

# THE PUBLIC REALM AND THE PARIAH KINGDOM

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In the debut issues of openDemocracy Tom Nairn launches a coruscating assault on New Labour's timid programme of constitutional reform. The central charge is that Blair, like Thatcher before him, is perpetrating a 'non revolution from above'. The visceral criticisms of a self-avowed civic nationalist are unlikely to resonate in New Labour circles. But New Labour ideologues would be wrong to dismiss Nairn – as they sometimes do – as a superannuated 'nat-case' who has been wrongly predicting the 'break up of Britain' since the 1970s.

There are weaknesses in Tom Nairn's position. To my mind there are three. In the first place he hugely over-estimates the extent to which 'the centre' – whether it be No. 10, Blair's inner circle, the Cabinet, Whitehall – can successfully manage the country from above, even in the confined terms of the New Labour project. The key point is this: no matter how modest the constitutional reforms have been to date, and they are very modest, they have nevertheless created new political spaces in which new voices are beginning to be heard. Even the modest degrees of democratic devolution have allowed Wales, through its National Assembly, to contest the undemocratic imposition of a Blairite leader. More important, the Scottish Parliament has begun to craft a far more progressive agenda than anything seen at Westminster with respect to personal care for the elderly, student tuition fees and freedom of information for example. In other words the reforms to date should not be dismissed so easily.

A second weakness relates to the way in which Tom frames the problem of England. The problem of the 'dominant nationality' need not be such an incubus on progressive constitutional change if we frame the issue in terms of English regionalism rather than English nationalism. The demand for democratic regional assemblies is growing in England and this bottom-up pressure will be difficult to resist despite the fact that Blair himself seems to have little appetite for it. A regionalised England, in other words, need not be a barrier to progressive change.

Thirdly, Tom's treatment of the 'resistance movement' to New Labour is interesting but not persuasive. Three forces might successfully resist, he tells us, namely:

- immigrant intelligentsias
- civic nationalism in Scotland and Wales
- pro-European forces

Arguably all these have an interest in a culturally diverse, socially tolerant and pluralistic Europe, where the key challenge is how to accommodate the grand narratives of subsidiarity (democracy) and solidarity (equality). At the moment, however, there is little to unite these disparate forces of resistance. Or is there?

Constitutional reform is more than a constitutional issue. The institutions of democratic devolution, like the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales, create new spaces for debate within their countries and, potentially, throughout the Isles as a whole. These new spaces beyond Whitehall and Westminster could be about to prove themselves in the biggest battle of the second New Labour government – the defence of the public realm (which involves not just the delivery of public services but the very integrity of the public sphere).

The plans for reforming education, health and transport include huge injections of private capital, signalling that the old Thatcherite mantra of 'public bad, private good' is sadly far from dead. With Wales and Scotland fully committed to the public service ethos, the devolved administrations will be among the frontline resistance forces when it comes to defending the public realm. The longer term challenge, as Tom Nairn rightly says, is for these forces to forge new connections. One of the most important connections being the link between devolution and pluralism at home and federalism in Europe – this is the road beyond the 'Pariah Kingdom'.