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A gift fae the Giftie:
Candid views of a Geordie Catholic on
Scottish politics in the wake of the 2016 Holyrood elections.

I came to live in Glasgow in 2012, in perfect time to witness some of the most dramatic events in recent Scottish history. As a lifelong Caledoniaphile, and the first public spokesperson for the erstwhile Campaign for a Northern (English) Assembly, I crossed the Border with great expectations. These were heightened by my heritage: the neighbourhood I come from was settled by Glasgow Irish shipyard workers in the early 1880s. I can report that, despite the passage of 135 years, the basic assumptions of life and etiquette remain essentially the same in Govan and Gateshead. This is reflected in the genuine, heartfelt feelings of solidarity which most Geordies feel towards Scotland in general and Glasgow in particular. Of course the same feelings are extended to the cities of northern England, especially Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield and Leeds – and indeed to Cardiff, Swansea, Belfast and Dublin. Fellow-feeling is particularly warm towards cities with similar histories of hardship.

Solidarity is, of course, a central theme of Catholic social teaching. It may be regarded as a particular expression of the Lord's instruction that we love our neighbours as ourselves (Mk 12: 31) – particularly our less fortunate neighbours. Solidarity with the oppressed leads naturally to a desire to empower them, so that they achieve greater control over their own destiny. Scotland's devolution settlement is the most advanced realisation of these impulses, so it is inherently attractive to a Geordie aspirant.

Another key theme of Catholic social teaching is subsidiarity: the principle that "...matters should be dealt with at the lowest and most appropriate authority and that a central authority should perform only those tasks that cannot be carried out at a more local level ..." ¹. This concept has been central to Catholic social thought since at least 1931, when it was enunciated robustly by Pope Pius XI in his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*. The practice of subsidiarity has a far longer pedigree, of course, being manifest in the particularly stable federal settlements of the USA, Canada, Australia and several European countries (most admirably the German *Länder* system). Had the UK had the sense to adopt such a system two generations ago, it is unlikely that we would now be living with the tensions of an evidently Disunited Kingdom.

I spent much of the 2014 independence referendum campaign enjoying the weird sensation of being a "swing voter": I was torn between maintaining solidarity with my Geordie and Liverpudlian comrades and taking subsidiarity to its logical conclusion. I finally resolved the tension a fortnight before polling day, while gazing across the Sound of Raasay, feeling incalculably and delightfully remote from London. In the end, I decided just to answer in the affirmative the simple question on the ballot paper: "Should Scotland be an independent country?" Had the question been "Do you believe all of the Alex in Wonderland stories about the utopia that would inevitably arise from Scottish independence?" then I would have voted "No". Although I thought it likely that a "Yes" victory would lead to a decade of tumult, I was in a reckless mood, savouring the mood of the moment.

It was only much later that I realised was just how many former Labour voters had fully bought into the alluring utopian vision set forth by the SNP. The Labour electoral melt-down of May 2015 has

continued this year. It is now clear that many Scottish people truly regard nationalism as their best hope for economic advancement. Yet I, for one, have always been deeply suspicious of nationalism. As Orwell wrote: "... Nationalism is power hunger tempered by self-deception ..." Is it indeed the case that independence will usher in a golden age of equality, or is there a degree of self-deception in this? Orwell again: "...One cannot see the modern world as it is unless one recognizes the overwhelming strength of national loyalty ... Christianity and international Socialism are as weak as straw in comparison with it. Hitler and Mussolini rose to power in their own countries very largely because they could grasp this fact and their opponents could not ..."

Yet the latter seems an unfair reference in Scotland today: there is certainly a "nationalism" that is simply a legitimate expression of subsidiarity; of a legitimate self-respect that seeks to express itself in home rule. Gandhi espoused just such a nationalism. Yet even that great soul was unable to restrain the xenophobic tendencies that led to partition and violence. An even more salient example is offered by the fratricidal conflicts between nationalists in Ireland that inflicted deep wounds that suppurate to this day.

But surely Scotland could never experience such calamity? The more I have experienced the mood in post-referendum Scotland, the less certain I am. With the only left-wing unionist party in ruins, any notion of solidarity with Liverpoolians and Geordies already seems a distant memory. But what of subsidiarity? Perhaps my greatest surprise has been the discovery that the SNP have no interest in subsidiarity: they demand more power for Holyrood, yet have systematically stripped it away from local councils; they have created a national police force answerable directly to the Minister of Justice² - an action with daunting parallels in 1930s Europe. A 2012 law has introduced significant restrictions on freedom of expression, which are being applied far more widely than was originally promised³, with Police Scotland recently doing the rounds of Catholic clubs and Celtic supporters clubs to warn their clientele off celebrating the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising⁴. Most recently the SNP government have granted themselves the power to interfere in university governing bodies, in a manner unheard of in similar countries (though common enough in Africa). This summer will see the introduction of the 'named person' scheme, with its own Orwellian echoes².

A few days ago I saw a social media posting that had attracted many 'likes': the photograph was of a muscle-man in a Saltire t-shirt and kilt with the caption: "My country, my flag: love it or leave it". I was particularly chilled by the use of "my" instead of "our". I recalled the words of Arundhati Roy: "...it isn't necessary to be 'anti-national' to be deeply suspicious of all nationalism, to be anti-nationalism ... Flags are bits of coloured cloth that governments use first to shrink-wrap people's minds and then as ceremonial shrouds to bury the dead. When independent, thinking people begin to rally under flags, when writers, painters, musicians, film makers suspend their judgment and blindly yoke their art to the service of the 'nation', it's time for all of us to sit up and worry ..." ⁵ I'm not worried yet, but I am sitting up; and I am beginning to wonder what will become of solidarity and subsidiarity in the Scotland of tomorrow.

¹ <http://www.catholicsocialteaching.org.uk/principles/glossary/#Subsidiarity>

² Gallagher, T., 2016, *Scotland now. A warning to the world*. Scotview Publications, Edinburgh. 346pp.

³ Rooney, K., 2016, 'Let the people sing': rebel songs, the Rising and remembrance. In Lusk, K., and Maley, W. (eds.) *Scotland and the Easter Rising: Fresh Perspectives on 1916*. Luath Press, Edinburgh. 168-173.

⁴ See *The Herald*, 19-3, 11-4 and 12-4-2016.

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/sep/30/usa.iraq>