

# SCOTLAND IS LIBERTARIAN!

## A REPLY TO SEAN GABB



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It is a common complaint among Scottish people that the English are remarkably ill-informed about Scottish history, when they pay any attention to it at all. Sean Gabb's piece, *Why the English Should Welcome Scottish Independence*, is as fine a vindication of that complaint as one could possibly ask for. Gabb argues that England is a fundamentally more libertarian country than Scotland, and that it would be in the interests of English freedom to encourage Scottish independence. He claims that

Their own experience has been of despotism broken by periods of wild disorder. ... In their culture, strong and often unlimited government is not an alien, uncomfortable notion. It is common sense.<sup>1</sup>

Although it has been many years since I studied Scottish history, this is such a misunderstanding of the basic facts of the country's history that I wonder where Gabb got the idea from. If he would take the trouble to read any reputable book on the subject, such as Professor J. D. Mackie's definitive *History of Scotland*, or any general survey of the archaeology and history of the British Isles as a whole, such as Dr Catherine Hills' *Blood of the British*, he would realise that virtually the opposite is the case.

### LEGALLY RECOGNISED FREEDOM

Recent archaeological, philological, biological and historical research has destroyed the popular myth that there is some fundamental distinction between the "Anglo-Saxon" and "Celtic" populations of the British Isles. In fact, there has been a continuity of population since late Palaeolithic times. Successive invasions of Romans, Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Danes, Vikings and Normans were much smaller than has traditionally been assumed. A recent study of DNA patterns of people throughout Britain demonstrated that they are of one common stock, and that population groups that have arrived in the past 10,000 years have had only a marginal impact on that stock. It has been demonstrated that the Anglo-Saxons, far from massacring the native population and driving them westward, in fact became the new ruling class, working within the customs of the native population. Even the Vikings, for all their ferocious reputation, would often carry out raids in one area and then buy and cultivate land in another area. Gradually the kingdoms of England, under King Egbert, and Scotland, under Kenneth the Hardy, emerged from the numerous small kingdoms that covered the whole island of Britain.

During the middle ages the two separate kingdoms both developed — and strengthened — institutions based on the legally-recognised freedoms of individuals and institutions, the concept of the monarch ruling according to an independent body of law, and the concept of rights and justice existing separately from the will of the monarch. It is perhaps ironic that the two countries were in armed conflict for so much of the middle ages, given that their institutions were so similar. We all know about how, in Magna Carta (1215), King John was compelled by his subjects to recognise the rights of the individual and institutions in England. While Scotland had no exact equivalent to Magna Carta, the same concept of liberty under the law was explicitly recognised in numerous Scottish historical documents. In the Declaration of Arbroath of 1320, for example, the barons of Scotland stated that they had chosen their king, Robert the Bruce, to enforce and uphold their traditional freedoms, and asserted their right to depose him if he attempted to rule in violation of those rights. For many more statements

of the such principles, see the numerous translations in *Scottish Historical Documents*, edited by Professor Gordon Donaldson. Contrary to Gabb's assertion, these principles were firmly established in Scottish law and custom. It is certainly true that there were often severe divisions among the Scottish people and "periods of wild disorder" in the northern kingdom. Nevertheless, similar events occurred just as frequently south of the border. Has Gabb never heard of the conflict between King Stephen and the Empress Matilda in the 12th century, the civil war between John and the barons, the conflict between Henry III and the barons, the Wars of the Roses and the English civil war, to name but a few? One might also mention a certain degree of religious fanaticism which led, among other things, to Scotland becoming (along with Hungary), one of the two main centres of witch-hunting in the 16th century.

### SCOTTISH EDUCATION

In the modern era, Scotland developed institutions which in some cases were considerably more libertarian than the English equivalents. The best known example is the Scottish free banking system. In 1694 William of Orange granted the Bank of England a monopoly of the issue of money throughout England. In Scotland, by contrast, private banks were free to issue their own money in a free market, to the greatly increased prosperity of the Scottish people. Unfortunately, one of the costs of union with England was the eventual abolition of this free banking system in 1845, even though every single town and village in Scotland voted to keep it.

Another example is Scotland's highly advanced free market in education. Scotland is a cold and barren land with few natural resources (until the discovery of oil in the North Sea). Scottish crofters and small farmers could eke out only a bare subsistence from the soil, and famines were a frequent fact of life for centuries. So the Scots realised that their economic well-being depended on the maximum possible development of the individual through education and the acquisition of skills. Only through making himself more valuable through self-improvement could the Scot hope to improve his lot. The Scots therefore developed what economists call "human capital" to a degree not surpassed by any other people in the world.

The Scottish system of education developed on a free-market basis, with teachers setting up private educational facilities and providing them to customers who wanted to buy them. In the 19th century, Robert Lowe remarked approvingly that "In Scotland they sell education like a grocer sells figs."<sup>2</sup> The Scottish free-market educational system produced an even higher rate of literacy among the Scottish working class than that which prevailed among English workers: according to a report of the Factory Inquiry Commissioners in 1834, 96% out of a sample of 28,000 Scottish mill workers could read, and 56% could write.<sup>3</sup> These figures were several percentage points higher than contemporary figures from the English working class. In his groundbreaking studies of the free-market educational systems of both England and Scotland, Professor E. G. West cites the following "à la carte" menu offered to families by a primary school in Kirkcaldy in the 18th century:

#### Table of Fees per Quarter

|  |                              |
|--|------------------------------|
| English by itself:   | one shilling and sixpence    |
| English writing and vulgar arithmetic with one hour's writing daily: | two shillings                |
| Latin by itself:   | three shillings              |
| Latin with writing and arithmetic:                                   | three shillings and sixpence |
| ...  |                              |
| Decimal arithmetic, mensuration, trigonometry and algebra:           | three shillings              |
| Church music (on occasion):  | gratis <sup>4</sup>          |

And Gabb claims that free markets were alien to the Scottish way of life!

Many commentators attributed the fact that the Scottish population was remarkably law-abiding to its superior education. The Scottish classical liberal philosopher James Mill (father of John Stuart Mill) quoted statistics to show that England had eleven times as many criminals as Scotland in proportion to its population, despite the comparative material poverty of the Scots:

We desire our opponents to tell us in what respect the circumstances of the English population have not been more favourable than those of the Scottish except in the article of schooling alone?<sup>5</sup>



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## THE BENEFITS OF THE UNION

Far from the free market being “alien” to such great Scottish philosophers as Adam Smith and David Hume, as Gabb would have it, free markets, individual liberty and the rule of law were central to the Scottish historical experience. Rather than positing some English “uniqueness”, it is more useful in historical terms to recognise that England, Scotland and the Netherlands, and to some extent Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries, developed a political, legal, social and economic order characterised by voluntarism, liberty, the independence of the social order from the state, and legal restraints on political power, while the institutions of other European countries were constructed by the authority and on the initiative of the state. Nevertheless it is true that the Scots developed close links with France, the country with which they were so often militarily and diplomatically aligned against England, as well as with other Continental countries.

The union between England and Scotland was not without problems and gross injustices, although it gradually gained general support on both sides. In the revolt of 1745–6, Bonnie Prince Charlie did not gain the support of the majority of Scots. After the Young Pretender’s defeat at Culloden in 1746, the Duke of Cumberland carried out horrific reprisals against the Scottish Highlanders, earning him the nickname “Butcher” Cumberland, and in the decades which followed, the notorious Highland Clearances, in which the Highland crofters were forcibly deprived of their smallholdings and reduced in many cases to death by starvation, were perhaps the closest approximation to genocide ever carried out in the British Isles. It would be wrong, however, to describe these events as simply “English oppression of the Scots”: the Highland clan chieftans deserted their lesser brethren and other Scots actively participated in their dispossession. Those Highlanders who survived flocked into large industrial centres like Glasgow to become an urban proletariat, while others were recruited into Highland regiments, or emigrated to North America.

Nevertheless, the union benefitted English and Scots alike. It enabled rapid economic growth in Scotland with hugely expanded markets for Scottish goods. The Scottish standard of living rose from being about half that of England to being virtually the same. Scots were represented throughout the British empire out of all proportion to their numbers. For centuries the Scots had achieved an international reputation as excellent scholars, entrepreneurs, inventors, engineers, doctors and soldiers. Considering the comparatively small size of the Scottish population, the number of Scottish innovations in technology, medicine, engineering and any scientific field one cares to name is simply staggering. Duns Scotus (John the Scot) was one of the greatest of medieval philosophers, who taught at the great universities of Europe and was a central figure in the “12th century Renaissance”. No fewer than four of the Russian tsars had Scotsmen as their personal physicians.

Wherever they went, the Scots distinguished themselves in every conceivable endeavour, both as part of the British empire and as immigrants to the United States. The entrepreneur Andrew Carnegie, creator of US Steel, at that time the world’s largest company, and Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone, were both born in Scotland, and even a partial listing of distinguished Americans who were born in that country, or who were of Scottish ancestry, would easily fill a large volume. With such figures as Smith and Hume, the Scottish Enlightenment of the 18th century developed the essential world-view that we describe as “libertarian”. Neither can one ignore the Scottish contribution to English — indeed the world’s — literature. Sir Walter Scott was one of the greatest of the world’s Romantic novelists, while Robert Burns, writing in the Scots dialect of English, is recognised the length and breadth of the world as one of the finest poets of modern times. In the field of popular literature one must also mention Robert Louis Stevenson and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Not only did Conan Doyle, who practised as a doctor of medicine, write the Sherlock Holmes and Professor Challenger stories, and numerous historical novels and other fictional works, as well as histories of the Boer War and the first world war, but he also created several inventions, such as the deep-sea diving helmet. And that tradition has been continued in our own time by such notables as Hamish Henderson, Dame Muriel Spark and Ken MacLeod. Is it seriously contended that England would benefit from making such a people into foreigners?

## WAR AND WELFARE

During the first world war, Scots volunteered to fight in equal proportion with the English, and fought with unparalleled courage for king and country — country meaning Britain. Their losses were terrible, and with a much smaller population than England were proportionally

far more difficult to make good. In one Highland regiment almost the entire officer corps was wiped out, so that a second lieutenant had to be promoted to commanding officer. Nevertheless, when the second world war broke out, there was not the slightest complaint in Scotland that it was “England’s war”: once again the Scots distinguished themselves in battle on every front, as well as at home, and tens of thousands gave their lives to save Britain from becoming part of a greater European Reich. Any consideration of the future relationship between England and Scotland must take these facts into consideration.

What happened was that over the centuries the most dynamic, creative and innovative Scots emigrated — to England, Canada, the US, the British empire and elsewhere. A large proportion of those who remained tended to adopt the “welfarist” mentality that Gabb complains about. When Labour governments introduced nationalisation from 1945 onwards, this disproportionately affected Scotland because that was where so many basic heavy industries were located, and the attitudes Gabb deplors appear to have developed as a result of this. Yet there is no necessary correlation between the Scottish people and socialism: as recently as 1955, the majority of Scottish constituencies were represented by a Conservative MP (not that that means a great deal from a libertarian point of view, I admit). In the transition to a 21st-century “Third Wave” economy, characterised by such features as decentralisation, de-massification, digitisation and customisation, there is every prospect that the Scottish people will re-discover their traditions of innovation, entrepreneurship and independence and leave behind the collectivism and welfarism that temporarily developed in the post-war decades.

What is true of Scotland is even more true of Wales and Northern Ireland. Wales has been administratively, politically, legally and economically integrated with England since the 13th century, and it is absurd to suggest that Welsh independence is either feasible or desirable for either people. Welsh nationalists are a tiny but noisy and influential fringe who are generally disparaged by the majority of Welsh people, who regard the compulsory teaching of the Welsh language, the incomprehensible Welsh Channel 4, and the dual-language road signs with derision. The people of Ulster have been British for over three centuries, and have just as much right to remain British as the people of Kent or Yorkshire. Any attempt to force them to submit to Dublin rule, which is undoubtedly being planned in the current talks at 10 Downing Street between Tony Blair, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, which are taking place without any requirement that the IRA surrender their weapons, would be a monstrous betrayal of the people of Northern Ireland, including the 30 percent of Roman Catholics who wish to remain British.

## REGIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

It is not in dispute that there is considerable coolness towards the union among many Scottish people today. Let us hope, now that the Scots have voted to establish their own parliament, that this arrangement will be satisfactory to them. The refusal to grant Home Rule within the United Kingdom to Ireland in the 19th century led to the breakaway of the Irish Free State. Let us avoid anything similar in the Scottish situation. The current drive to dismember the United Kingdom comes very largely from the European Union, which seeks to divided the whole of Europe into “regions” over which it will be easier to impose its tyranny and slavery than over Europe’s historic nations. Official EU maps show Scotland and Wales as two of these “regions”, while Northern Ireland is shown as part of a “region” which contains a large part of the Irish Republic. England is not recognised at all, except as several “regions” such as “the north-west”, “the Midlands” and “the south-east”. In opposition to this model, let us assert the historic unity and identity of the entire British people, and demand the immediate withdrawal of the United Kingdom, as a single nation, from the EU. Opinion polls demonstrate that the large majority of Scots — and English, Welsh and Ulster people too — favour the continuance of the union. Let us hope that now that the people of Scotland are taking a greater degree of control over their destiny, they will re-discover their ancient traditions of liberty within a decentralised, free and independent United Kingdom.

## NOTES

1. Sean Gabb, *Why the English Should Welcome Scottish Independence*, Political Notes No. 139, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1997, p. 1.
2. Quoted in E. G. West, *Education and the Industrial Revolution*, B. T. Batsford, London, 1975, p. 63.
3. *Ibid*, p. 68.
4. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 63.
5. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 131.