Politics and Public Policy in Scotland

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Preface and Acknowledgements

The title of this book begs a question. Is there such a thing as Scottish politics? The United Kingdom is, after all, a unitary state with a single government and parliament. Our answer is that there is a Scottish politics but that its nature and the position of Scotland within the United Kingdom are widely misunderstood. Some English scholars are in the habit of using the terms Britain and England interchangeably, an error which is almost universal in Europe and North America. Even within Scotland, few people are aware of the details of the distinct governmental arrangements.

Part of the problem lies in the peculiar development of the United Kingdom, a gradual process of territorial consolidation combined with an extraordinary absence of constitutional imagination. There has been neither an attempt to build a uniform state on continental lines, nor an acceptance of the federal principle for recognising and accommodating distinct territories within the state. Parliamentary sovereignty (itself a disputed legacy of the Union of 1707), remains the only firm constitutional principle. Under the unitary Parliament, a wide variety of political and administrative practices have developed in the different parts of the kingdom. Lacking its own source of political authority, Scottish administration has developed piecemeal, without clear organising principles or consistency. This argument, developed in an earlier book (Keating and Midwinter, 1983) was unwittingly confirmed by a critic who commented that ‘the clearances apparently did their work only too well, leaving only some agencies here, a complex organisational network there’ (Raab, 1983). Intended as a criticism of the book, this serves as a fair, if

rather sweeping, portrayal of Scottish government. Until administrative decentralisation is matched with a degree of local political control, Scottish government will remain an untidy patchwork without the clear focal point provided by a representative body.

Our treatment of Scottish politics and government reflects this inconsistency. There is much to be said on the Scottish Office and on local government. The role of the Treasury, the main instruments of economic policy-making, the civil service and, to some degree, the main political parties, are not so distinctive in Scotland and our coverage reflects this. The future of Scottish government is a matter of political controversy and we return at several points to this theme.

The book is a collaborative effort and the order of names simply reflects our practice of rotation in joint publications. We all contributed to Chapter 1. Keating and Mitchell drafted Chapters 2 and 8. Mitchell drafted Chapter 3. Keating drafted Chapter 4 and Midwinter Chapters 5 and 7. Midwinter and Keating drafted Chapter 6 and we all contributed to Chapter 9. The final draft of the whole book was written by Keating.

We have received advice, comments and criticisms from a number of colleagues, including Alan Alexander, David Heald, Richard Parry and Urlan Wannop. Many people in public life have shared their experiences with us and, though discretion and the canons of governmental secrecy prevent our naming them, we are grateful. Any errors of fact or judgement remain our exclusive responsibility.

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