Theology in Scotland
31.2 (2024): 21–31
https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v31i2.2803

The owl of Minerva takes fright[1]

David McCrone

David McCrone is a sociologist at the University of Edinburgh, where he spent his working life. This talk was given in New College in November 2023. It has been updated to take account of unfolding events as well as new thoughts in the light of helpful comments which are much appreciated.

Abstract

This paper presents a sociological analysis of the ways in which Scotland has been transformed over the last 25 years. It takes as its starting point the talk the author gave in 1996 entitled "The Post-Modern Condition of Scottish Society", setting out how Scotland has changed in the intervening years. It sketches out and reflects on the defining events of the period: devolution and the establishment of the Scottish Parliament; the rise to power of the Scottish National Party (SNP) as well as its shifting fortunes; all set in the context of the Scottish independence and Brexit referendums. It concludes by offering critical commentary on contemporary global issues, particularly the loss of the sense of social reality in the face of the current mood of individualism, moral relativism and post-factual narratives.

The past

In 1996 I gave a talk at a conference in Aberdeen on the Future of the Kirk. I called it "The Post-Modern Condition of Scottish Society";[2] a hostage to

[1] 'The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only at dusk'; famously cited by the philosopher Hegel as reflecting the fact that awareness only comes at its moment of passing.

[2] Published in *The Future of the Kirk: The proceedings of the conference held at the University of Aberdeen on 16 September 1996*, ed. D. A. S. Fergusson and

fortune if ever there was one. Re-reading it almost a quarter of a century later, and with trepidation, I surprised myself into thinking that I still stood by most of it; which, of course, is not to claim that I was correct, then or now. We do continue to live in post-modern times, even though the shine has gone off the concept of post-modernism/post-modernity.

I guess what pulled me into it originally was the sense that the conventional (modernist) explanation for social development centred upon 'nation-states' no longer made sense; and that Scotland was a good example of what I came to call an under-stated nation. In this talk twenty-five years later, let me first sketch out what has happened; not that you need reminding much, and then go on to make some critical comments about the world we live in. If I get it wrong, in another 25 years, given my age, I won't be around in person to answer for it, so here goes.

The present

What has happened since 1996? We got a parliament in 1999; it quickly became the key governing institution, trusted, arguably, almost regardless of its competences, in both senses of that term. People very quickly latched on to it as the prime 'civil institution' in Scotland, and we got what I called the devolution conundrum: credit for achievements, even when it had no responsibility for them, while blame went to its UK equivalent, regardless. Taking credit for what you have not been responsible for is, in the long-term, though, corrosive. It encourages complacency, when we should be trying harder.

And conversely, if you are blamed for a lack of achievements in reserved matters (welfare, energy markets) and at the same time not taking full advantage of powers which *are* devolved (such as energy efficiency programmes), then somehow you have to manage these contradictions. Through thick and thin that has been the story, with good as well as bad effects. The parliament (and government) helped to mobilise and organise, and its attempts to do politics differently (not always successfully) became a beacon in these islands.

All was not always for the best. It sought, for example, to squeeze out dissent, to extend its remit way beyond its competences, to claim credit

D. W. D. Shaw; *Theology in Scotland* Occasional Paper no. 2 (St Andrews: St Mary's College, 1997), 11–20, https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v31i2.2817.

where it wasn't due; but that is the way of modern politics. James Mitchell observed that 'The central paradox of Scottish politics has been that in the desire to find an alternative system we have ended up with a system of government that is essentially the same as the Westminster system'.[3] And there is much truth in Gerry Hassan's observation[4] that Scottish government has been reduced to a mini-version of Westminster and Whitehall, and a form of political leadership which was part-presidential and part-presentational.

The Scottish Parliament provided a political platform for the SNP which has dominated Scottish politics since elected as a minority in 2007. It seemed virtually invincible until 2023 or thereabouts, when things began to fall apart quite quickly (and not because the Opposition was necessarily any good), in essence under the weight of its own contradictions. It never quite came to terms with the complex relationship between 'movement' (for independence) and 'party' (winning elections and running public policy). With hindsight, however, the governing party never thought through what it was about, apart from favouring 'independence', but neither discussed properly what that meant, nor how to get there, and in which contexts.

Social market centrism which characterises social and economic policy by SNP governments was something of an add-on, arguably derived from 'reading' public opinion. Above all, it didn't do the necessary double-digging (thereby speaks the constant gardener). There was surely a job to do to convince people of economic viability; and they never did that. Taking a longer view: we might say that the SNP never properly understood why it was successful from the mid-2000s, nor why it fell from grace more recently.

It wasn't the first to have this problem. Think of Labour in Scotland in its own heydays, especially from 1979 until 2003. Like almost all political parties in these islands it has never had a sufficiently good analytical understanding of its social politics. Easy, though, for an academic to say. Some people were saying it some time ago. David Marquand, who died in April 2024, was one who straddled politics and the academy with

[3] James Mitchell, "We Have Devolution From Westminster But Not From Holyrood: Scotland as a Centralised State", *Scottish Left Review*, March 2022, https://scottishleftreview.scot/scotland-as-a-centralised-state/.

[4] Gerry Hassan, "From Donald Dewar to Humza Yousaf: The Role of Scotland's First Ministers and the Importance of Political Leadership", *The Political Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (2023): 564, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13333.

distinction. In his 1988 book *The Unprincipled Society*, he observed:

> My central thesis is that the roots of Britain's adjustment problems are to be found in a coherent, though often unconscious, set of attitudes to policies and political man [sic] – to the relationship between man and society, between individual purposes and social purposes, and to the political dimension of these relationships – and in the reductionist model of human nature which lies behind them.[5]

The future

So here we are in 2024, 25 years on from devolution. We might say that 'devolution', introduced as a device to stymie nationalism (killing it stone-dead, you may recall), has run its course. It is not clear what further powers might be devolved, but the status quo of devolution does not look like the preferred option. The halfway house became the stopping-off point on the road to somewhere else. Furthermore, in legal-constitutional terms, the UK Supreme Court has decreed that Holyrood is simply the creature of the British state, and has no independent right to exist, still less order a second referendum on independence. Black-letter Law Lords might be expected to be legal literalists, but it leaves in limbo a nation within a state without recourse to an escape route. All those resounding phrases in the Claim of Right about parliament being the will of the people ran up against black-letter law; we just chose not to read the Scotland Act 1998 too carefully, or ponder what it meant.

And, to compound that, in political terms, the political carrier of something approximating to independence, the SNP, is in trouble. So both constitutionally and politically we appear to be in something of a cul-de-sac in 2024.

This matters, because in 2016 Scotland (and Northern Ireland) were forced to leave the EU against the express will of their electorates: the assertion of so-called muscular nationalism from the Anglo-British centre. We know now that both referendums – the Scottish Independence Referendum (ScIndyRef) in 2014, and Brexit in 2016 – have effected major shifts in Scottish public opinion, to reinforce commitment to

[5] David Marquand, *The Unprincipled Society: New Demands and Old Politics* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988), 213.

'independence', whatever that might come to mean in the future.

The unintended consequences of the two referendums, in 2014 and 2016, have been to align more definitively electoral and constitutional support, as well as tying these firmly to membership of the EU, or at least, embracing being 'European'. On the other hand, the road to greater autonomy, 'self-determination', looks quite uncertain. And yet we are at an odd moment in our politics: a nationalist party in trouble, and yet support for independence fairly constant at almost 50%; a platform, should one ever be offered, on which such a movement can build. Consider the contrast with what was on offer before ScIndyRef 2014, when support for independence was around 33%. Little wonder that allowing another ScIndyRef2 would be a big gamble for the British state, and is judged to be so by its power brokers, Labour and Tory alike. Once bitten, twice shy. The last time, after all, the losers won the peace.

And yet it is a mistake to think that this is simply a Scottish story. England has moved steadily rightward, mobilising Leave support in 2016 such as to make 'English nationalism' a serious political force in the land, at least for the moment. However, cobbling together a movement of haves ('blue wallers') and have-nots ('red wallers') was never going to hold for too long, even if this produced a peculiar shade of purple, oddly enough a colour favoured by emperors and bishops, neither of which Scotland has had much time for. It is not so much that public opinion has shifted rightwards in England – broadly speaking, it hasn't. In 2016, at the height of the Brexit madness, 50% of people in England even considered themselves on the Left (in Scotland it was 60%). That English figure may surprise us, even though the Scottish one does not.

What we found in the survey data[6] was that those who gave their identity as 'English' (about one-third at the time of the 2019 post-Brexit election) were right-wing English nationalists. That mobilising of 'being English' paid off handsomely for the Conservative party in 2016, and in the 2019 British General Election (BGE), though it has become a poisoned chalice more recently. It is not the case that suddenly people in England have become 'English' (to the detriment of being British), but that 'being English' has become suffused with right-wing Tory politics, and we live in the aftermath of the 2019 BGE, with its plethora of prime ministers, too

[6] David McCrone, "Explaining Brexit North and South of the Border", *Scottish Affairs* 26, no. 4 (November 2017): 391–410.

many to mention (or even remember, some lasting less time than the proverbial supermarket lettuce7). That may well change (but not the lettuce) after the next BGE. The Conservative party might well morph into something far righter – all the signs are there, conspiracy theories and all. More generally in the world we see the rise of right-wing populism, which the Conservative party sought to mobilise on its right flank by squeezing out UKIP and its right-wing groupuscules, but then discovering that the incubus was inside the party, not outside the body. That hasn't ended well for the Tories since 2019, but elsewhere in the West the centre-right has given space and airtime to further-Right parties almost everywhere we look.

This is undoubtedly a crisis for democracy, at least as we've known it since 1945. Not many predicted the rise and rise of rabid, right-wing, populism from America to Russia and points in between. The thought of Trump returning to power ought to send a shiver down every European spine. Furthermore, nationalism in Scotland is not populism; this is not Hungary without the goulash.

So the world of politics is quite different from that in late 1990s, and not all for the better. Forces of reaction, almost unthinkable then, have mobilised around issues, among others, of 'cultural' politics. Culture wars against black and brown people, migrants or not (a long dishonourable history of imperial racism was always to hand), and against unspecified 'elites', judges and the like, and more generally 'progressive' opinion, are waged such as to narrow rather than broaden electoral appeal; the war against woke, they call it.

Unthinkable forms of prejudice and bigotry whether against women, people of colour, Jews, Muslims, people of complex sexuality, have become 'respectable'. Old truisms that 'It's the economy, stupid' are forgotten or dressed up in new clothing. Populist nationalism of the right is ensconced in most western and eastern societies, mostly with authoritarian appeal.

There's another side to this, which is even more dismaying to me, coming as it does from the progressive side of politics: asserting, in return, that what matters most is 'lived experience', that for example, only black people can talk about colour, women about gender, proletarians about social class, and so on, which arguably plays into the hands of the radical right. We have entered a world of silos, in which only those deep within

[7] I confess to not knowing that a lettuce can last so long in a supermarket.

them are judged to be able to speak about what it is like to be in there. The rest of us are left to imagine. I am reminded, though, of the observation by Craig Calhoun (another sociologist) that there are two dominant perspectives anent global society: the utopia of cosmopolitan liberalism, and the spectre of reactionary nationalism or fundamentalism. Each in their ways deny or underplay the importance of the 'social'. He observed:

> At least in their extreme forms, cosmopolitanism and individualism participate in this pervasive tendency to deny the reality of the social. Their combination represents an attempt to get rid of 'society' as a feature of political theory. It is part of the odd coincidence since the 1960s of left-wing and right-wing attacks on the state.[8]

Hollowing out

Let us explore the reasons for this malaise a bit more. It is as if we have allowed radical individualism to threaten our right to talk for and support what we, personally, are not. We have also allowed ourselves to be held 'responsible' for the sins of our ancestors, when we surely cannot be; only, in truth, for our own sins, not the sins of our fathers/mothers and forefathers/foremothers.[9] And in any case, as the writer Philip Pullman once observed: what matters 'is not so much who you are, as what you do. What we do is morally significant. What we are is not'.[10] Thus, you should not be prosecuted for who you are; rather, for what you do. We are who we are, like it or not; but we are responsible for our actions.

How did it come to this? My view is that it derives from losing the sense of the social in this maelstrom of individualism. I recall this observation by the late and much-lamented Neil MacCormick:

> The truth about human individuals is that they are social products, not independent atoms capable of constituting society through a

[8] Craig Calhoun, "'Belonging' in the Cosmopolitan Imaginary", *Ethnicities* 3, no. 4 (December 2003): 536.

[9] My formulation is not simply in the interests of gender balance, but because women share some of these iniquities with men.

[10] Philip Pullman, "Identity Crisis", *The Guardian*, 19 November 2005.

> voluntary coming together. We are as much constituted by our society as it is by us. […] We are the persons we come to be in the social settings and contexts in which we find ourselves, and whatever sense we have of our identity and character as persons reflects our interaction with significant others in our social setting, and indeed in a more diffuse way is a reflection of our total social milieu.[11]

McCormick spoke of 'contextual individuals' as the essence of who we are, and he pointed out that one of the key contexts is that of 'national identity', and that 'respect for national identities, and acceptance of the legitimacy of a civic-cum-personal variant of nationalism, do not conflict with liberalism. Indeed, liberalism may require this.'[12]

It is a measure of how far backwards we have gone since the 1990s that we have to defend the 'social' as a meaningful context for understanding people and society, not only against the usual suspects, but against those who believe that 'lived experience' trumps all, however misguided and indeed anti-social. To reinforce the point: the American political theorist Michael Sandel once observed that:

> If we understand ourselves as free and independent selves, unbound by moral ties we haven't chosen, we can't make sense of a range of moral and political obligations that we commonly recognize, even prize. These include obligations of solidarity and loyalty, historic memory and religious faith—moral claims that arise from the communities and traditions that shape our identity. Unless we think of ourselves as encumbered selves, open to moral claims we have not willed, it is difficult to make sense of these aspects of our moral and political experience.[13]

Sandel was taking issue with the tendency to excuse the most outrageous and unevidenced statement as 'just an opinion', as good as any other. To

[11] Neil MacCormick, *Questioning Sovereignty: Law, State, and Nation in the European Commonwealth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 163.

[12] Neil MacCormick, "Liberalism, Nationalism and the Post-sovereign State", *Political Studies* 44 (1996): 565.

[13] Michael Sandel, *Justice: What's the right thing to do?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2009), 220.

say *'Whatever'* is not a good defence. On the contrary, we are honour-bound to engage with it as an argument to be challenged and contested. We are, as Sandel says, *encumbered selves*, with the right and, indeed, the obligation to challenge, rather than assume that anything goes, even for the quiet life, or out of politeness, and especially if we think the person uttering it should know better.

Lying at the root is the basic fact that my rights are not absolute, but in essence, are contingent on those of others. Furthermore, taken to extremes, we have ceded our right to take issue with what we do not happen to be; or, on the other hand, assert to the critic: what do *you* know about *us*?

One of the effects of 'post-modernity', to return to my theme of twenty-five years ago, is that we are in serious danger of losing our bearings, that social and moral relativism rules, that my opinion is as good as yours; walk by on the other side. We have come to inhabit a world of post-factual narratives. The danger of 'causing offence', notably among liberals, coupled with aggressive counter-claims fed by a right-wing press and media, is deemed more important than arguing the case, in calm, reasoned and rational terms.

Its effect on academic life and thought has, in my view, been detrimental to good scholarship and rigour. And who would have thought that publishers would be employing 'sensitivity readers' so as not to upset the nervous? Witness too, closer to home, the extraordinary case of the David Hume footnote, interpreted as racist, and which led to Scotland's greatest philosopher having his name removed from an Edinburgh University building (see the excellent critique by Peter Hutton and David Ashton[14]). Furthermore, surely you don't have to insult people to disagree with them? You can do so calmly and reasonably, and others have the right to treat you in the same way.

Recovering the future

Much is at stake; and post-modernism has much to answer for. Somehow we have to recover that shared sense of social reality. We might consider that a rosy retrospect, but bear in mind that aggressive individualism only really took off in the mid-1970s, especially as a political ideology under Mrs

[14] Peter Hutton and David Ashton, "David Hume – An Apologia", *Scottish Affairs*, 32, no. 3 (August 2023): 347–64.

Thatcher, and prior to that, claiming that 'we're all in this together' did not seem far-fetched (until it was hijacked by George Osborne when he embarked on 'austerity' in 2010).

Finally: think of where we are in this wee country of ours. Abjure the temptation for binary divides, encouraged, I think, by a referendum mentality; are you for us or against us? Or are you both, indeed? Most of us, after all, are comfortable and used to *'being between'*, a notion I owe to Cairns Craig, who in turn owed it to the poet Sorley MacLean, to refer to the condition of writing in Gaelic and Scots/English. Cairns observed: '[…] all cultures exist not in themselves – in the autonomy and autotelic trajectory of their own narratives – but in the relations between themselves and others. Culture is not an organism, nor a totality, nor a unity: it is the site of a dialogue, it is a dialectic, a dialect. It is being between'.[15] We borrow each other's notions if they help to explain our world. We are, after all, social creatures. And if we are 'between', then being asked 'are you for us, or against us', is quite the wrong question to pose. And talking of poetic wisdom, and the condition of being between, recall Norman MacCaig's fine poem "Assynt and Edinburgh": 'Two places I belong to although I was born / in both of them. / They make every day a birthday, / giving me gifts wrapped in the ribbons of memory. / I store them away, greedy as a miser'.[16]

I leave you with the words of another poet, Walt Whitman, who acknowledged the influence of the 'odd kind chiel', Robert Burns, and much wiser than anything I could say to you:

> The past and present wilt—I have fill'd them, emptied them,
> And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.
>
> Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?
> Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,
> (Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer.)
>
> Do I contradict myself?

[15] Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and British Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), 206.

[16] In *The Poems of Norman MacCaig*, ed. Ewen McCaig (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2005), 505.

Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait on the door-slab.

Who has done his day's work? who will soonest be through with his supper?
Who wishes to walk with me?

Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove already too late?[17]

[17] Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, §51, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version.