

Scotland and Europe: a Union of Ideas. Scotland House, Brussels, 15 July 2014
Europe and the beginning of Scottish sovereignty
Dauvit Broun

European countries that have achieved their independence in the twentieth century have often traced their origins as peoples to the early medieval period or beyond, especially if in the modern era their national identity is defined primarily by language. In these cases the beginnings of their sovereignty is already anticipated by the continuous existence of that people from ancient times. The nation is presented as an intrinsically independent entity whose origins and history is essentially distinct and separate from other nations. This does not work for Scotland. True, a uniquely distinct people—the Picts—once thrived in the early medieval period in most of what is now Scotland. After the year 900, however, ‘Picts’ disappear from contemporary sources. This does not mean that Pictish people themselves suffered some terrible catastrophe that killed them off. It seems, instead, that they became speakers of Gaelic—a language shared with Ireland—and Pictish died out.

Although it is not possible to portray Scotland’s origins in terms of a continuing ethnic distinctiveness from ancient times, it is not difficult to see that Scotland has a long history as a kingdom with Pictish roots. Up to a point this also means that the beginnings of Scottish sovereignty is already anticipated by the fact that Scotland was a self-governing entity a millennium ago. The problem with this as a sufficient explanation of the beginning of Scottish sovereignty is that, before the thirteenth century, kingdoms were much more temporary than language-groups. Even if we confine ourselves to what is now Scotland, and look at the ninth to thirteenth centuries, at least four kingdoms emerged and then vanished: Strathclyde, Galloway, Argyll and the kingdom of Mann and the Isles. A fundamental aspect of what changed in the thirteenth century—making kingdoms as enduring as language-groups—was that the idea of sovereignty

itself had emerged for the first time in a way that we would begin to recognise today. In the case of Scotland the new durability of kingdoms was demonstrated earlier than anywhere else. Despite being completely conquered twice by Edward I of England (in 1296 and 1304), the flame of Scottish independence could not be extinguished and the kingdom re-emerged more vigorously than ever. Scotland also shows more clearly than elsewhere that this new idea of sovereignty was not simply or chiefly a result of autonomous development. Instead, it arose directly out of a more intense experience of being European. Scotland was not alone in this, of course. Because the notion of ethnic continuity is not relevant in the case of Scotland, however, the importance of a new sense of being European as the source of Scottish sovereignty is particularly obvious. As a result, the example of Scotland makes it much easier to understand this crucial phase of European history, and to see how national sovereignty and European integration were, in origin, two sides of the same coin.

It has to be admitted that the easiest way to see the emerging idea of national sovereignty in European terms is not to focus on a new sense of being European, but to take a comparative look at changes in the nature of kingdoms. The emergence of central administration within kingdoms is a key theme in traditional national histories. This began to be a widespread phenomenon across Europe in the early 1200s. As a result, it has been observed that ‘governments were increasingly governing continuously rather than in brief spurts’. The emergence of continuous government meant that royal authority became routinely accessible for those sections of society with property and privileges. This can be seen in Scotland, of course. It also coincided with the emergence of a new juridical concept of legitimate public authority. Previously it was held that all public authority was derived ultimately from the Emperor. About the year 1200 a new idea took root—namely, that a king was emperor in his

kingdom. This can readily be recognised as the seed of what became the concept of national sovereignty. According to this approach, national sovereignty was a consequence of the development of central government in kingdoms across Europe.

But national sovereignty also involves a kingdom defining itself in relation to other kingdoms. It may seem obvious to us that a kingdom should see itself as of the same status as any other kingdom. Scotland in this period is a good example of how this was not the case. It is in this context that we can see that a new sense of being European was crucial, not just for Scotland, but for the very beginning of the idea of national sovereignty itself. I would also argue that it also helps to explain why kings and those they governed began to aspire to centralisation and continuous government. It was (as we will see) something that they had already begun to experience at a pan-European level.

Let us begin with the claim that kings did not necessarily regard themselves as equal to other kings. There can be no doubt, for example, that Alexander I king of Scots (who reigned between 1107 and 1124) did not see himself as a king of the top rank. On his seal—a crucial symbol of his authority attached to everything written in his name—he is represented without a crown. It is clear, in fact, that he was a client of the king of England. It is equally clear, however, that he regarded himself as completely in charge of his kingdom, without interference from anyone else. This may seem to us to be contradicted by his subordination to another king. But this would be anachronistic. At this stage it was generally assumed that kingdoms were domestically autonomous entities. It was inconceivable that a superior king would routinely intrude on the internal affairs of a lesser king.

Something had changed, however, by about the year 1250. The first Scottish king to be depicted on his seal wearing a crown is Alexander III, who became

king in 1249. He was only seven years old, so this cannot have been something that he insisted on personally. It must have been promoted by those who were governing Scotland in his name. Scottish leaders at the time were so keen that Alexander III should have all the trappings of kingship that, in 1251, they asked the pope for the rite of coronation and anointment. A king who was anointed with holy oil, as well as crowned, was a king in the fullest sense known to Latin Christendom. The pope refused (due to English pressure); nevertheless, the pope also emphasised that, *de facto*, Scotland was a kingdom like any other. But the Scottish leadership had not waited for the pope's permission to portray the boy king as God's anointed. In Alexander III's inauguration they remodelled the ceremony in two ways. First, they moved the enthronement from the moothill of Scone—the traditional site—to a prominent cross in the graveyard at Scone Abbey. Second, they re-enacted the passage in the Book of Kings where Jehu becomes king when he is recognised by the people as the Lord's Anointed by throwing their cloaks at his feet. Not only was the kingdom's elite the main audience for Alexander III's inauguration, but they took part in the drama by casting clothing at the boy king's feet. Here, therefore, we have an example of how a kingdom's elite now thought it was essential to assert their autonomy by portraying their king as fully equal to any other king. Domestic autonomy was now linked in their minds to external status.

It is important to emphasise what was new about this, and what was not. Kings had always been the ultimate authority within their kingdom—but this had been taken for granted and was generally an unspoken assumption. Now it was made conscious and asserted. A natural explanation would be that there had been an external threat to their domestic autonomy. Was this external threat the king of England? Almost certainly not. The first king of England who actively sought to undermine Scotland's domestic autonomy was Edward I in 1291.

The Scottish kingdom's domestic autonomy had, however, been systematically threatened in another context: the Church. It is important to remember that, in the middle ages, the Church was the whole of society. It was (and is) the body of Christ. For centuries it had been controlled by kings and, at a more local level, the nobility. Bishops were either part of royal households or attached to major royal churches, and the clergy were drawn from locally powerful families. Pope Leo IX (who reigned between 1049 and 1054) and his successors sought to change this as part of a wider programme of reform. In order to make sure that worship was conducted properly (as they saw it), and that people led Christian lives, it was felt to be essential that church leadership at all levels be taken out of secular control. The ultimate objective was a hierarchy of obedience from pope to parish. In the next century Latin Christendom—the majority of Europe—developed an unprecedented degree of uniform government and law as well as shared norms and experiences. This was neither royal government nor national culture, and so can too readily be overlooked as the beginning of central government and common culture as we know it. What I would emphasise is that in Europe in the twelfth century, with the possible exception of England, centralised administration was a new experience, and a shared pattern of life a new aspiration across Latin Christendom. I would argue that this experience of central government as part of the Church was crucial for the development of royal government and standardised 'national' laws and customs in the thirteenth century.

There was, indeed, a direct link between the emergence of a pan-European structure of government under the papacy and a heightened consciousness of the status of kingdoms. If the hierarchy of obedience from the pope to parish was to be achieved, it was necessary to remove any doubts or ambiguities about each level in the chain of authority. One of the most contentious problems was to establish the level immediately below the pope. Kings by and large were ready

to accept that the pope should naturally have ultimate authority in spiritual affairs. They were keen, however, to have their kingdoms recognised as the next level, either by having an archbishop for the kingdom, or (if there was more than one archbishop) to designate one of them as primate. There were many long lasting disputes in the twelfth century before a fully developed structure of government from Rome to the localities was established. One of the longest running was about Scotland's status.

It began disastrously for Scotland. One of the earliest mechanisms adopted by Pope Leo IX for bringing order to Latin Christendom as a whole was to hold regional church councils which he presided over in person. But the pope could not be everywhere. Another of his innovations was the creation of legates who could embody papal authority at a specific time and place. In 1072 a council was convened in England under the authority of a legate with the aim of deciding the archbishop of Canterbury's claim to be primate of England. It was determined that the archbishop of Canterbury would have primacy over the other English archbishop, the archbishop of York. The sting in the tail for Scotland was that, despite the fact that no-one from Scotland was present, it was declared that all Scottish bishops would be under the archbishop of York. It is not clear how far the archbishop of York at the time attempted to put this into effect. But his successor certainly did, however. As soon as he was in Rome to receive his badge of office (the pallium) in 1100, he got the pope to write a letter to all the Scottish bishops to give them the good news that they had a new archbishop and should show obedience to him. The pope probably had no idea that this would be a problem. He may not have been aware that there was already a chief bishop of Scotland based at St Andrews. (The bishop of St Andrews did not have a pallium.) The clergy at St Andrews soon wrote a powerful statement of their claim to be not only in charge of the Scottish

Church, but a second Rome! The pope, however, continued to back the Archbishop of York.

This was a dangerous situation. From now on each new Scottish bishop—and particularly the most important bishops, St Andrews and Glasgow—was expected by the pope to give a written undertaking of their obedience to the archbishop of York before they could take up office. The situation was not finally resolved in favour of the Scottish church until 1192. During this time the Church was beginning to develop centralised government and territorial jurisdiction within the Scottish kingdom. This meant that, if York or Canterbury prevailed, a crucial part of controlling Scottish society would fall under the authority of an archbishop in another kingdom. This was what provoked King Alexander I to insist that he was the ultimate authority in his kingdom. For the first time Scotland's domestic autonomy was threatened.

It was only now that Scottish independence became an issue. It was explicitly recognised at that time that the kingdom's freedom was at stake. Before then domestic autonomy had been taken completely for granted—so much so that no-one would have thought about it. It is only when Church government across Europe began to take shape that domestic autonomy became conditional on securing external recognition as a kingdom. Instead of having an archbishop, however, the Scottish church was treated as a province of bishops directly under the pope—an extraordinary arrangement. Nevertheless, this was enough to secure Scotland's place in the family of European nations.

Scotland's story may have been distinctive, but its experience was not. Its distinctiveness merely allows us to see more clearly how it was only through the realisation of a European-wide form of government—the papal monarchy—that the very idea of a Europe of independent kingdoms first took shape, and the seed of national sovereignty was sown.