

Comment:

Paisley Pattern Politics

Federalism was never on offer, in the negotiations leading to the Union of the Westminster and Edinburgh parliaments in 1707. There were thirty one commissioners on each side, all appointed by the Queen; they met in Whitehall, sat separately, communicated in writing, and observed strict secrecy. From the start, the English ruled out federation. Few of the Scots commissioners (fourteen peers, a handful of lawyers, and gentry representing the counties) wanted it either; as subsequent events show, they really wanted jobs, perks and titles from the Queen in London. Much more seriously, however, for the English, the only way to secure England against the perceived threats, France from outside (and the Scots could not be trusted not to side with the French on some future occasion) and the Jacobites from within (and most of them were in Scotland), was an incorporating union, with one imperial crown, one parliament and one British army. The throne was to pass to the royal cousins in Hanover, as the Westminster parliament had decided in 1701, but which the Scottish parliament had studiously never endorsed. Much haggling produced agreement that, of the 558 members of parliament in the Commons, there would be 45 from Scotland (Cornwall sent 44). Sixteen Scottish peers would sit in the house of Lords. Though the archbishops of Canterbury and York headed the English delegation, the matter of church government was not discussed. A whole range of other matters was left undiscussed, such as local government, the universities, poor relief, and above all the legal system. The two countries were too unequal, and too different in too many respects, historically and culturally, for union of parliaments to be anything like complete integration of peoples.

When the proposals for the treaty became known beyond the tiny ruling elite, there was a great deal of opposition — in both countries, but especially in Scotland. Much of the opposition was, of course, ill-informed; and it was never united. The Presbyterian clergy, little consulted and initially fearful that prelacy would be imposed by the English, were mollified by the act securing the Presbyterian system which the Scottish parliament passed in the course of the debate on the commissioners' proposals. The Episcopalians, expelled from the Church of Scotland sixteen years previously, were no happier with the Hanoverian succession than with William of Orange. The merchants of Glasgow, perhaps surprisingly, were not much attracted by the prospect of joining a free trade zone with England and her colonies; they even petitioned against the union. There was mild rioting in Edinburgh and Glasgow — and a contingent of English troops was held in readiness on the border by December 1706.

The controversy over the Treaty of Union was quite like the present

debates about the relationship between Britain and the European Union. In particular, though methods of deciding such issues now involve very many more of us, at certain stages, there was a government determined to have its way in the teeth of popular discontent and even quite considerable opposition in parliament. On 16 January 1707 the Treaty was ratified by the Scottish parliament by 110 votes to 67 — still a sizeable minority against it.

Patronage and croneyism — sleaze — played its part in persuading the Scottish parliament to vote itself out of existence. The *Memoirs* of George Lockhart of Carnwath (one of the commissioners), the best contemporary account, seems to some historians much too partisan to be trusted; he joined the Jacobite rising in 1715; but he was, after all, a member of a British parliamentary commission set up in 1711 which uncovered evidence of clandestine payments to members of the Scottish parliament during the Union debates. The evidence of bribery that he offers convinced Walter Scott a century later. In any case, the distribution of offices, sinecures, and pensions, not to mention peerages, among the Scottish voters, is difficult to construe as anything other than the reward for their compliance with the English government's wishes.

On 11 September 1997 those on the electoral roll in Scotland (English, Irish and Welsh included) will be invited in a referendum to endorse the new British government's proposals for devolution and in particular for a parliament once again in Edinburgh. The campaign has been dogged by a series of discreditable events in the Labour constituencies of the west of Scotland. Weeks after the general election, the millionaire who won a seat in Govan was under investigation for alleged improper payments. Much worse, the suicide of the Paisley South MP exposed something of the vendettas in the local Labour *nomenklatura*. That led to suspension from the party of the Renfrewshire West MP, charged in the suicide note with smearing his colleague's character (which he denies: 'If I'd wanted to call Gordon a poof I'd have done so to his face'). There is allegedly a whispering campaign of rumours against two other MPs in neighbouring constituencies. And so on. Paisley, once famous for its silk shawls, imitations of shawls brought home by Scottish officers from India, has become synonymous, for television-watchers and newspaper readers in Scotland, with Tammany-style political corruption. Proportional representation, as planned, would stop the new parliament from being dominated by 'Old Labour' 'numpties' from the central belt. But the cynicism about politicians, dramatically displayed all over the United Kingdom in the rejection of the Conservatives in June, may now reappear in Scotland as refusal to give the solid backing to the Labour government's proposals that the credibility of a parliament in Edinburgh requires. The Union that was made in sleaze in the peerage may be preserved, however unfairly, by rumours of sleaze in Paisley patterned Labour fiefdoms.

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