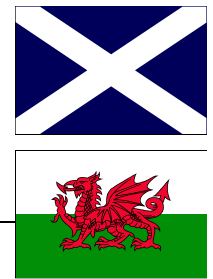


Scotland and Wales: Houses of their Own



On September 11, 1997, Scotland won the right to establish a legislature of its own and, in effect, bring about a devolution of powers from London to Edinburgh. Seventy-four per cent of the people supported the establishment of a new Scottish parliament, a 129-seat body with wide—but not exclusive—powers to govern Scotland’s five million people. A week later in Wales, 50.3 per cent gave their approval to a referendum supporting the establishment of a Welsh legislature. The 60-member Welsh assembly is due to convene at the turn of the century in Cardiff. For the first time in almost 300 years, Great Britain will cease to be a unitary state and will take on the structure of a federal system of government, not unlike Canada’s.

Many people see these referendums as the natural culmination of a long struggle for autonomy in the face of what many Scots perceive as indifference or even scorn on the part of England, the dominant culture. This nationalist cause is deeply rooted in the histories of both countries. Seven-hundred years before this referendum, in 1297, William Wallace of Scotland defeated the English at the Battle of Stirling Bridge. This historic and symbolic event was recently brought to the forefront of popular culture with the release of the movie *Braveheart*. For many Scottish people, the decisive result of the referendum in favour of devolution is an expression of nationalist sentiment and the modern-day equivalent of a nationalist victory on the battlefield.

A different historical metaphor explains in part the relationship of Wales to England. In 1969, following custom, Queen Elizabeth II presented her son, Prince Charles, as the new Prince of Wales, in a ceremony that traditionally takes place within the ramparts of Carnarvon Castle in Wales. As the Queen’s representative and speaking from Wales, Charles pledged “I, Charles, Prince of Wales, do become your liege man of life and limb and of earthly worship. In faith and truth, I will bear unto thee, to live and die against all manner of foes.” This ritual dates to the conquest of Wales by the English in 1536 when the *Act of Union* declared Wales “forever and henceforth incorporated and annexed” by England. The narrow margin of victory in the Welsh referendum was an indicator of a significant division among the Welsh on the nationalist issue. Although Wales appears to be strongly united, a split between the north and south and urban and rural areas on the question of unity is evident. William Hague, the leader of the British Conservative Party—and Secretary for Wales in the cabinet of the previous prime minister, John Major—said, “We’ve seen the country split down the middle.”

The reactions to devolution reflect a significant division in British politics in general. Edinburgh’s newspapers proclaimed “A Nation Again” and “A New Dawn,” while William Hague lamented the “. . . sad night for the future of Scotland and the United Kingdom.” In promoting devolution, Prime Minister Tony Blair is hoping to defuse calls for Scottish independence. When the devolution plan was first unveiled, it was described as a scheme to recognize Scotland’s “distinct identity” while keeping the Scottish within the United Kingdom. Scottish legislators will only have legislative control of local concerns, such as health, education, and municipal government; however, there are those who feel that Blair’s program will fan the flames of regional nationalism and lead to the eventual breakup of the United Kingdom. Many political observers in Canada are now drawing comparisons between Scotland and Quebec. For students of history, it is perhaps another proof that political movements rarely exist in isolation: that for most, there are precedents elsewhere in the world.