

Seminar with Dr. Eve Hepburn on Scottish devolution

On the 16th of June a seminar with Dr. Eve Hepburn on Scottish devolution was held in the Åland Parliament building in Mariehamn. The seminar, organised by the Åland Parliament and the Åland Island Peace Institute, attracted an audience of about 20. Dr. Hepburn gave a lecture under the title "Taking Stock: A Decade of Scottish Devolution", where three main questions were explored: first, why did devolution take place, second, how has devolution worked, and finally, what are the consequences of devolution? Has it been a success or a failure, and how will it develop?

Why did devolution take place? Dr. Hepburn explained that demands for self-government or 'Home Rule' for Scotland have been voiced since the 1800's, and a separate Scottish national identity can be traced further back than that, but that the more recent emergence of Scottish nationalism in civil society and in political parties, represented in particular by the rise of the Scottish National Party (SNP) through the second half of the 20th century, has to do with more than identity. It can be explained partly by the Conservative government's centralized rule and lack of consideration for regional differences under Margaret Thatcher which gave rise to discontent in Scotland, partly by the discovery of North Sea oil, and partly by the perceived democratic deficit in the British political system as Scotland's political behavior tends to differ from that of England.



The Labour government headed by Tony Blair elected in 1997 also had reason to support devolution: transferring some powers to the UK nations through devolution was seen as a strategy for keeping the UK together by curbing the Scottish nationalist independence movement. In the Labour election campaign, devolution had been promised as part of their British constitutional reform package, and following the election of the new government and the subsequent national devolution referendums of 1997/8, in which a majority of the Scottish people voted for devolution, a devolution settlement was reached in 1999.



Devolution has created new institutions and separated powers between London and Edinburgh. Under the devolution settlement, Scotland got its own Parliament, its own government, and power over a large number of areas including education, health, economic development, agriculture, and environment. Foreign policy, defense, and international relations including relations with the EU are still UK competences. Taxation also remains under British rule, but Scotland may diverge 3% from the UK level of income tax – this possibility has so far not been used due to fear of economic setbacks. Tax money is returned from Westminster to Scotland through a Block Grant, the spending of which is under Scotland's control.

Consequences of devolution have been largely positive both from London's and Edinburgh's perspective. Devolution, and particularly the way in which tax money is transferred from Westminster to Edinburgh through the Block Grant, appears successful for Scotland as it has allowed both Scottish policy divergence and increased public spending, among other things making possible the abolition of tuition fees in Scottish higher education, and free-of-charge care for the elderly. On the same time, the Labour government's strategy for weakening Scottish calls for independence seems to have worked – polls have shown those of the Scottish who want independence have been decreasing in numbers in recent years. However, a majority of Scots want to further develop devolution. Further fiscal powers are among the devolution issues most discussed. Another question is that of relations to the EU, which are currently conducted on the UK level and in which Scotland

therefore has little representation, which is considered a major problem. On the UK level, the asymmetrical manner in which powers have been dispersed through devolution – different nations have different powers, depending on popular demand and devolution settlements – has also had some negative consequences. While devolving Scotland has acquired relatively many powers, England has almost none, and discontent in England has risen with the fact that the Scottish under the current taxation system receive more tax money per head from Westminster than do the English, as well as with the current system in which Scottish MP's in Westminster may vote on matters affecting England, while English MP's (and Scottish MP's for that matter) have no voice in the Scottish Parliament. Dr Hepburn concluded that further constitutional change may be necessary in order to solve such issues.

In the subsequent discussion, the audience raised questions ranging from identity to economics to the management of UK-Scotland relations. Åland and Scotland were compared on several points – for example, the British system with the Block Grant is comparable to Åland's, and in both the Scottish and the Ålandic debate, increased economic and taxation powers as well as representation in and use of the EU are often discussed.

Dr Hepburn is a senior research fellow at the faculty for politics and international relations at the University of Edinburgh. She is currently working on a research project of comparative island studies, in which Åland is one of her case studies alongside Sardinia and Prince Edward Island. She has also recently published a book about the ways in which the European Union is used by member states and regions, titled *Using Europe*.

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