

Comment

Ane Auld Sang

‘An unreasonable and strange people’
Queen Anne on the Scots

After he had signed the Act of Union between England and Scotland the Earl of Seafield, chancellor of Scotland, sighed ‘There’s ane end of ane auld sang.’ Snatches of the melody have remained in the political air ever since, swelling into the military marches of the Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745, plaintive in the laments that followed on the Highland Clearances, self-confident and assertive on the terraces of Murrayfield during the singing of ‘Flower of Scotland’. Scottish independence is an election issue. Both major British political parties are in for a shock north of the border. In a recent survey of opinion in Scotland fifty per cent of those polled expressed themselves in favour of Scottish independence. A further poll, taken at round about the same time, showed support for the Labour party declining markedly, whilst support for the Scottish National Party correspondingly rose. The Scottish Conservative party is, as many of its members realise, on the verge of extinction. Unfortunately, this message does not seem to have penetrated to the highest levels of government in London. Faced with the worst recession for fifty years, with output lower in 1992 than in 1990, rather than the expected $7\frac{1}{2}$ per cent higher; with an increase of 700,000 in the unemployment figures in the space of a single year and set to touch 2.9 million by December; the government has sought to disguise its panic at the prospect of an election by being seen to act tough, with regard to socialism, Europe and Scotland.

All over Europe peoples and societies have been delving into their folk memories and rummaging in the wardrobe of tradition to deck themselves and their political aspirations in the garments of history. Snatches of many ‘ane auld sang’ have been heard as empires crumble and nations are reborn. The various crises of public confidence in government and political integrity which followed on the demolition of totalitarian government in Europe and the Soviet Union prompted an attempt to re-examine the foundations on which these polities rested. One of the challenges faced by the new ‘popular’ governments in Eastern Europe was that of encouraging the active participation of their citizens in the democratic process. It is significant that the turn-out in the recent Polish presidential election was alarmingly low, giving rise to fears of a re-emergence of authoritarian government. Fascism breeds on complacency.

The health of our society depends on the voluntary involvement and sacrifice of ordinary individuals convinced of the value of civic institutions and determined to preserve their vitality. This network of institutions: the law, local government, the universities, the churches and charitable organisations, has taken a severe battering in Britain over the past decade. Many people are questioning whether it is worthwhile to take up the challenge of involvement. Recent opinion polls have revealed a deep cynicism on the part of the electorate about the form and structure of political debate in Britain; a cynicism which is particularly marked amongst the educated and professional classes. The spectacle of two political parties, inadequately led and lacking in imagination and flair, making taxation the prime support of their electoral platform in a time of grave social crisis is faintly absurd. An observer could be forgiven for thinking that the real issue driving the electoral machines of both main parties is the determination of one to seize power, and the other to retain it. Against this background the drive towards Scottish independence reflects the spirit of the age.

One of the motives fuelling the trend towards Scottish independence is the realisation that the British Constitution no longer serves the interests of democratic government. As in most highly centralised countries this deficiency has become more visible, more quickly, at the periphery. The present electoral system ensures that the Scottish people can never significantly affect their own destiny. Most English people see Scotland as a part of north Britain, as a region amongst many others. No matter that the Act of Union in 1707 united two imperial crowns; no matter that the relatively large number of Scottish M.P.s is designed to ensure that the Scottish people have an involvement in the government of the United Kingdom proportionate to their status as partners in an experiment in constitutional theory. Bleatings from Unionist Conservative and Labour party supporters that the number of Scottish M.P.s would be trimmed in the event of Scottish devolution being granted, cut no ice in Scotland. It matters not if there were twenty or two hundred Scottish M.P.s, their power to affect policy is minimal. What counts in Scotland is patronage and the prerogative power of the crown to suborn the Scottish establishment with titles, honours and distinctions. In this regard it is highly significant that the Faculty of Advocates, allegedly custodians of the distinctive Scottish tradition, refused even to send observers to the Scottish Convention on the constitution: many a promising career has been ruined by an imprudent display of conviction. The pressure for Scottish independence has helped to uncover a crisis of confidence in our system of government and our political institutions. The major political parties must not be lulled into thinking that the contagion will not spread south of the border. The auld sangs are aye the best.

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