

# Language and culture in a rediscovered Scotland

*Kevin Williamson*

Identity, personal or national, isn't merely something you have like a passport. It is also something you rediscover daily, like a strange country. Its core isn't something like a mountain. It is something molten, like magma.

Hugh McIlvanney<sup>1</sup>

Scotland is an unusual country in that a popular sense of Scottish identity has existed since the end of the thirteenth century. Few nations can make such a bold and ancient claim. It was undoubtedly the Wars of Independence fought against English occupation that created this unique sense of Scottish identity. Since then, for over seven hundred years, it has been Scotland's often fraught relationship with its larger neighbour which has helped sustain and shape this sense of national identity.

The separate histories and unique cultures of the two neighbouring countries – who each can trace their origins to medieval times – have been responsible for important differences in outlook and character. On the question of social or political emphasis I tend to concur with the nineteenth-century Scottish writer, John Galt, who wrote: 'The English are a justice-loving people, according to charter and statute; the Scotch are a wrong-resenting race, according to right and feeling; and the character of liberty among them takes its aspect from that peculiarity.'<sup>2</sup>

We see this manifested today in the working priorities of two very different parliaments. Westminster accentuates stuffy tradition, law and order, rules and regulations, and keeping social order. The Scottish Parliament has put more emphasis on openness, accessibility and addressing social concerns.

By way of further example, if we look at the leanings of the eight

best-known political parties in Scotland a distinct pattern emerges. The four political parties which support an independent Scottish state – the Scottish National Party, Scottish Greens, Scottish Socialist Party and Solidarity – are all to the left of centre, anti-war, anti-imperialist, and are for the dismantling of the nuclear state. The four political parties which support the Union – Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and the British National Party – are all to the right of centre, pro-nuclear, and imbued with the spirit of Empire. The left-right political division on the question of Scottish independence is not a coincidence.

### THIS FAR BUT NO FURTHER

Between 1979 and 1990 – that dark period in Scottish history that will forever be known as ‘The Thatcher Years’ – there was no shortage of combustible social materials building up in Scotland. The decimation of industry, mass unemployment, widespread poverty, and the tearing apart of local communities, created an unstable and potentially volatile mix.

The introduction of the poll tax in Scotland – a year before England and Wales – brought these latent tensions to the surface in a way that was unparalleled. Scotland’s democratic deficiencies and social inequalities became inextricably linked in the public consciousness. But we know now that, despite apocalyptic predictions to the contrary, it was neither Margaret Thatcher nor the poll tax that tipped Scotland over the edge. Mrs Thatcher left office in 1990 and the poll tax was condemned to defeat soon after. The catalyst for constitutional change came about on a miserable Friday morning in April 1992.

Americans will tell you where they were the day JFK was gunned down in Dallas in 1963. Socially aware Scots will tell you how they felt on that terrible morning of 10 April 1992. I can recall that morning like it was my worst ever nightmare. All over Scotland, in that particular year, few would have disagreed with the poet TS Elliot when he wrote that ‘April is the cruellest month’. I went into work on the Friday morning dejected and depressed, not quite able to face up to the reality of what five more years of Tory rule could mean. The prospect was grim.

But there was something else about 1992. Political arithmetic was being done north of the border. The reasoning was straightforward. The electorate of Scotland had rejected the Tories for the fourth time in a row. The electorate of England had elected the Tories for a fourth

time in a row. A right-wing government in London, with alien values, was being imposed on Scotland against the will of the Scottish people. The political relationship between Scotland and England would never be the same again. The two countries were drifting apart.

### REBELS IN INK

1992 was also the year I edited the first issue of *Rebel Inc* magazine. An invigorating new wind was blowing through the margins of Scottish literature and I wanted to be part of it. As an editor I was specifically looking for writers whose voices reflected the tongues of the communities they came from. I was only partially successful. Looking back, what was interesting was the combative empowering role that the Scots language played in the 1990s. The various Scots languages took centre stage in what was in effect a clash of cultures, classes, national identities and ideas. Working-class writers such as James Kelman and Irvine Welsh wrote in their native tongues, and in doing so provoked the fury of upper-class critics immersed in their London-centric prejudices. We were at war, culturally speaking, as we have been for many centuries now, and Kelman and Welsh were fighting in the front line. *Rebel Inc* became part of that war.

I edited *Rebel Inc* magazine for five issues between 1992 and 1994. The magazine featured working-class writers such as Irvine Welsh (who worked for Edinburgh Council's Housing Department), Gordon Legge (a trainee nurse), Duncan McLean (a janitor), Laura Hird (who worked for a trade union), Alan Warner (a train driver), Shug Hanlan (a security guard) and many more besides. The Scottish landscape felt as culturally exciting as it was politically bleak.

During that time Scottish literature flourished. Awards and gongs don't mean that much but a cursory glance back through that crucial period of 1992-1994 tells its own story. Alasdair Gray's finest novel, *Poor Things*, won the Whitbread Best Novel Award in 1992. Jeff Torrington's *Swing Hammer Swing* won the Whitbread Book of the Year award in 1992. Janice Galloway's *Foreign Parts* won the 1994 McVities prize. A.L. Kennedy was cited as one of Granta's '25 Best Young British Novelists' in 1992.

James Kelman's *How Late It Was How Late* won the Booker Prize in 1994. Against a backdrop of the English criticatti spewing forth elitist abuse and patronising drivel about the language used in his novel, I can recall the hairs standing up on the back of my neck when Kelman

quietly took to the podium for his acceptance speech and famously declared: 'My culture and my language have a right to exist.'

Alasdair Gray – one of the most influential and inspirational writers of the post-war period working in the British Isles – in 1992 produced a beautifully concise and wonderfully readable historical tract entitled *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland*. It opened with the words which could define inclusive civic nationalism in the modern era: 'The title of this book may sound threatening to those who live in Scotland but were born and educated elsewhere, so I had better explain that by Scots I mean everyone in Scotland who is eligible to vote.'<sup>3</sup>

### RENAISSANCE IN SONG

It wasn't just Scotland's poets and writers who were articulating the concerns of a disenfranchised population. In 1987 arguably the most influential Scottish recording artists of all time burst onto the music scene with their single 'Letter From America'. In less than five minutes of carefully-crafted pop music, the heartaches of a generation were summed up by a rock band – singing not in a generic Americanese but proudly and defiantly in their native Scots. It was a Eureka moment. The Proclaimers were one of a small number of important Scottish bands in the 1980s who were laying down the foundations of what would eventually develop into a full-blown Scottish musical renaissance.

In 1985 Runrig released the first rock album recorded entirely in the Gaelic. Runrig's version of *Loch Lomond* – an old Jacobite lament first – has established itself as an alternative Scottish national anthem. The singer Jesse Rae – who wrote the disco classic 'Inside Out' for Odyssey – often appeared on the same bill as Runrig. Rae wore a steel helmet, full Highland battle dress and carried a five foot Claymore, claiming he would continue to dress like this until Scotland was free. The thing that made Runrig, The Proclaimers and Jesse Rae stand out was that they were overtly political and overtly nationalist. Runrig drew heavily on their Hebridean roots and culture, and their former keyboard player, Pete Wishart, has been an elected SNP MP at Westminster since 2001.

Stuart Adamson's Big Country were another band bucking the Anglo-American trends. Big Country adapted the skirl of the bagpipes and other traditional Scots instruments into a powerful and unique guitar sound. The brothers Pat and Greg Kane were experimenting with a laid back jazz/soul sound in their band Hue and Cry. What

made them special, however, was that Pat Kane was positioning himself as a prominent cultural commentator, a Scottish radical, arguing persuasively for Scottish independence.

It is interesting to note in passing that all of these Scottish musicians drew heavily from an indigenous folk tradition. This folk tradition is the unsung hero – if that makes sense – of the Scottish cultural renaissance. The folk tradition, through its songs, ballads and poetry, has helped keep our language and identity alive, at a grassroots level, from below, when all around was a standardised English, and a generic British identity promoted from above.

Scotland's musicians, singers, poets, writers and artists had paved the way for the re-opening of the Scottish Parliament. They had reasserted their sense of Scottish identity, and their democratic aspirations, and from 1999 Scots had a political structure which could begin to convey the democratic wishes of the Scottish people.

#### TERRACE INTER-NATIONALISM

The football terraces have always been a useful barometer of any cultural shifts. In Scotland the national football team has been a visible assertion of the nation's existence for over a century. At internationals there is no confusion over which national anthem to sing, which flag to carry, or who the team represents.

After the street battles of the 1970s and the arrogant 'wha's like us' swagger prior to Argentina '78 there was the sound of puffed out chests being deflated. Remarkably, and without prodding from above, Scottish fans then re-invented themselves. Out went the arrogance and aggression towards opposition fans and in came a re-branded new-look Tartan Army. The Tartan Army became unofficial sporting ambassadors for Scotland – albeit quite drunken ones – whose presence was welcomed in whatever city or country they travelled to. This was important. The Tartan Army put the missing hyphen back into the idea of football inter-nationals. This inter-nationalism of the Tartan Army has percolated deep into the fabric of Scottish society, whereas the so-called 'internationalism' of the far left has remained largely disconnected from the popular consciousness.

In 1999, however, the Tartan Army reserved one last howl of aggressive hatred for the Auld Enemy. When the English National Anthem was struck up at Hampden Park prior to a Euro 2000 play-off, the cacophony of boos and jeering was ear-splitting. England

commentators branded it a disgrace but without attempting any understanding of why this had happened. Perhaps this was one final ‘Up Yours’ to England for the previous eighteen years of Tory rule. I’d like to think so.

### A LOCAL HERO

In 1995 an internationally acclaimed Oscar-winning movie was released whose cultural impact helped propel Scotland towards devolved self-government. Mel Gibson’s *Braveheart* worked its way deep into the Scottish psyche. *Braveheart* was of such cultural importance that it brought a long overdue debate on Scottish history into the mainstream. William Wallace was brought back from relative obscurity to become a Scottish folk hero once more, and a potent symbol of freedom and Scottish independence.

The usual suspects in the media sneered at *Braveheart*. Many professional historians who have since earned a fair crust on the back of *Braveheart* tried to diminish Wallace’s role in Scottish history. One Scottish historian who has suffered at the hands of Labour control freaks in the past had his finger on the pulse, and responded scathingly: ‘Historians like TC Smout, Tom Devine and Michael Lynch have as much hope of confining Wallace to a footnote on “Scottish Trade In The Burghs” as Dr Andrew Noble and his motley crew have of suppressing popular delight in this most enduring of legends.’<sup>4</sup>

Before *Braveheart* Scottish history had been marginalised and devalued in our education system to the point of near invisibility. Such is the nature of colonisation. It was no coincidence that the national referendum for a Scottish Parliament was held on 11th September 1997 – exactly 700 years to the very day after William Wallace’s Scottish army defeated the English invaders at the Battle of Stirling Bridge.

### MINDING OUR LANGUAGE

Language is the culture – if you lose your language you’ve lost your culture, so if you’ve lost the way your family talk, the way your friends talk, then you’ve lost your culture, and you’re divorced from it. That’s what happens with all these stupid fucking books by bad average writers because they’ve lost their culture, they’ve given it away. Not only that, what they’re saying is it’s inferior, because they

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make anybody who comes from that culture speak in a hybrid language, whereas they speak standard English. And their language is the superior one. So what they are doing, in effect, is castrating their parents, and their whole culture.

James Kelman<sup>5</sup>

Language is the key to understanding our unique sense of Scottish identity. It is the foundation upon which our culture is constructed. It is the arena in which hearts and minds are won. Poetry, songs and ballads may seem a strange weapon with which to fight back against the mightiest empire the world has ever known, but in this case the pen has proven mightier than the sword.

Alasdair Gray summed it up nicely: ‘Scots who felt their culture threatened by London rule strove to preserve it by collections of songs that had evolved for centuries but seldom been printed.’<sup>6</sup> In the last two and a half centuries collecting together such ballads and songs of Scotland has been a task enthusiastically performed by poets such as Robert Burns, James Hogg, Sir Walter Scott and Hamish Henderson. Their own literary output proved just as important. At some of the key junctures of history our writers and poets rose to the challenge, and kept our language, culture and a sense of identity alive.

It was the poets Robert Fergusson and Robert Burns who led the fightback. The Twa Boabs’ revolutionary decision to swim against the British tide by writing their verse primarily in Scots was without doubt the finest act of Scottish resistance in the second half of the eighteenth century against the colonisation of our minds. Through the language of poetry they kept a unique sense of Scottish identity alive and visible whilst the upper classes were celebrating their new-found Britishness in pretentious displays of Anglicised diction.

After the militarism of the Napoleonic Wars, there was a brutal aftermath in the British isles. Unemployment, hunger and famine were commonplace, and in the Scottish Highlands there were barbaric clearances of the people from their own lands. A John-Bull Britishness was being actively promoted. Seditious movements against the tyranny of the British government were met with bloody violence at Peterloo in 1819 and in central Scotland in 1820.

In the face of this onslaught the three most important Scottish writers of the early nineteenth century struck back, just as Fergusson and Burns had done before them. In their literary endeavours James Hogg, John Galt, and even arch-unionist Sir Walter Scott (who in an

ironical turn of the cards acted as the executioner's cheerleader against the rebels of 1820), chose to write in the 'guid Scots tongue'.

The British rulers for their part changed tack in 1822 and began a celebration of all things Scottish, including Wallace and Bruce and the symbols of Scottish freedom – as integral components of a new British identity – and the tartanisation of Scotland had begun. A wedge was being driven between Scottish identity and Scottish freedom.

During the first world war a British identity was taken for granted: it would have been a brave person who tried to contradict this. The effects of this were still being felt long after the war, and, despite a resurgent Home Rule movement and revolutionary leanings around the time of Red Clydeside – or perhaps because of the two – the first bona fide Scottish cultural renaissance of the twentieth century sprang into being.

A group of important Scottish writers, including Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, R.B. Cunningham Grahame, Lewis Grassic Gibbon and Naomi Mitchison, emerged after the first world war. The poet Hugh MacDiarmid was without doubt the central figure among them. Armed with an old Scots Dictionary MacDiarmid led a defiant cultural fightback against Britishness, using poetry written in Lallans – a literary Scots language he single-handedly resurrected and brought into the age of modernity.

In 1926 MacDiarmid published 'A Drunk Man Looks At The Thistle' – possibly the most important and influential poem ever written in the Scots language. This epic poem of 2,685 lines examined many aspects of Scottish life, Scottish identity, and Scotland's place in the world. MacDiarmid – who was expelled from the SNP for being a communist and expelled from the Communist Party for being a Scottish nationalist – articulated his own philosophy in the poem's most famous lines:

I'll ha'e nae hauf-way hoose, but aye be whaur  
 Extremes meet – it's the only way I ken  
 To dodge the curst conceit o' bein' richt  
 That damns the vast majority o' men.<sup>7</sup>

MacDiarmid declared cultural war on all things English and even listed Anglophobia as one of his interests in *Who's Who*. Two years later MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn and R.B. Cunninghame Graham were involved in founding the National Party of Scotland, which later

evolved into the modern SNP. Cunninghame Grahame went on to become president of the SNP in 1934. Yet MacDiarmid, Gunn and Cunninghame Grahame – like Mitchison and Grassie Gibbon – all identified themselves as socialists.

After the second world war it was the turn of the ‘Rose Street poets’. MacDiarmid was still at the centre of things but was joined in his cultural onslaught against Anglicisation by Hamish Henderson, Ian Crichton Smith, Sorley MacLean, Sydney Goodsir Smith, Robert Garioch and Norman MacCaig. This group of poets countered the all-pervasive British identity promoted in the post-war period with texts written mainly in Scots and Gaelic. Their patriotism and their radicalism were never far from the surface. It cannot be stressed enough how much the modern sense of a Scots identity has been sustained and preserved by poets and writers – and that the Scots language (in all its forms) has been at the heart of this.

#### POST-DEVOLUTION CULTURE

In the mid-late 1990s, from the housing schemes of Falkirk emerged a band called Arab Strap. Like The Proclaimers they were essentially a duo who chose to sing/drawl/growl their lyrics in their native Scots tongue. Arab Strap were two highly literate raddges, arch hedonists, rooted in the working-class culture and community they sprang from. Their influence has hung like a guiding light over Scottish music for the last ten years.

The choice by Arab Strap and The Proclaimers (if there was a choice) to sing in Scots has encouraged others to have the confidence to do likewise. In 2008 I presented a weekly music and culture show on Radio Free Scotland.<sup>8</sup> Every week I would play Scottish acts, seeking out bands who sang in a distinct Scots tongue. There was no shortage of talent. Some of my favourite Scottish singers and bands of 2008 – Glasvegas, ballboy, The Just Joans, King Creosote, Half Cousin, Dumb Instrument, James Yorkston, Colin McIntyre, Foxface, The Pictish Trail, De Rosa, Jocky Venkataraman, The Twilight Sad, Swimmer One, The View, Mouse Eat Mouse, Albannach, Withered Hand, Found, Madhat, Popup, The Bum-Clocks, Over The Wall, Kid Canavarel, Solareye (and of course The Proclaimers, plus Malcolm Middleton and Aidan Moffat, formerly of Arab Strap) – all sing in their guid Scots tongues.

There is another intriguing dimension to this. Gaelic is spoken by just over 1 per cent of the Scottish population, and as a first language

mainly in the Outer Hebrides. Yet in 2006 the long-standing Edinburgh-based anarcho-punk collective Oi Polloi released *Ar Cànan, Ar Ceòl, Ar-a-mach* – a punk album recorded entirely in Gaelic. Oi Polloi encourage their fans to learn the language. As a result, the staff at the new Gaelic College in Skye have now become accustomed to spiky-haired punks enrolling to study there. The punk band Mill a h-uile Rud not only record exclusively in Gaelic, and promote the language on their website, but even refuse to do interviews unless they are conducted in Gaelic.

The Gaelic revival is still in its infancy but it's already visible. In 2008 the BBC launched BBC Alba – a new dedicated Gaelic digital TV channel. A critically acclaimed Gaelic feature film – *The Inaccessible Pinnacle* – was given a cinema release in 2007. Gaelic is no longer in terminal decline, and even has an aura of cool about it among a section of creatively aware young people.

Interesting new post-devolution cultural mutations have been taking place in literature too. Post-devolution novels have appeared, brimming with linguistic experimentation in the various Scots tongues. Take this arbitrary selection of post-devolution novels: James Robertson's *The Fanatic*, Laura Hird's *Born Free*, John Aberdein's *Amande's Bed*, Alan Bissett's *Boy Racers*, Alan Warner's *The Man Who Walks* and James Kelman's *Kieron Smith, Boy*. They are all fine works of literature, they are all written in Scots, yet the Scots of each novel varies wildly from the others and is specific to the book's time and place. The language of these six novels is drawn, respectively, from seventeenth-century Edinburgh, modern Edinburgh, 1950s Doric, Falkirk, Oban and Glaswegian.

Matthew Fitt's sci-fi novel *But'n'Ben A Go-Go* goes even further. It is written entirely in Scots, utilising almost every known variant of Scots, past and present, from the Northern Isles to the Doric, from the Gaelic to the urban Scots of the central belt. Matthew Fitt and James Robertson have been busy writing and translating books into Scots for pre-school children, as well as promoting the Scots language around primary and secondary schools. This augurs well for the future. Graphic novels have also begun appearing written in Scots.

While modern Scottish writers are always mentioned in dispatches for utilising, defending and promoting the Scot language, it is often forgot that they stand on the shoulders of earlier folk musicians such as Billy Connolly, Matt McGinn, Ewan McColl and Dick Gaughan. Unlike in the world of pop music – which is/was controlled by conser-

vative Anglocentric radio stations such as Radio 1 – you wouldn't get far in the world of Scottish folk music if you sung in a generic South of England accent.

There is another interesting phenomenon that is worth mentioning in passing. Post-devolution, at a grassroots level, there has been an exponential increase in the number of cultural festivals, music festivals, film festivals, literary festivals and localised community festivals. These are pretty much unconnected events. But collectively they could be interpreted as a loose grassroots cultural network that spans the entire country, and which involves tens of thousands of volunteers and participants.

#### FAILING THE COUNTER-CULTURE

For five years, from 1999 to 2004, the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) was on the rise. One MSP elected in the 1999 Scottish Parliament elections, six in 2003. This was a hugely significant electoral breakthrough. In Glasgow the profile of the party's first MSP, Tommy Sheridan, was being used to build bases of support across the city for an anti-capitalist party not seen since the days of the Red Clydesiders. But with the benefit of hindsight there was a deep-rooted problem – inherited from the party's Trotskyist origins – which created a form of tunnel vision when it came to the questions of Scottish independence and Scottish identity.

Collectively, the SSP were afraid of anything to do with Scottish identity, the Scots and Gaelic languages, or traditional Scottish culture. The SSP shrank back from the symbols of Scottish nationhood – such as the Saltire, the Flower of Scotland or even William Wallace. It refused to participate in events which commemorated important events in Scottish history, such as the annual commemoration of the signing of the Declaration of Arbroath, and the annual marches which marked the execution of William Wallace, the massacre of Glencoe, the 1820 Radical Uprising or Culloden. Collectively, the SSP were afraid of embracing a positive sense of Scottish identity, afraid of what they wrongly saw as 'capitulating to nationalism'. And crucially, between 1999 and 2007 there was no theoretical understanding developing within the SSP of the concept of civic nationalism.

In May 2003, when the six Scottish Socialist MSPs were elected, the SSP's political strategist Alan McCombes wrote a keynote document assessing the changing political landscape. It dismissed the John

Swinney-led SNP as ‘a tartan version of New Labour, desperate to win respectability in the eyes of big business’, and mistakenly assumed that ‘any change at the top of the SNP is likely to be one of presentation rather than substance’.<sup>9</sup> The document did, however, correctly note that: ‘because the SNP leadership (then under John Swinney) did not push the independence message as forcefully as in previous elections, Scotland’s constitutional future was not at the heart of this election.’<sup>10</sup>

What this strategy document did not anticipate was that the SNP would learn from the 2003 setback when they lost a quarter of their seats in Holyrood. They reinstated the popular and able Alex Salmond as party leader, and then spent the next four years fighting on a populist left-of-centre social programme, with Scottish independence and Scottish identity at its very heart.

It was the SSP who did not learn from their own analysis. The party repeatedly refused to endorse any form of outward public campaigning on the question of Scottish independence – which played a part in their losing most of their support to the SNP. There was one solitary exception – on the opening day of the new Scottish Parliament building at Holyrood – when a fairly large SSP-initiated protest rally was held on Calton Hill in support of a Scottish Republic. It wasn’t to be repeated.

If the SSP were veering away from publicly campaigning on Scottish independence, what chance was there of the party engaging on the questions of language, culture and identity? In the 2003 SSP strategy document there was even an astonishing claim made that in Scotland ‘the national question is not associated with language, religion or ethnicity’.<sup>11</sup> There was absolutely no mention made of either a cohesive cultural strategy or an approach to the question of Scottish identity.

The Scottish Greens were even less enthusiastic about promoting Scottish independence or a positive sense of Scottish identity. Like the SSP they have substituted a bland generic rootless internationalism for an inclusive outward-looking sense of Scottish identity.

The SNP changed tack and won hearts and minds. In the 2007 Scottish Parliament Elections the SSP and Scottish Greens were completely out-flanked, as were the unionist parties, and for the first time ever the SNP became the party of government in Scotland. The SSP and Scottish Greens were routed by the SNP, losing 11 of their 13 MSPs. In the SSP’s case there was an additional complicating

factor. It had put so much stock in the celebrity, charisma and reputation of one individual, Tommy Sheridan, that his political demise after a court case about his personal life led to a bitter split and recriminations. But the roots of the demise of the SSP were evident long before the SSP's fallout with Tommy Sheridan erupted in November 2004. The party's inability to get a majority of its party to endorse campaigning on Scottish independence – in all its cultural and political manifestations – was central to this. The SNP stepped in and mopped up.

The SNP for their part have always embraced a positive sense of Scottish identity. The party promotes Scottish culture and encourages Scots to learn about our own complex history. Nor have the SNP any dogmatic fears of embracing the symbols of Scottish identity, such as the Saltire flag, the Scottish National Anthem, St Andrew's Day, and suchlike. All of this sets them apart from the others on the Scottish left, yet the party's sense of Scottish identity is neither xenophobic nor exclusive, and this is what matters. Promoting a sense of Scottish identity will not in and of itself prepare the ground for Scottish independence. Social issues come into play. But the connections between these are undoubtedly related to a sense of self-confidence. When a positive and self-confident sense of Scottish identity is forged to a desire for democratic self-government and social justice then Scottish independence will become an irresistible force.

The SNP have sussed this out. They opposed the imperialist war in Iraq from the very beginning. They have opposed nuclear weapons at Faslane since their inception, and have repeatedly said they will obstruct and oppose the replacement of Trident missiles. They have opposed a new generation of nuclear power stations being built in Scotland and seek renewable sources of energy. They have opposed the quasi-privatisation programme of school and hospital buildings through PFI and PPP programmes. They have opposed the closure of a number of Accident & Emergency facilities. They have said they would scrap the Graduation Tax and write off outstanding Student Loan repayments.

But crucially the SNP link their social programme to a sense of Scottish identity. For instance they have promised to overhaul the Scottish education system to teach the basics of Scottish history to all school children. And, more importantly, they promised to put through a Bill for an independence referendum in their first term of parliament. This is still on course for 2010.

**SCOTLAND'S POLITICS OF IDENTITY**

If we are to learn anything from this period it is that the politics of identity and self-confidence are absolutely central to any project in Scotland that seeks to increase and strengthen democracy to the point of self-government and independent statehood. The indicators look good. As the Scottish historian Tom Devine has said:

There's been a fantastic increase in our sense of Scottishness and I think that means we're a much more confident people. We are seeing now that our history, writing, architecture, painting, pop music have given us a more vigorous culture than we've had for generations.<sup>12</sup>

For the Scottish left outside the SNP a revolution in thinking is long overdue, to engage positively with the politics of identity and culture. Of necessity this would mean nothing less than reinvention. The centralised organisational structures and internal party culture inherited from a Trotskyist or Leninist past are repugnant to the majority of Scots – and always will be.

On the other hand, cultural engagement outside party structures could assist the marginalised Scottish left in learning about the nature of language, identity and culture and its place in our lives and communities. Perhaps what could be gleaned through a little humility – stepping aside from the leadership fetishisms of the past, and working alongside others in local communities to make them better places to live in, culturally, socially and economically – could help shape a reinvigorated leftist culture conducive to the rebirth of radical ideas in Scotland.

**NOTES**

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6. Gray, *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland*.
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8. Kevin Williamson, *The Scottish Patient*, Radio Free Scotland, [www.myspace.com/thescottishpatient](http://www.myspace.com/thescottishpatient).
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