

WHO DO WE WANT TO BE?

A QUESTION OF HERITAGE AND IDENTITY

Heritage Lottery Fund

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In praise of diversity: A Highlander's take on integration, Britishness and empire

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The Highlands and Islands. Where, when I was growing up there, getting on meant getting out. Where now the opposite is true.

Some figures and some facts.

During the last 40 years, a period when Scotland's total population's scarcely changed, the population of the Highlands and Islands has risen by a fifth.

Inverness is one of Britain's fastest growing cities.

The Isle of Skye, percentagewise, is doing even better, with half again as many residents as in the 1960s.

Economically we're on the up and up.

Once the Highlands and Islands jobless rate was a multiple of its all-Scotland equivalent.

For several years it's been below the Scottish average.

Now it's below the UK average as well.

Our business start-up rate is equally encouraging.

As is our job creation record.

In today's Highlands and Islands, compared with forty years back, we have 50 per cent more people in employment.

Fifty per cent. The figure for the rest of Scotland's only a small fraction of that.

As the First Minister has said, anyone in search of pointers as to what this country ought to be about, needs only to look north.

There lots that's positive is happening.

Like our commitment to the arts.

Our push for a University of the Highlands and Islands.

A proliferation of community ownership ventures which have put local people in control of hundreds of thousands of acres.

So what's behind this Highlands and Islands renaissance?

In a word, this conference's subject matter – heritage.

Which is why the Heritage Lottery Fund's been so important in a Highland context.

Our physical environment, our natural heritage if you like, is of the highest quality.

This matters. Their proximity to a great outdoors gives America's most successful regions, the Pacific North West, say, or Colorado, their edge as business locations.

With the Highlands and Islands, for the first time in centuries, attracting far more folk than the area is losing, our natural heritage is delivering the same effect.

It isn't doing so unaided.

Our human heritage is important also.

This heritage, incidentally, shows there's nothing new in the notion of the Highlands and Islands as a place with big ambitions.

Fifteen hundred years ago, Iona's Gaelic-speaking monks made their Hebridean monastery a centre of enlightenment and learning capable of reaching out to all of Western Europe.

A thousand years ago, the Earldom of Orkney, its attainments evident in Kirkwall's grand cathedral of St Magnus, was a North Atlantic crossroads.

But then, between the thirteenth century and the eighteenth, the Highlands and Islands were swallowed first by the Scottish, then by the British, state.

Sure, like Sikhs or Iroquois or Zulus, Highlanders went on – as soldiers – to aid the very people who deprived them of autonomy.

But we began by being colonialism's victims.

Okay, our experience was not the same as Africa's.

For in the world the British Empire made, we had one huge advantage. We were white.

But as was also true of Wales, and truer still of Ireland, the Highlands and Islands were, for all that, one of imperialism's proving grounds.

A quotation. From an 1815 letter written by Patrick Sellar, much the most thoughtful, most intelligent, of the men who organised the Highland Clearances.

This is Sellar on the thousands of evictions he helped to carry out.

'Lord and Lady Stafford [his employers] were pleased *humanely* to order a new arrangement of this country. That the interior should be possessed by cheviot shepherds and the people brought down to the coast and placed there in [crofts] under three arable acres ... I presume to say that the proprietors *humanely* ordered this arrangement, because it surely was a most benevolent action to put those barbarous hordes into a position, where they could better associate together, apply to industry, educate their children, and advance in civilization.'

Sellar wrote at a point when Highland regiments were helping Wellington prevail at Waterloo – a point when, partly for this reason, the kilted military man became the British Empire's most enduring symbol.

So just like Native Americans, with whom Sellar compared the people he evicted, Highlanders could simultaneously be thought great warriors – and trash.

Needless to say, it was the latter perception that most shaped policy towards the Highlands.

After all, it's inherent in the position of the coloniser that he has to denigrate, dehumanise, everyone he colonises.

This is because the imperialist – Patrick Sellar for example – came to the Highlands, much as he came to Africa, to impose – he said – not just a new, but a superior, order.

Given their civilising mission, colonisers can't allow the colonised to have a worthwhile history, or heritage, of their own.

Prior to his arrival, the coloniser's self-image dictates, there was – there could have been – nothing but darkness. Only with him came light.

So it was in Africa.

And in the Highlands and Islands.

Thus it came about that generation after generation of our people were told that everything inherited from what had gone before – starting with Gaelic, with Shetlandic, with Orcadian – was necessarily inferior, second-rate, of no account.

Developmentally, this was disastrous.

When, as well as being disempowered, you have your alleged inadequacies dinned into you, you can't but end up lacking self-esteem – something essential to enterprise, initiative, advancement.

That's why the economic regeneration of the Highlands and Islands had to commence with restoring our formerly demoralised population's sense of worth; with encouraging both individuals and communities to take pride in their background; with making people feel good about themselves and their surroundings; with showing that the Highlands and Islands, long dismissed as hopelessly impoverished, are actually rich in music, architecture, literature, archaeology and much else; with insisting that the Highlands and Islands, so well endowed culturally as I've said, are even wealthier environmentally; with demonstrating that our area, despite its having been so long and so habitually disparaged, is capable of offering all its residents an exceptionally high quality of life.

From a Highlands and Islands standpoint, then, our heritage, along with our entitlement to make what we want of it, are key elements in our success.

So I worry a bit when politicians talk, as many have been doing, about everyone living in this country having ideally to buy into a nationally agreed definition of Britishness.

In the Highlands and Islands, we've been beneficiaries of a now threatened multiculturalism which, for the first time in ages, gave us space – in a sixties phrase – to do our thing.

I'd hate to see that space once more diminish.

And not just for Highland reasons.

Countries or cities, the US or London say, containing numerous immigrant communities tend to be more dynamic – whether businesswise or culturally – than cities or countries where society is less diverse.

So here in Scotland, we should welcome immigrants.

Not merely because our labour market needs them.

But because they'll help make Scotland a more exciting, more creative, place.

Of course, if we're to have diversity of this sort, we also have to have equality of treatment – irrespective of ethnicity and background.

And here the Scottish record's nothing great.

Nearly 200 years after their forebears' arrival, descendants of our biggest ever immigrant influx, the Catholic Irish, can still run up against discrimination.

As Scots, we like to think we're welcoming, hospitable.

We aren't.

Not down here in the Lowlands, not in the Highlands and Islands either.

Up there in the north, we face real challenges in this regard.

Over the last two or three decades, tens of thousands of English people have settled in our area.

Now thousands more are moving in from eastern Europe.

Which is why, the other day, I found myself being interviewed by a Polish radio reporter in Inverness's newly-opened Polish café.

Our response to this new influx – a response that's standard everywhere – is to talk of integration.

Fair enough. As long as we don't use the word, as it's so often used, to mean *assimilation*.

In the Highlands and Islands, as I've stressed, we've been ourselves assimilated – sometimes at bayonet point.

The damage thus done to us is damage that we're only now repairing.

Hence my dislike of thinking that insists that a particular variety of Britishness, or Scottishness, is in some way definitive – superior to all the rest.

But what's true at the national level, holds good regionally as well.

In today's Highlands and Islands, as well as fostering those identities – Gaelic, Orcadian, whatever – which are historically rooted in our place, we have to give equivalent recognition to alternative identities, Polish, English, otherwise.

This conference's title asks a question: Who do we want to be?

Given what I've said, my answer won't surprise you. With the proviso that nobody's choice should jeopardise anyone else's, everyone living in today's Highlands and Islands, in today's Scotland, everyone in the whole wide world, should be free to be exactly who they like.

Thank you very much.