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Cutting Scotland Loose: A Southern Briton's response to Preston.

Peter Preston has written a stimulating and provocative essay (Preston, 2008) on the subject of Scottish independence. It deserves a response from a southern Briton, although I do not 'scoff' at the prospect of independence, nor would I qualify as a member of a metropolitan elite. (Preston, 2008, 718).<sup>1</sup> My only qualifications for making this contribution are the fact that early in my career I treated emergent Scottish and Welsh nationalism as a serious political phenomenon that deserved systematic attention. (Grant and Preece, 1968; Grant, 1970).

There is much in the article that I agree with. For example, it is evidently the case that the continuing existence of a distinctive civil society in Scotland in the form of distinct systems of law, religion, education, local government and, last but not least, football facilitated the emergence of a distinctive Scottish political identity and a Scottish political class that fostered, and had an interest, in that identity. The length of Scottish history has perhaps not been matched by the coherence of the nationalist trajectory, even though it seems to have escaped from some of the sentimental varieties of what amounted to 'being Scottish', albeit often initiated and perpetuated by persons from England. Modern Scottish Nationalism may be defined as predominantly broadly social democratic, celebrating values of solidarity and community. Whilst it may not be 'atavistic' as Preston argues, nationalism always depends in part on a definition of 'the other', in this case England and the English. That is why so many people – or, at least, liberal cosmopolitans - find nationalism, even its post-modern 21<sup>st</sup> century form, a phenomenon that makes them uncomfortable.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'southern Briton' is presumably a play on the term 'North Britain' which was used by fervent unionists to describe Scotland.

I would also agree that elite-sponsored attempts to construct ‘a reaffirmation of Britain and Britishness’ (Pearson, 2008, 723) are artificial and unlikely to succeed. It should be noted, nevertheless, that there has generally been a clear majority against the option of Scottish independence, with the latest polls consistent with the usually reported level of between a quarter and a third in favour and some 50 per cent against.<sup>2</sup> It is possible to envisage a scenario in which a combination of recession and a Conservative government in London would change those numbers, but greater devolution seems a more likely future.

The greatest deficiency of the article is its assumption of a given future, particularly a European future which is central to the vision for Scotland that is presented. Forecasting the future is fraught with danger, as a statement in the article shows: ‘The European Union is home to a number of small states: Ireland, Denmark, Sweden and Finland comprise a north-west arc of small, prosperous member states: additionally, there are Iceland and Norway.’ (Preston, 2008, 723). This vision of an arc of prosperity is looking less promising after the recent financial crisis, particularly in the cases of Iceland and Ireland.

The most suitable predictive exercise that can be undertaken in relation to the European Union (EU) is to distinguish a variety of possible scenarios (Gamble 2006) which can include disintegration and ‘business as usual’ as well as further integration. It is not necessarily the case that ‘the resolution of Europe’s general crisis has been ordered around the project of the European Union.’ (Preston, 2008, 721). This project has often seemed to be ill defined, elitist, technocratic, complex and hence inaccessible to citizens and lacking in popular legitimacy. During the recent financial crisis, the European Commission has been somewhat sidelined as heads of

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<sup>2</sup> See ‘Banks crisis proves setback for independence push’, *Financial Times*, 1 November 2008.

government of the major member states have taken the initiative, while key EU policies such as those on state aids have risked being set aside in the pursuit of the defence of short-term member state interests. The extent to which 'The European political space offers the prospect of a reanimation of the imagined Scottish community, its clearer articulation' (Preston, 2008, 721) is contingent on events at a European level which need not follow one clearly distinguishable and predetermined path. The EU does lend itself to multi-level governance, but also to a variety of different forms of government – unitary, federal and partially devolved – among its member states.

Preston characterises the existing devolved Scottish Parliament as 'a nuisance in certain circumstances'. (Preston, 2008, 719). This overlooks the possibility of a devolved Scotland as a political space within which policy experiments may take place which then could be a source of policy learning for the rest of the United Kingdom. There are those who would argue that such experiments would not be possible without the Barnett Formula which, in their view, permits additional public expenditure in Scotland without raising taxes. An alternative Scottish view is that the formula is not particularly generous, given Scotland's special circumstances such as its remote areas, and does not compensate for revenue derived from Scottish oil.

Setting this controversy aside, a devolved Scotland may be able to take policy initiatives which could create a positive 'California effect' in the sense that California pioneers, for example, environmental policy initiatives that are then adopted by other states or at a federal level. A current example based on my own current research would be animal welfare policy for livestock, particularly in relation to endemic diseases which have received more attention and stimulated some innovative policy responses in Scotland. This is not entirely accidental, as one policy expert

commented in interview: 'In Scotland [we] tend to be forced together. [There] does seem to be more contact because [we are] smaller.'<sup>3</sup>

Devolution potentially brings gains for the UK polity as a whole, but Scottish independence might pose problems for England. Preston sees it (2008, 724) as leading to 'a more self-conscious English polity' and that could well be the case, but what form would that self-consciousness take? Attention often focuses on the loss of 'a Westminster seat bank' (Preston, 2008, 724) for Labour and certainly it would be easier for the Conservative Party to win elections without Scotland forming part of the United Kingdom.

My concern is, however, a broader one than electoral arithmetic and this is why I would never laugh at the prospect of Scottish independence. Preston sees positive possibilities in terms of the emergence of an English nationalism that engaged in a serious reflection on the country's location within global structures. (Preston, 2008, 722). There is, of course, an English question which requires serious reflection. In particular, 'The unwillingness of the English to think about themselves separately from Britain, to see themselves as *a* British nation rather than *the* British nation is at the heart of the English Question in British politics.' (Gamble, 2003, 3). The English nationalism that appropriates the flag of St. George and a vision of 'Enger-land' may display the very atavistic characteristics which Preston sees as absent in Scotland. It can be xenophobic, inward looking and in denial of changed economic and political realities. Scottish nationalism may be soft, but not its English counterpart. The English need the Scots to save them from themselves.

## **Bibliography**

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<sup>3</sup> Interview, Inverness, 15 July 2008.

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