

# Reforming Scotland: The Scottish Liberal Tradition



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## **Reforming Scotland**

This is the first in a series of individual contributions to the publication, 'Reforming Scotland', which aims to set out a possible vision for Scotland's future which can inform and influence the policy debate in the coming years. The contributions are by people from a range of different backgrounds and political perspectives who have looked at how policy could be reformed across a range of different areas and they represent the views of the authors and not those of Reform Scotland. They are published under the banner of our blog, the Melting Pot, since they are in keeping with the shorter pieces done by various people for this which can be found on our website [reformscotland.com](http://reformscotland.com)

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## The Scottish Liberal Tradition

One of the interesting features of the Scottish independence debate was the extent to which it was dominated by arguments about the distinctiveness of Scottish political culture. Chief among these arguments has been a cultural trope that asserts that Scotland is, in some sense, a more left-wing country than England. This view assumes that the Scottish people have inherited a tradition of politics, an attitude to government, which is bound up with socialism, with social democracy, with the welfare state and with state intervention in the economy. Behind these assertions lies the implicit belief among large sections of the Scottish commentariat and intelligentsia, that Scotland is in some sense a more egalitarian and hence a more moral country than some of her neighbours.

Now laying aside the accuracy of these claims, challenged as they have been by the evidence of social attitudes surveys<sup>1</sup> and by critical analysis of even those sympathetic to the view such as Gerry Hassan<sup>2</sup>, and laying aside the fact that they may have come to prominence for tactical reasons related to the independence referendum as part of a deliberate differentiation strategy, we are still left with the uncomfortable feeling that this outlook tells a partial, not to say a partisan, history of the tradition of thinking about politics and society in Scotland.

In this chapter I want to offer an alternative to this popular interpretation of Scotland's political culture. In so doing I want to revive interest in Scotland's often overlooked liberal tradition. I hope to do this by highlighting a series of ideas that have had a strong resonance in Scottish political life, while pointing out that, though many of them are shared by the social democratic narrative, they also form the basis of an alternative way of thinking about politics that challenges the assumptions of the consensus on Scotland's left-leaning political sentiments. Moreover I want to make the point that this tradition is not conservative, but rather offers an alternative progressive account of political thinking.

We should begin with some basic distinctions. I use the term liberal here in the traditional European sense. What has come to be called classical liberalism, rather than in its modern American sense where it has become a synonym for

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<sup>1</sup> John Curtice and Rachel Ormiston 'Is Scotland more left-wing than England?' *British Social Attitudes* 28, ScotCen No. 42, December 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Gerry Hassan *Caledonia Dreaming: The Quest for a Different Scotland*, Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2014.

social democracy. Equally I am not concerned with the eighteenth and then nineteenth century dominance of Scottish politics by the Whig and Liberal parties or with the current policies of the Liberal Democrats. Though the history of the Liberal party offers evidence to support the reality of the tradition I seek to highlight, my concern in this piece will be more with the ideas that characterise the Scottish liberal tradition.

In terms of the thinkers that helped to shape this tradition I want to dwell on the outlook of the Covenanters and George Buchanan; on the Scottish Enlightenment of David Hume and Adam Smith; on the reform movement and the work of the Mills (James and John Stuart) and on the wide popularity of another Scottish writer Samuel Smiles.

Space constraints mean that this discussion will be necessarily brief and indicative, but in starting the ball rolling I hope to encourage readers to consider an alternative tradition of Scottish political thought, one which challenges the dominant narrative, and which provides, in my view, the basis for a very different way of approaching Scotland's current political problems which has an equal historical claim to be embedded in the cultural attitudes of the Scottish People.

## **12 Liberal Themes in Scottish Political Thought**

The following list of themes is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to provide an illustrative list of some of the elements that might build towards understanding the core ideas of the Scottish liberal tradition. They emerge from three great moments in Scottish cultural life: from the Reformation and the campaign for Presbyterian Church government; from the Scottish Enlightenment and from the Nineteenth century reform movement. Hopefully they will be as readily familiar to the reader as the ideas which are assembled into the social democratic story of Scottish culture.

### **1. Individualism / Anti-paternalism**

Scotland's experience of Calvinism, in common with that of other European countries, imbued its culture with a strong respect for and concern with individualism. The belief in a personal relationship between the individual and

God through faith became a prominent part of Scottish culture. In the Scottish Enlightenment this individualism moved from the sphere of religion into that of social and political life as Hume, Smith and others argued that the developing liberal and commercial society that they experienced in the eighteenth century offered far greater opportunities for individual self-expression and freedom than previous forms of social life. In the nineteenth century in the hands of John Stuart Mill, this individualism became the core of a moral case for a free society. The rugged individualism of Scots both at home and overseas was a manifestation of a strain of cultural thinking that valued the individual, a strain of thought that was pre-disposed to allow individuals the space to make their own decisions and which was suspicious of, not to say downright antagonistic towards, those in positions of authority who sought to impose their will on the people. Initially this view concerned Church government and opposition to the Monarch's interference in the forms of worship, but over time it extended into a more general individualistic outlook that has remained a permanent feature of Scottish culture. The often expressed view that the Scots were particularly committed to a notion of democracy arises from this cultural feature of the Reformation.

## **2. Egalitarianism of status**

Also stemming from the Reformation was the view that all people are of equal moral status in the eyes of God. The lack of certainty over our status as saved or damned meant that those of higher social status had no privileged position in the true consideration of worth. This egalitarianism, like the egalitarianism of the English Levellers, was not concerned with the redistribution of worldly goods, but was rather a belief that all deserve equal status and consideration. And that those who claimed special privilege were to be viewed with suspicion. In its most tangible form this idea manifested itself in the long arguments about patronage in the Presbyterian Church and the notion of a strong democratic element to congregational organisation. But in the hands of George Buchanan and the Covenanters it also took on a political dimension where rulers were seen to be dependent on the consent of the people. For Buchanan, Kings were limited by law and their position was revocable should they step beyond the bounds of their office. In the Scottish liberal tradition egalitarianism of status was intimately linked to the idea of limited government and legitimacy from consent.

### **3. Hard work and self-reliance**

Stemming from the strong theme of egalitarianism was a deep concern with the idea of self-respect. A notion that the least, as well as the greatest in society, was to be accorded consideration became connected to the idea of self-reliance and the importance of being able to live an independent life. Drawing obvious parallels with the notion of a protestant work ethic made so famous by Max Weber, this trope in Scottish culture celebrated those who were able, by dint of their own effort, to support themselves and their families and promoted a disinclination to rely on the patronage of others. The theme reached its apogee in Samuel Smiles book *Self-Help*, a Victorian best seller that lauded the work ethic and individual responsibility.

### **4. Parsimony**

The other great theme of Smiles' book is the idea of living within your means. This may be at the root of the crude caricature of the Scots as mean, but it is a theme that is already present in the work of Adam Smith. In the *Wealth of Nations* Smith's hero is not the great businessman, or the wealthy industrialist. Rather it is the careful and prudent ordinary individual who is able, by dint of hard work and careful saving, to improve the situation of their family. Smith was suspicious of prodigals and projectors, of merchants who sought privileges from politicians, and of those who lived at the expense of others. Individual responsibility and the 'desire to better our condition' come together for Smith to create a gradually growing economy from the parsimony of individuals.

### **5. Free trade and wealth**

Smith's great book also gives us our next theme. From the debates surrounding the Act of Union onwards access to international markets and free trade seeped into the Scottish consciousness. Whether through the access to the British Empire, or through Smith's account of the benefits of free trade and the division of labour, this became a prominent theme in nineteenth century Scottish thinking. Free exchange of goods between responsible individuals backed by a sound banking system became the basis of the economic miracle that brought Scotland from a relative position of poverty to the forefront of economic development in the eighteenth century. It's also vital to remember that Smith's

case for free trade was a moral case: his argument is based on the idea that it is the poor who benefit most from economic growth and that, though material inequality is a necessary feature of a commercial society, this inequality can be tolerated as it provides the engine of economic activity which raises the living standards of the least well off in society.

## **6. Limited Government**

Key to this, in Smith's view, was the provision of a stable government and the rule of law. As he said in a famous aside, 'Little else is requisite to carry a state to the highest degree of opulence from the lowest barbarism, but peace, easy taxes, and a tolerable administration of justice: all the rest being brought about by the natural course of things,'<sup>3</sup> Smith recognised the central role of government and justice to a successful society, but he saw that role as being limited to a set of core functions. Moreover he worried that if government did expand its activity then the scope for corruption and for malign interference would expand and threaten the very forces that were slowly, but surely, raising people from poverty.

## **7. Spontaneous Order**

Smith's views on the market are often summed up by misquoting his use of the phrase the invisible hand to suggest that his support for free trade was based on the idea that a providential God ensures that the outcome of markets is always efficient. But this is not what Smith meant at all. He was perfectly aware that the outcome of economic activity could be far from efficient – especially when vested interests are able to persuade government to offer them protection and privileges. Instead Smith's argument was more modest and an example of a form of thinking that he shared with David Hume and other members of the Scottish Enlightenment. What Smith noticed was that our actions often produce beneficial social outcomes that were no part of our intention. Indeed we are often better able to produce socially beneficial outcomes through such processes than when we deliberately pursue such a goal through government. Mercantilism said that government should intervene in the economy to help

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<sup>3</sup> Dugald Stewart 'Life of Adam Smith' in W.P.D. Wightman (ed.) *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* by Adam Smith, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, pp. 257-351 p., 322.

national industry, but Smith's view was that, in general, leaving individuals to make their own economic decisions in co-ordination with others through the market, was a more effective way of generating economic development.

## **8. Localism**

The next major theme is localism, or the strength of local association and government. Scotland had a rich history of burgh and county government that developed through the nineteenth century, and one of its key features was the absence of formal political parties. Though the Highlands remain the last refuge of this tradition of independent service in local government, it was once characteristic of all Scottish communities. Communal organisation to provide roads, water and sewerage, policing and education developed along with strong town and county identities which have been increasingly obscured by centralisation and local government reorganisation. Local organisation went beyond the formal institutions of government with a rich civil society of clubs, charities, sporting associations and mutual organisations that brought individuals together on a voluntary basis to work on issues of shared local concern.

## **9. Education**

One of the most prominent of these, and long a source of Scottish pride, was the provision of excellent local education which in turn supported a strong university system. From the Reformation onwards there was a conscious effort to create a literate and informed public who would be able to take responsibility for their own religious and civil life. The centrality of education was also linked to the theme of individualism and self-reliance. The stress on education in Scottish culture long predates the twentieth century reforms that are often lauded as its clearest manifestation. Moreover the broad-based system of Scottish Highers and undergraduate degrees is characteristic, not so much of a democratic intellect as George Davie once called it, as of a liberal intellect in the sense that we refer to the Liberal Arts.

## 10. Community

For all of the Scottish liberal tradition's focus on individualism, it also shows strong concern with a sense of community and shared responsibility to the less advantaged. The history of Scotland's towns and cities is filled with examples of people coming together to organise and fund the provision of public goods. From the provision of basic health and welfare services to the building of roads and bridges, these forms of voluntary community effort demonstrate that the liberal tradition is not dependent on a view of human nature that sees humanity as selfish and limited in their objectives. Scotland's towns and cities are filled with buildings, libraries, museums and parks that were gifted to the people by successful individuals or raised by public subscription. These many examples of philanthropy highlight that a sense of belonging and duty to community was a key aspect of Scottish culture long before the development of the institutions of the social democratic state.

## 11. Tolerance

Despite Scotland's seventeenth century reputation for religious strife and intolerance the Scottish liberal tradition is actually characterised by the development of religious tolerance. As David Hume argued the profusion of 'enthusiastic' religious views led to a diversity of religious beliefs and practices throughout Britain which meant that despite the formal religious orthodoxy, a culture of accepting non-conformity on a practical level soon developed. As Alexander Broadie has argued, Scotland in the Enlightenment period was a remarkably tolerant place where within barely a generation the country had gone from the execution of Thomas Aikenhead for mocking religion to a situation where David Hume could be widely viewed as an infidel and yet face no formal sanction or imprisonment.<sup>4</sup> The toleration of free thinking, together with the respect for education, formed the building blocks of the Scottish Enlightenment. And in the nineteenth century it became, in John Stuart Mill's famous essay *On Liberty*, the basis of the most famous philosophical defence of freedom of thought and speech.

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Broadie *The Scottish Enlightenment*, Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2007.

## **12. Internationalism**

Finally, as has been widely noted Scots are particularly mobile people. For all of their patriotism and love of country, they have travelled and pursued opportunities all over the world. But this outward looking tendency is also reflected in Scotland's willingness to absorb ideas and influences from abroad. Whether that be John Knox importing Genevan theology, or Scots Lawyers training in the Netherlands, or Hume and Smith absorbing the latest English and French ideas to shape their thinking, the Scots have always had an openness to the world. The Scottish liberal tradition embraces this making it an outward looking, not a parochial, creed. The Scots have always been rightly proud of their achievements and their culture, but this pride is coupled with a willingness to learn and to view themselves as part of a wider international community.

## **Conclusion**

The themes mentioned above represent the basis of a distinct and progressive Scottish liberal tradition. Though many of them are shared with the dominant narrative of social democratic Scotland, they also point us in interestingly diverse directions. The tropes of thought mentioned above can, indeed do already, form the basis of an indigenous liberal tradition. A tradition characterised by respect for individual rights, the rule of law, representative democracy, and a distinct private sphere. This liberal tradition seeks to respect these values through a number of political attitudes that are distinct from the more state-focussed social democratic narrative. The liberal tradition stresses the importance of stable limited government; non-intervention in the economy; trust and responsibility towards individuals; individual effort through small businesses and careful capital accumulation; mutual co-operation on areas of shared and local concern and suspicion of the grandiose claims of government. It is an outlook which is not often openly expressed in Scotland in the twenty-first century and does not have the media profile of the alternative narrative, but it is no less real and tangible for that. Indeed it is often most prominent when discussion turns to the nature of the Scottish Diaspora in Canada, the US and New Zealand. Starting to think in terms of a Scottish liberal tradition once again not only provides an alternative to the dominant narrative about Scottish politics, it also allows us to reclaim the ideas and outlooks of those who shaped this country. Indeed it may offer us the only truly progressive path open to us in the years ahead.



