

## **Ian Mitchell's Scotland-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS**

21 – *Question of Scotland*

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### **THE QUESTION OF SCOTLAND**

#### **– Devolution and After**

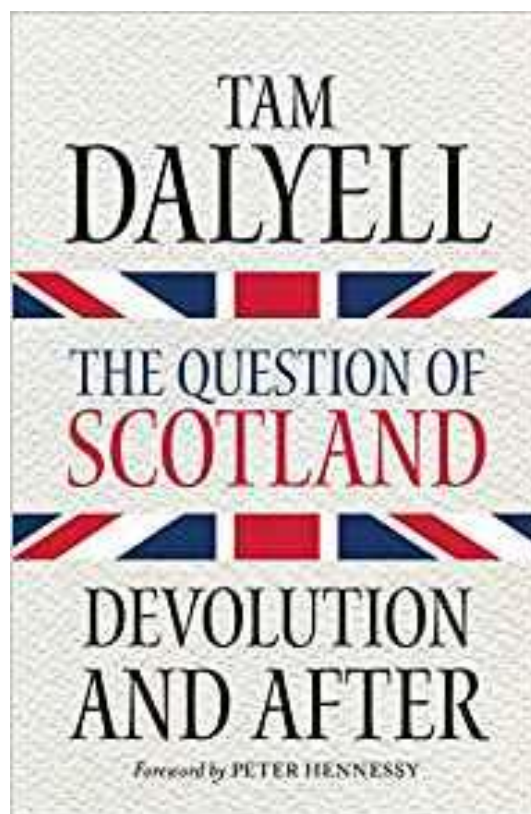
**Author:** Tam Dalyell

**Publication info:** [Birlinn](#), 2016

*(available on Amazon, click on cover image for link)*

**Descriptor:** A leading Labour anti-devolutionist speaks his mind a decade after retirement.

**Reviewer:** Ian Mitchell, 5 November 2018



**Reason to read:** Describes the chicanery, dishonesty and inconsistency of Labour Party policy on devolution for Scotland over the last seventy years. Tam Dalyell of the Binns was MP for West Lothian for 43 years but never given office in any Labour government, which speaks volumes for his honesty and forthright approach to issues. He saw right from the start that Devolution was a slippery slope to separation and he never wavered in his view. He understood that an uncontrolled parliament could lead only to division, inefficiency and constitutional grandstanding. Until he died last year, he still hoped that the Scottish parliament might be abolished one day.

Dalyell never accepted the weasel words of Donald Dewar, the slim (in the Old Scots sense of the word) saint who did his best to stifle debate about the planned Scottish parliament in 1998. He imposed a guillotine on debate on the Scotland Bill in the House of Commons. “Pandora’s Box was opened before its contents could be scrutinised due to the ruthless and wicked decision of Brown, Dewar, McLeish and their entourage to impose a guillotine so that their proposals for Scotland went unexamined.” (p. 183) This was in the face of the strong parliamentary convention that important constitutional debates are never guillotined. “One ought not to think ill of the dead, but it really was wicked of Dewar to brush aside questions which he was too intelligent not to know required a substantial answer.” (p. 117)

This is part of the reason why the parliament is so dysfunctional today. I would suggest that the authoritarian, secretive and politically manipulative circumstances of its birth have tainted its life ever since. It was conceived as an electoral ploy, never properly scrutinised, and then allowed to spend its time chasing the limelight when it should have been forced, by statutory requirements written into the

Scotland Act (1998), to stick in its official business to what it was mandated to do, namely govern Scotland, not agitate for constitutional change in the UK.

### ***Thoughts provoked:***

1. Dalyell is surely right about this: “It has always seemed strange to me that the Edinburgh Agreement [organising the 2014 independence referendum] did not include the constitutional requirement of a two-thirds majority for the result. Any major change should not take place on the basis of threadbare majorities. When I spoke to him recently, the distinguished professor of politics Philip Norton reeled off for me a long list of countries where a 66 percent majority of the electorate was required for a change in the constitution to be enacted – Germany, Italy, Norway, Hungary and Finland, to name but a few. Sweden requires a 75% majority, and only Brazil was lower with 60 percent.” (p. 141)
2. He is right about this too: “The SNP’s vision for an independent Scotland was summed up in *Scotland’s Future: Your Guide to an Independent Scotland* [which was] an expensive travesty. Funded by taxpayers and written by supposedly neutral civil servants, it was, in fact, an SNP tract. It was a complete and utter fabrication concocted for purely political purposes. The SNP government has never hesitated to use public money for party political purposes... [The result was that] in 2015 the political climate was akin to a one-party state.” (p. 141)
3. He is surely also right in quoting with approval the ex-Speaker of the House of Commons, Betty Boothroyd, from her memoirs: “After complaints about the scope of Welsh questions, I issued new guidelines on 12 July 1999 stipulating that Commons questions must relate to matter for which ministers were responsible.... Tam Dalyell asked if the Scottish parliament would observe the same self-denying ordinance in respect of UK matters beyond its competence. All I could say was that the new Commons guidelines would be sent to Edinburgh, but I was happy to leave that conundrum to Sir David Steel, presiding officer of the new Scottish parliament.” (p. 136)
4. He is surely right about this as well: “It sticks in [local] councillors’ gullets that they have to make unfair cutbacks while the vastly expensive Holyrood and its whole paraphernalia of personal research assistants and support staff for members’ offices continue to cost more by the year.” (p. 183)

***Incidental interest:*** Dalyell quotes a hideous example of the burach that is proportional representation. It concerns his membership of the “indirectly elected European Parliament” from 1976-9. It is the *party* which decides who should be on the list of representatives of the people, not constituency voters. This is an example of the result: “My Budgets Committee chairman was the brave Erwin Lange – he had been allocated to the SS Punishment Brigade in 1942 in Russia for his socialist views. On several occasions I went to Lange on sticky issues to ask him what we should do about them. His answer was always the same – he would have to consult Herbert Wehner. Wehner was the thuggish, ex-Communist floor leader in the Bundestag in Bonn. Erwin explained that Wehner determined members’ places on the list and, if he crossed him, he would be so far down the list that he would not be re-elected to the European Parliament. Erwin said it was terrible but that was just the way of things.” (p. 159)

**Surprising points:** Actually this is not surprising, but it is still shocking to read that Dalyell's successor as MP for (by then) Linlithgow and East Falkirk), Martyn Day, "concluded his maiden speech in the House of Commons by saying that he would enjoy his term in London 'behind enemy lines'." (p. 169)

This is perhaps not surprising either, but it was news to me, after all the terror that "infraction proceedings" from Europe visibly invoke in milk-and-water civil servants in Edinburgh: "Alarming also is the saga of the delayed payments to farmers from the Common Agriculture Policy... Sufficient to say that the culpability of the Scottish Government was such that it provoked the European Commission to issue a fine of £125 million." (p. 174)

**Negative issue(s):** Too many committees, resolutions and forgotten names, especially in the early part. Reminds one of Tony Benn's style "in diary".

**Style:** Clear and studiously polite.

**Smile(s):** I am afraid that Sir Thomas Dalyell, 11th Baronet was, like most socialists, not one to see the funny or paradoxical side of life. He was more reformer than raconteur.

**Author:** Tam Dalyell comes of an ancient line of Scottish aristocrats and soldiers. After Eton and King's College, Cambridge, he joined the Royal Scots Greys as a National Service squaddie. Later in parliament, he continued the fighting tradition, first, by posing the West Lothian question in connection with the proposed Scottish Assembly in the 1970s, then by persecuting Mrs Thatcher over the sinking of the Argentine cruiser, *Belgrano*, in the Falklands war and, more appropriately in my view, by persecuting Tony Blair over the Iraq War which Dalyell said—echoing, incidentally, the conclusions of Lord Bingham, the greatest judge in late 20<sup>th</sup> century England—was quite simply a war crime.

**Link(s):** You can see him talking about the 2014 independence referendum here (Kirsty Wark has politely had her hair done to match Sir Tam's): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YO8ZEJ5Kh0> . And here is a quirky tribute from a disguised fan whom I quote because he seems to me to have grasped the main point about Dalyell [https://www.amazon.co.uk/Question-Scotland-Devolution-After/dp/1780273681/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1541424431&sr=1-2](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Question-Scotland-Devolution-After/dp/1780273681/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1541424431&sr=1-2): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yh6jo6xGnjU> And this is the article to which the fan refers (re the "cabal"): <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1429114/Fury-as-Dalyell-attacks-Blairs-Jewish-cabal.html>. It is intriguing in the light of this year's anti-Semitism row in the Labour Party.

**Overall recommendation level:** HIGH – especially for those fed up with the Holyrood Today show

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**About the reviewer:** Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including *Isles of the West* and *The Justice Factory*. He is writing a multi-volume study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*. He lives in Campbeltown and can be contacted at [ianbookrec@gmail.com](mailto:ianbookrec@gmail.com). For other reviews in this series, see: <https://www.moffatrussianconferences.com/ian-mitchell-s-russia>