

Protagonist Corner

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“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive....” Wordsworth’s optimistic spin on the French Revolution somehow reflects, at least in part, the mood within Scotland at present. On 18 September, a referendum is to be held, and Scottish voters will be presented with a clear choice, whether to remain part of the United Kingdom or to regain independence and complete autonomy.

As many readers in the US may know, Scotland was a separate nation with its own monarch until 1603 and had its own governance until 1707, when in rather controversial circumstances the Scottish and English parliaments were united. A movement for Scottish independence developed over the years, gaining momentum with an increasing groundswell of opposition to the policies of Tory governments, especially Margaret Thatcher’s. This led in 1999 to the creation of the present Scottish parliament at Holyrood in Edinburgh, with extensive powers on a wide range of social matters (health, education, local government, etc.), while foreign, defence, fiscal, and macro-economic policies continue to be determined in London. Since then there has been a continuing call for the devolution of more powers from Westminster, strengthened by the Scottish National Party surprisingly gaining an absolute majority at the most recent elections in 2011 and since then having been, by fairly general agreement, a responsible and effective government.

The Scottish churches played an important part in the build-up to the creation of the Scottish parliament, in particular through their participation in a leading role in the work of the Scottish Constitutional Convention, which to a large extent laid the parliament’s foundation. In particular, the Church of Scotland as the national church (not strictly “established” like the Church of England, but more independent and separate from, and therefore able to adopt a more critical relationship with, government), had for many years taken a close interest in the constitutional discussions. Indeed at the time of the first devolution referendum in 1979, it got into some difficulties as to whether or not it was appropriate to reach an official view and urge church members to vote, specifically in favour of devolution – which narrowly failed at that point to gain the necessary overall electoral support.

This time round the newspapers and broadcast media have for months been full of discussion of the issues. The different camps (“Better together” and “Yes for Scotland”) have been promoting their arguments vigorously, although too much attention has been concentrated on the potential economic benefits, “what’s in it for us” rather than “what outcome will be best for the good of all.” While opinion polls have been suggesting that there will be a clear majority who opt for the status quo, expert commentators are indicating that the result will be much closer and that the gap will narrow considerably as September approaches. The Church of Scotland’s Church and Society Council has dealt with the issues in successive reports to the 2012 and 2013 General Assemblies and has effectively encouraged local discussion within and among congregations with a view not to advocating one or other side of the argument, but to encouraging people to reflect on the values that are important to Scotland’s future, how the churches can help to make Scotland a better place to

be, and how people's aspirations and hopes can be put into action. Within our local group of congregations (of different denominations), we are holding meetings in 2014 to help people think about the issues at stake. Within the Iona Community of which I am a member, a vigorous discussion is under way. This topic was the central focus of members' Community Week on Iona in October last year, and the Community's magazine *Coracle* is carrying a series of thought-provoking articles by former Leaders and others. Whenever the subject comes up when Community members gather, the conversation is likely to be lively – emotions run high; questions of distinctive identity and culture, social justice, and practical politics are interwoven; and there may even be, (thoroughly good-natured and well-intentioned of course!) charges of chauvinism and xenophobia.

At least it is reassuring that on this occasion, contrary to what may have happened in the past, there is little sign of any questioning of the appropriateness of the churches' involvement in discussion of these issues. There seems a general recognition that it is right that we should be engaging in this debate about the kind of society we want Scotland to be, what should be its social and political priorities, what values should underpin and drive it, and what process of governance is most likely to deliver what we are seeking. Of course among grass-roots members of the churches, there are different views on these matters; but it is an open, as yet unresolved question as to whether the leadership of the churches should seek to give an indication of support one way or the other. On the one hand, this would be regarded by some as inadvisedly partisan and unduly divisive, and contrary to the traditional "middle axiom" approach that on issues involving Christian ethics, church statements should be confined to general principles, grounded in theology, and should not engage with practical political particularities. The alternative viewpoint, more persuasive in my opinion I confess, would suggest that on matters of critical social significance, where Gospel values and social wellbeing are at stake, the church is justified in getting off the fence and speaking out more decisively.

At present in Scotland the general feeling is that the present Scottish National Party government has been doing a pretty good job. On many social issues, especially perhaps in the fields of health and education, there is the feeling that Scotland's policies are better and fairer than those operative in England. There is, incredible as it may seem, at present only one Tory MP from Scotland at Westminster, and the indications of increasingly right-wing tendencies south of the border are disturbing. The commitment there to economic austerity and welfare reform is widening the gap between richer and poorer, and there is the real possibility that a "No" vote in the referendum could have the undesirable result of Scotland being stuck with a thoroughly uncongenial Westminster government and, into the bargain, being taken out of the European Union. On the other hand, a "Yes" vote would almost certainly reduce the chances of a Labour government, which has always depended on its substantial backing in Scotland, ever achieving victory again at Westminster!

At such a time, it is salutary to remind ourselves that the Gospel is intrinsically counter-cultural, calling us to express "eschatological dissatisfaction" with the prevailing culture of selfishness and consumerism and to take seriously our calling as "resident aliens." As Christians, as churches, we are challenged not just to embody and thereby through our worship and witness to draw attention to the vision and values of God's kingdom; we are required not just to "love mercy and walk humbly

with God,” but to *do* justice. So we must be ready to engage with social and political realities, affirming the priority of the common good and mutual responsibility, pointing to the hope of a better, fairer world and the transforming potential of God’s grace. It remains to be seen how all this will play out over the months ahead: watch this space!