



Scotland: still searching for a new political identity

A Nation In Revolt

On June 11 Scotland did not (as Stuart Hall put it in last month's *Marxism Today*) 'capitulate to the Thatcherite future'. The Conservatives were left with only 10 of the 72 seats: these include Nicholas Fairbairn, Europe's best-known *Politiklown* and a number of gentlemen from the big-estate country still adjusting to the shock of 1945. To the remaining taxiload of modern Tory cadres has been entrusted the task of guiding Scotland's semi-autonomous administration until 1992.

The impossibility is aggravated by the fact that their 62 parliamentary colleagues (50 Labour, 9 Alliance and 3 Scottish Nationalists) are united on more than anti-Thatcherism. All gave noisy electoral promises of action for Home Rule and looked forward - no doubt with varying degrees of hypocrisy - to an 'ungovernable' country. But it's at this point that some caution is required. Hall's alternative to capitulation is worth recalling too: that can now only consist in 'finding another way of imagining the future'. The Scots have not been able to do so yet, but the election has given them an almighty push in the right direction.

Conservatives are consoling themselves mainly with

Mrs Thatcher's gimlet-eyed economism: Scotland is nothing but the fossil-redoubt of 'the North', a single morass of relative backwardness to be steadily reduced by the diffusion of (preferably private) drainage and forestry works outwards from the Centre.

On the Left southern Labourites have found another, oddly parallel kind of consolation in the belief that the Scottish redoubt at least will remain as a secure basis for future revival of British-Socialist fortunes: again, it's 'the North' (and Wales) who will eventually prove 'Britain' means something different by reconquering the South and Midlands.

Yet a more sober reckoning of the result ought to treat these scenarios with even more caution than 'Doomsday'. It is probably more accurate to treat the Scottish 1987 election as one more chapter in a longer-running story, best thought of as Scotland's search for new political identity. This was launched after the second world war by premonitory episodes like the Scottish Covenant of the early 1950s. 70s nationalism is its most spectacular manifestation so far, and its onward course has been beset by wrong turnings, giddy

oscillations and an enfeebling lack of political self-confidence (often concealed by ranting, or Sunday-School prognostications like 'Doomsday').

The historical contradiction at the heart of the process is an interesting one. Scotland is far too strongly configured as a nation (above all in institutional terms) to renounce nationality. Yet internal division has robbed it of the ethnic or religious basis for the successful mobilisation of separate identity in those terms. Hence, and very fortunately, it can only hope to advance on more progressive terrain: via the democratic-popular or Burnsian

Caledonian Labourism has always been ultra-conscientious in obeisance to all the icons of Windsordom. This must be remembered for the full and spectacular irony of the new moment to be grasped: Scotland's uncertain quest for a more modern and distinct identity has ended in the clammy embrace of the party historically most hypnotised by Britishism.

It is altered circumstances which have made the weird coupling inevitable - those very conditions of 'regressive modernisation' so admirably analysed by Stuart Hall. With Thatcher's third term we no longer have merely a government, but a regime. Britain's reborn Conservatism enjoys a traditional elective tyranny needing no reform and has built up beneath that a durable southern power-bloc which will never again cede even formal authority to the outlands or the lower orders.

It is this successful 'passive revolution' that has unwittingly given Scottish identity its new opportunity of affirmation. In the 1970s nationalism had only a floundering and half-compliant Labour government to define itself against; now, Scottish Labour's quasi-national 'mandate' has to contend with a regime and its detested personification. This basic alteration of terrain is far more significant than 'what Scottish Labour will do *now*'. The answer to that question is almost certainly that it will wriggle for years yet in vain attempts to harmonise the irreconcilable: to make a new Scottish democratic-national identity fit somehow, somewhere, into the deepening reaction of the new British hegemony. And the more significant question is whether, in the course of these struggles, the Scottish Labour Party can eventually change its own nature and become both national enough and, more importantly, democratic enough to assume the responsibility which history seems to have thrust upon

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Tom Nairn



Rifkind: Scotland's by default

tradition, as it were, rather than through some variety of ethnic populism. But this is inherently difficult among a people ruled from outside since 1707 and lacking in modern models of successful popular self-action or revolution. The difficulty has, naturally, been compounded by the very nature of United Kingdom hegemony - that is, by a state and parliamentary inheritance whose unwritten constitution has been so heavily biased against the democratic-popular and all notion of effective sovereignty from below.

In the past, this impasse has actually been aggravated by Scottish Labour's dominance. Like some time-serving foreman queasily aware of his charges' capacity for mutinous conduct,