



The Scotland-UN Committee

Introduction and References

Prologue – the Prehistory

The Parliament of the Kingdom of Scots is an institution of venerable antiquity. Mentioned in written records as far back as the year 1174 under King William I “The Lion” (*“Dunc tint li reis Willame sun plenier parlament”*), it asserted its power on innumerable occasions against foreign aggression as against attempts by the Crown to exercise absolute authority. This ranged from running the country for years while the King was in English captivity, meanwhile upholding the alliance with France, to taking the initiative during the constitutional wars of the 17th century. It even set up a special committee “to wage war against the King” to assert the supremacy of the Community of the Realm of Scotland against the royal claim of divine right to rule.

Unfortunately, it was just such a claim to which Scotland was subjected by the very shortsighted Union with England, where the idea of a royal divine right still prevailed, albeit now transferred to the English Parliament that went into abeyance on 1 May 1707. The further transfer of that alleged absolute sovereignty to the new United Kingdom Parliament had no basis in law or logic, nor did the Scottish Parliament have the authority to transfer any such absolute power to its successor. It was based simply on a totally erroneous assumption south of the Border that the brand-new joint legislature of the brand-new United Kingdom was the English Parliament continuing.

The unpopularity of the Union within Scotland, and the autocratic manner in which the English majority behaved towards Scotland, within the next half century provoked four armed uprisings that could be suppressed only with military force, accompanied by barbaric atrocities by government troops. The stone outcrop on which the Jacobite standard was raised at Glenfinnan in 1745 still bears the inscription declaring the end of the Union with England to be one of the main objectives of the rising.

The attempts to restore the Scottish Government and Parliament, generally only for the running of Scottish affairs within the Union, continued at intervals with increasing intensity over the following two centuries, as the power and influence of the British world empire rose to its peak around 1880 and then went into an accelerating decline, hastened by two world wars. 34 measures in the Westminster Parliament for the recall of the Scottish legislature were killed by procedural chicanery, or simply voted down “democratically” by the huge English majority in an atmosphere of jeers and contempt for Scotland and all things Scottish. That era came to an abrupt end after the Thatcher regime in 1979 arrogantly “repealed” a home rule Act after it had been adopted by the constitutionally supreme Scottish people in a referendum

This time the gloves came off

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had gone a step too far by purporting to override a perfectly legitimate majority decision by the Scottish people in the 1979 referendum. The details of that orgy of manipulation and corruption, recorded while the events were still fresh, can be read here in the 1979 documentation of the event entitled [The Government of Scotland in the Light of the Scotland Act](#).

A more concise survey and statement of the sovereignty of the Scottish people is contained in a critique of the referendum experience: [After the '79 – book review](#). Written at the invitation of the editors of the Edinburgh review Cencrastus, and published in its issue no. 11 at New Year 1983,

it advocated unilateral action by the Scots to implement their own democratic decision.

The Scottish reaction to Thatcher's arrogant *coup d'état* in defiance of the most basic constitutional principles was at first stunned, and then a wave of boiling anger spread across the country. The atmosphere of the time can be sensed in John McGill's tribute to his late Scotland-UN founder colleague [Willie McRae](#), who was shot dead under still unexplained circumstances on a lonely highland road on 6 April 1985.

It was against this background that a group of Scots resolved to take the case of self-determination for Scotland to the United Nations and the international community generally. [The Scotland-UN Committee - the Story in Brief](#) provides a summary of its activities right through to the historic conclusion of its work and the restoration of the Scottish Parliament and Government. A more concise version can be read in [Devolution and the Labour Myth](#), which also provides some additional details. A full account must await the release of the records of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Cabinet Office.

The campaign expands at home and abroad

Scotland-UN initiated and legitimised its activities by drawing up a petition, finally signed by more than 300,000 Scots, requesting it to take the issue of self-government to the United Nations and the international authorities generally. The petition sheets were lodged with UN HQ New York along with a document putting the Scottish case. The following year a detailed 99-page dossier with the title Scotland's Claim of Right to Self-Determination, compiled by a Scotland-UN expert committee, was sent to the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva as well as being circulated to other international institutions and every national government in the world individually. An unanswered [Petition to the Queen](#) cleared the way for action at international level.

These activities were carried on within the overall framework of the campaign for the restoration of democratic government in Scotland. Members of the Scotland-UN group were also very active in the Campaign for a Scottish Parliament (CSP) and other home-rule organisations, in addition to Scotland-UN's own activities at home and abroad. The proposal to hold a Scottish Constitutional Convention, in premises already booked at Edinburgh University, was one of a number of Scotland-UN initiatives in 1979. A Blue Paper was circulated to all Scottish local and regional authorities, but was not proceeded with at the time due to an inadequate response.

Four years later, however, the idea had spread, and so the editors of Radical Scotland magazine invited Scotland-UN to expand on the subject. James Wilkie's article entitled [A Scottish Constitutional Convention: the door to the future](#), printed in the magazine's Dec 1983/Jan 1984 issue, explained Scotland-UN's ideas. It not only dealt with the constitutional issues involved, and the justification for unilateral Scottish action in an international context, but also laid out the structures and procedures that were later followed by the Convention in the course of its work.

While seeking concrete action at international level, Scotland-UN published some of the constitutional know-how garnered through contact with leading foreign specialists in a series of papers written for wider distribution to a more general and less intellectual readership. One typical example is [Scotland's Parliament - the Right of Recall by the People](#), which restated the justification for unilateral action by the Scots by simply setting up their own Parliament without reference to anyone else.

The international campaign was stepped up on every available occasion, mostly just with the purpose of making Scotland's case known in the most important circles worldwide, especially in the United States, where a number of S-UN members and supporters were active at fairly high level: [Appeal to the US Congress to support Scotland's cause](#). Wherever possible, however, diplomatic action was undertaken where there was a possibility of an immediate effect on the Scottish situation.

The earliest such action, in 1980, was a direct confrontation with the Thatcher regime in London, which in its search for "a final solution of the Scottish question" had attempted to obtain international approval of its assertion that there was no demand for regional government (devolution) within the UK. Scotland-UN totally destroyed that assertion with a powerful diplomatic campaign within the

Council of Europe, backed up by a pointedly worded document that the CoE Secretary General circulated to every member government: [Memorandum to the Council of Europe 1980](#)

One rather audacious move, from which only long-term effects were anticipated, but in the short term brought Scottish affairs once again into full public view before the world authority, is described in [The Stone of Destiny at the United Nations](#). The short- and medium-term success of this enterprise took the Committee's breath away and strengthened its determination to exploit every similar opportunity that availed itself on the international scene. This tactic had already paid off, for example when three Scotland-UN representatives were enabled to put Scotland's case at a week-long conference by special invitation at United Nations HQ Geneva.

Meantime the targeting of the increasing number of international institutions gathered pace. In Europe the circumstances of the late Cold War period were hardly propitious but improving. One dramatic development was the emergence of a new force on the international scene in the shape of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which later became the OSCE and is now Europe's largest political institution. The intensive research that this activity involved enabled Scotland-UN to issue definitive statements of Scotland's rights like [Self-Determination - what does International Law say?](#) And to back it up with an equally authoritative statement of how Scotland qualifies for the right: [Scotland's Status as a Nation](#).

By this time Scotland-UN was being run on the lines of professional international diplomacy, which demanded careful situation assessments before undertaking any diplomatic project. One example is the 1986 [Assessment of the International Situation](#), intended for S-UN internal use only, but still providing a fascinating historical perspective of a world that has now disappeared.

Scotland-UN relentlessly targeted the CSCE/OSCE, along with other international institutions, with progress reports on the government of Scotland and the many sins committed by the Thatcher regime there. The "saturation bombing" of individual member states doubtless contributed to the CSCE's emphatic support for the principle of self-determination of peoples at its Third Follow-up-Conference in Vienna in 1986/89. The relevant CSCE statement remains a milestone to this day:

"[The participating states] confirm that, by virtue of the principle of equal rights and self determination of peoples, and in conformity with the relevant provisions of the [Helsinki] Final Act, all peoples always have the right, in full freedom, to determine, when and as they wish, their internal and external political status, without external interference, and to pursue as they wish their political, economic and cultural development. (Questions Relating to Security in Europe, No. 4)"

Then came the final breakthrough

However, as Scotland-UN reported in its [Submission on Scotland's Right to Self-Determination](#) to the subsequent CSCE meetings in Paris (1989) and Moscow (1991), there was every indication that London had not the slightest intention of falling into line with the international constitutional norms. It was clear that, if we were going to make any real progress, we would have to go to the negotiating table with a weapon in our hands.

The opportunity to do just that arrived as the Communist system in Eastern Europe was breaking up during the early 1990s, and the international system was in upheaval. The UN grasped the opportunity by holding the largest-ever international conference, [The United Nations World Conference on Human Rights](#), with more than 10,000 participants from all over the globe. Scotland-UN was determined that Scotland would be represented in some form, although it was impossible to obtain a slot on the meeting agenda itself. And so a simple public relations exercise was adopted, with a printed statement setting out the Scottish case in a form that could be distributed by the Scotland-UN representative on the spot and attract support from governments and non-governmental organisations represented there.

The world was teetering on the brink of a breakthrough and, sure enough, the moment for which Scotland-UN had waited arrived after 14 years of relentless and determined campaigning. The difference was that there was now a body of international law governing Scotland's case, giving the opportunity to wield a legal and political weapon instead of simply making representations. The opportunity to exploit the new legal and political situation opened with the Council of Europe's

Meeting of Heads of State and Government in Vienna on 8/9 October 1993.

Armed with advance intelligence, Scotland-UN set out to influence the outcome of the European Summit by means of an intensive campaign of discreet diplomacy backed up by a succinct document on the lines of a modern Declaration of Arbroath: [The CoE Memorandum 1993 – the decisive breakthrough](#). The operation was an outstanding success in every respect despite determined sabotage attempts by London, and the Labour Party in particular.

The recommendation in the Scotland-UN Memorandum that the Council of Europe should set up a system to enforce observance of the international standards of pluralist democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human and civic rights was in fact adopted by the CoE, which developed a suitable monitoring system over the next few years. And the examination of the UK's democratic system that started in June 1996 resulted in a damning verdict on its shortcomings.

Scotland-UN now had a two-edged sword in its hand. In the first place, there was no way that the system of governing Scotland (and Wales) by Secretary of State could stand up to examination in the light of the international legal standards of democracy that were now about to be enforced, by international sanctions if necessary.

Politically, the situation was even more dramatic. All the international organisations were at that stage concentrating on forcing the ex-Communist reform states of Eastern Europe to adopt the international standards of pluralist democracy, the rule of law and respect for human and civic rights. There was, of course, no way they could do that if they ignored blatant infringements of the same norms by an established Western state.

The UK had to fall into line or be subjected to the same sanctions as the East European countries, because the then government of Scotland was cutting right across international policy at a major turning point in European and indeed world history.

On both counts, therefore, the UK was caught in a pincer grip, and the Council of Europe was only representing all the other international authorities that would have been obliged to intervene if the CoE had not already done so.

The UK authorities, and the Labour Party in particular, have done everything possible to try to conceal this background to devolution and the restoration of democratic systems in Scotland and Wales. A large part of the story can nevertheless be pieced together from archives of the Council of Europe that have been released to date.

Research by American supporters of Scotland-UN brought to light a number of source documents already cleared by the Council of Europe that broaden the picture and more than substantiate Scotland-UN's account of how the restoration of democratic government in Scotland and Wales came about. The overall picture revealed by these [Source References](#) is not yet complete, and must await the opening of the records of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Cabinet Office amongst others, but the evidence is quite sufficient to substantiate the Scotland-UN presentation of events.

The UK Conservative government under John Major was baffled by this assault from a completely unexpected quarter, and was no doubt thankful that this hot potato bounced onto the lap of Tony Blair's Labour administration after the 1997 election.

Blair had had no plans to do anything about the home rule for Scotland that Labour had promised for 100 years with no intention of ever delivering. This time, there was no way out, and devolution had to head Blair's government programme – a situation that he described as “a damnable nuisance.”

The Council of Europe helped him to clarify his mind a few weeks in advance of the election by issuing a statement of the sanctions that would be used against any European state that refused to adhere to the international standards of pluralist democracy. And the Scotland-UN Committee went for the kill by issuing a detailed assertion of [The Sovereignty of the People of Scotland](#).

The Scotland-UN Committee remained very active over the period of establishing the restored Scottish governmental system, including direct involvement in the 1997 referendum campaign. While this mostly entailed participating in the campaign organised by the Scottish National Party (the Labour and Conservative parties were conspicuous by their absence from the streets during the campaign), there were also individual Scotland-UN initiatives. The shattering size of the Yes majority in the referendum put the restoration of democracy in Scotland beyond question, and justified the 18 years of exhausting struggle by Scotland-UN.

With its principal objective now fulfilled, the Committee remained in being for several years until the revived Scottish Parliament and Government could be properly "run in". Since the new national institutions were initially kept under close control by London, it was necessary to retain a Scottish institution with international connections and the will to use them if it should become necessary.

The necessity was shown on numerous occasions, because the London stranglehold on the new Scottish Parliament and Government (initially called an "Executive"), and the insulting transfer of devolved decision making back to Westminster under the so-called Sewel motions, was a fair indication that, without international compulsion and the threat of sanctions, devolution would never have happened. And so Scotland-UN continued to act as Scotland's eyes and ears abroad on important issues.

One of them that involved a great deal of activity was fishing policy. Having got nowhere with polite representations to the EU, Scotland-UN finally sent a blistering [Letter to the Fisheries Commissioner of the European Union](#) spelling out the reality of the devastating damage the EU had caused to Scotland and demanding a remedy. As usual, the EU neither replied nor acknowledged receipt, but it did in time make some cosmetic changes to its fisheries policy that altered nothing of substance.

The Scotland-UN Committee was formally wound up in 2007, its mission accomplished with the restoration of the Scottish Parliament and Government. It thereby presented the Scottish National Party with the key to the door for its independence goal. That goal is not one that can be achieved by international diplomacy alone, but demands a massive declaration of purpose from the Scots themselves. That year the SNP formed the Scottish Government, and there was now an assurance that it would function without constantly looking over its shoulder in the direction of London as all its predecessors had done.

And so the Scotland-UN Committee quietly bowed out of the political scene, having served its purpose more than well and left a lasting legacy. Until independence happens it remains the one and only Scottish home-rule institution in 300 years to have concrete results to show for its efforts.

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The Scotland-UN Committee was active from July 1979 till being wound up in mid 2007, a period of 28 years, with its peak activity leading up to the reconstitution of the Scottish Parliament and Government in 1999. The Committee played a leading and very decisive role in the devolution process, since it was not only the source of some of the more revolutionary ideas on the Scottish political structure, but principally because its incisive international diplomatic campaign, pressed home with utter determination backed up by first-hand diplomatic expertise of a high order, was what broke the ice of three centuries and finally brought about action on the restoration of democratic government in Scotland - and also Wales. Without it, nothing of what followed would have happened.

In terms of results achieved the Scotland-UN Committee is unique in the history of the Scottish home rule movement over the past 300 years. It is not practicable to list the entire range of material covering the 18 years of its main activity, much of which is repetitive or confidential, and most of its verbal diplomatic negotiations are unrecorded and/or still diplomatically sensitive. But the cross-section presented on this site gives a rounded picture of its activities, ideas, and contribution to the future government of Scotland as well as laying the foundation for independence at a future date.

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