belief that '*business congregates where it can find politicians to lend it an ear and fight its cause*' (5.6.12). A Conservative commentator rightly describes this as the '*authentic voice of clapped-out corporatism*'.⁶

Part II of the document was devoted to various formulae for concocting a Constitutional Convention which could put the ruling élite back onto the rails after the distress of the past ten years. Various combinations of MPs, councillors and church officials were proposed. The *Claim of Right* was published in July 1988, and such a Constitutional Convention was established in March 1989 (and boycotted by the Scottish National Party). The indications are that this body will attempt to organise a referendum on its conclusions in conjunction with the Regional Council elections in May 1990.

Leaving aside the positional manoeuvres of the Labour Party and the Scottish National Party, and their squabbles over the supposed riches of the Maxton-Shinwell legacy, what have been the reactions to these developments? An interesting aspect is that various supporters of the Convention see a Scottish Assembly not as an end in itself, nor as an opening of possibilities within Scotland, but as a means to effect constitutional change throughout the British State.

Tom Nairn has no illusions about which social stratum is proposing the *Claim of Right* which he describes as '*a magisterial repudiation of the British constitution by elements of the indigenous élite*'. For him, the document and the Convention to which it has given rise are means to an end—the destruction of Britain's '*strange simulacrum of democracy*'⁷—and the hostility of the English Left to the

Dissemble ?

...e does the Constitutional Convention present?
...ical eye over its limited aims.

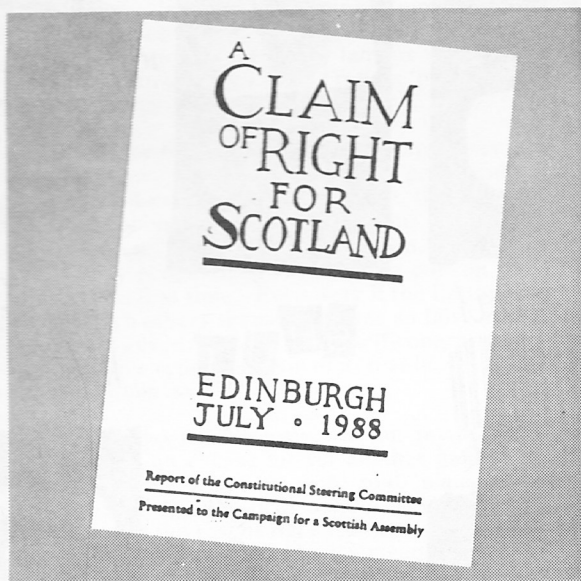
nationalism which can accomplish that is a residue of Empire.

The Interpretation of Dreams

In December, 1988, a variety of Left-Liberal politicians, journalists and comedians launched *Charter 88*, a campaign for democratic renewal of the institutions of the British State. Various constitutional and legal measures were proposed, such as a Bill of Rights, election by Proportional Representation, and 'the independence of a reformed judiciary', whatever that may be.

The 'Scottish grievance' was given considerable prominence in the Charter: in the third paragraph, right in the middle of an initial general diagnosis of the slippage of liberties, there suddenly appears a sentence complaining that 'Scotland is governed like a province from Whitehall'.⁸

At first sight, Scots may feel complimented by such attention. After all, basic feelings of Scottish nationalism are nourished by a mediated 'I-is-an-other' attitude: a resentment at exclusion from representation in the media (football results which are omitted from the national news, etc.); an anxiety that such representation as there is should 'show our best side'; Scots experience themselves as an inactive contemplation of their own image. Stifled by respectable inertia at home; and happy with self-parody as the Jock abroad (which of course includes England).



But *Charter 88*, and it sponsors the *New Statesman & Society* are using the Scottish grievance for their own ends. For *Charter 88* has a problem. Despite the proclamation that 'To make real the freedoms we once took for granted means for the first time to take them for ourselves', its campaign lacks strategy and depth. You've signed up; what now? Apparently, the frustration can be warded off only by boosting developments elsewhere. Hence the regular editorials and articles in the *New Statesman & Society* boosting the Constitutional Convention.

'Scotland's ferment is generating ideas for more user-friendly political structures' proclaims the subheading on Sarah Benton's column in the *New Statesman & Society*.⁹ Perhaps 'user-friendly', but who's the user: the aspiring political class? The term 'user-friendly' is being used to give a flavour of modernity, but betrays more than is intended: its usage in computing denotes a system in which all the real decisions have already been made; all that remains

is the simulation of decision-making. The content of Benton's article turns out to be largely a celebration of the newly-produced *Woman's Claim of Right*. This special pleading is reminiscent of the *300 Club*, whose radical approach to Westminster politics is merely to increase the proportion of hacks who happen to be women.

Similar cheerleading comes from the Communist Party, whose draft manifesto for the 1990s proclaims the Constitutional Convention as the most striking expression of imaginative opposition to 'Thatcherism'. Here again, political representation is unproblematic: the CPGB are satisfied that the Convention represents '80% of the Scottish people through their institutions and organisations'.¹⁰

Democracy is the flavour of the season. Even those who try to outflank Left-Liberal democratic campaigns only reproduce it in ever more bizarre shapes. For example, the reborn (and stillborn?) Workers' Party of Scotland worry about the narrowness of a debate whose most radical proposition seems to be use of proportional representation to choose between bands of political careerists.¹¹ They instead recommend computer democracy for a Scottish Assembly: issues decided by a TV debate followed by voting at home—a manic exaggeration of the way in which democracy separates and simulates real decision-making and control.

The new self-liberal constitutionalists now find themselves tumbling into the embrace of Roger Scruton, who seems to have been the only person to get the measure of the change in left-liberal thinking which all this represents. He welcomes the conversion of the erstwhile radicals from struggle against State institutions to support for constituted authority.¹

For some, the ideal seems to be a regionalisation of the UK into something resembling the Federal Republic of Germany. In that viewpoint, only new constitutional arrangement can facilitate change in the current situation. These are views sincerely held, but we can be sceptical about the possible outcome. Are the inadequacies of Scottish society merely consequences of an adolescent powerlessness? Or might power increase their vigour and produce a culture based on a siege mentality, contrasting the good inside and a bad outside? Not without reason, the *Claim of Right* has little to say about the example of Ireland, where such tendencies can be seen, mirrored in the writings of James Joyce and Myles na Gopaleen among others.

The Assembly proposition is intended to manage existing politiceconomic 'realities', not change them. A fundamental assertion of national identity would reproduce the system of governing party and loyal opposition. Could this do other than rely on a false, defensive collectivism? Any manifestation of social struggle (industrial, cultural, etc.) which could undermine that tenuous national identity would be regarded as a threat to the whole. If you want a picture of that future, imagine *The Sunday Post* crashing through your letterbox, forever.

References:

1. 'Scotland Grows Meaner and Leaner' in *The Observer*, 26.2.89.
2. Reprinted as 'Ancient Britons and the Republican Dreams' in *Games with Shadows* (1988).
3. Tom Nairn in *Marxism Today*, July 1987.
4. This and subsequent numbered points refer to paragraphs of *A Claim of Right for Scotland* (July 1988).
5. *Observer*, 26.2.89.
6. Michael Fry in the book of essays on *A Claim of Right for Scotland* published by Polygon.
7. 'The Raiders of The Lost Ark' in *The Guardian*, 1.4.89.
8. 'Charter 88' in *New Statesman & Society*, 2.12.88.
9. 7.7.89.
10. *Manifesto for New Times*, p.12.
11. In their pamphlet *A Proposal for a People's Assembly*.
12. Editorial in *Salisbury Review*, Vol.7 no.3.