

Anglo-Scottish relations - past, present and future

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Sir Malcolm Rifkind is one of the Conservative Party's most prominent spokesmen on Scotland as well as on foreign affairs. Elected MP for Edinburgh



in 1974, he began his parliamentary career as the opposition's spokesman on Scottish Affairs in 1975-76. Sir Malcolm's career in government since then comprise senior postings as Secretary of State for Scotland (1986-90), Transport (1990-92), Defence (1992-95) and Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1995-97). After an eight-year spell outside Parliament, Sir Malcolm was returned to the House of Commons in 2005 from Kensington and Chelsea and is now Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

Devolution has been the dominant theme of Anglo-Scottish relations in recent years. But constitutional questions have never been far away from any political discussion involving the two nations. The Act of Union celebrates its 300th anniversary this year and the debate about the future of the Union is as strong as ever. Some argue that Scotland would achieve greater prosperity if granted independence. Others insist that life apart from England would be unworkable. These debates have been conducted in one form or another for hundreds of years, but the Union will live on, strengthened by devolution, a shared history and common values.

There is nothing unique about the devolution debate in the United Kingdom. Within Europe, a number of similar constitutional settlements have developed in the last forty years. Spain has had to accommodate demands for autonomy from Catalonia and the Basque Country. The Northern League in Italy reflects demands for independent local decision-making. Belgium's political system has been similarly moulded to give expression to the aspirations of both Flemings and Walloons. The host of states that emerged from the ruins of the Soviet Union all sought political

independence. A Scottish longing for political power, in this respect, is no different.

The origins of devolution in Scotland are deep rooted. One can hear echoes of the contemporary devolution settlement in the words of Andrew Fletcher, a Scottish politician and strong opponent of the 1707 Act of Union which created the Kingdom of Great Britain and common parliament in Westminster. Fletcher believed that "if, instead of one, we had twelve cities in these Kingdoms possessed of equal advantages, so many centres of men, riches and power, would be much more advantageous than one". He envisaged a system that combined maximum autonomy with the benefits of a close political relationship with England. Today, Westminster remains in control of foreign policy, taxation and defence matters; the Scottish Parliament controls health and education.

However, the benefits accrued from close association with England have been mutual; the dependency has worked both ways. The British Empire, for example, was a joint venture run, not by England, but by Britain as a whole. The Scots were particularly receptive to the opportunities that emerged from Britain's position as a global power. Scottish traders, missionaries and regiments were ubiquitous. Glasgow was known as the second city of the Empire and Scottish migrants founded many settlements in the Dominions. Indeed, many Scots saw the British Empire as an 'imperial partnership' and it forged a strong political consensus on both sides of the border.

While the Empire has disappeared, the geographical fact of sharing an island off the north-west coast of Europe has not. Living in close proximity surrounded by the sea has encouraged the psychological and political assumption that sharing political institutions is only natural. It is surely inconceivable that, had both territories been part of mainland Europe, the bonds of kinship would have been so long-lived. The English language has similarly played a vital role in binding the Anglo-Scottish relationship into a Union. The nationalist parties in both Scotland and Wales emphasise native

linguistic traditions, but the reality is that language is not the political issue that it is in countries such as Belgium or Canada

Even when Scottish nationalism rears its head, its components reflect more an irritation with England than a deep-seated resentment. English condescension is the most that Scottish nationalist leaders can point to, and this explains the paucity of inspirational figures within the movement for independence.

Most important, the Union should be valued for what it represents. This is an age of fragmentation and factionalism. The fall of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia have, in Europe, resulted in a plethora of new states and a resurgence in ethnic hatred and warfare. Unfortunately, the trend, as we see in Kosovo, Chechnya and a series of disputes in the Caucasus, shows no sign of abating. The disintegration of nations is destabilising and dangerous. But the United Kingdom is a testament to the transcending of historic rivalry and the establishment of a free and equal citizenry under common political institutions.

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Britain's unity demonstrates that nationalities do not necessarily need states. An Anglo-Scottish divorce would send a discouraging message to the world. Rejection would be seen to prevail over solidarity; division over unity. Indeed, democracy and citizenship rest upon notions of reconciliation and the brokering of cooperation amongst those who are, in some way, different.

Another significant factor militating against Scottish independence is that it would hurt employment, prosperity and business confidence. The United Kingdom embodies both a recognition that mutual interest has been a component of enlightened self interest, and, more broadly, that an ideal is achievable, one in which nationhood, tolerance and liberty live alongside one another in tranquillity.