Foreword

If you need convincing why you should read a volume like this, which, let's face it, contains an awful lot of statistics, then I suggest you cast your mind back briefly to the spring of the year 2000.

Then, if you believed the newspapers, Scotland was torn by ideological strife the like of which had not been seen since the Covenanting armies set forth to claim Christendom for the Kirk. Except this time Covenanters and Catholics were on the same side, crusading in favour of an obscure clause about teaching matters connected with homosexuality in schools. Scotland would be saved for the True Faith, the simple decencies and the missionary position.

Our cousins in England, preoccupied with such trivia as building a multicultural society and reforming the National Health Service, guffawed loudly. Not content with boring everyone to death with their vaunted 'national identity' and siphoning off the rest of the UK's money for their absurdly overfunded public services, now the Scots were wrapping themselves up in the sort of moral ardour one of their better-known shepherds had lampooned hundreds of years before in *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. So much for devolution!

The reality was very different. We have long had the knockabout political argument against the caricature of Scotland above – when push came to shove the Scottish Parliament abolished Section 28, while Tony Blair backed off at the slightest whiff of trouble.

But the chapter on religion in this book has more profound implications. It implies that, far from being in thrall to the more intolerant varieties of Christianity, religious observance among Scots has now fallen so dramatically that it has reached a turning point. At the conference in Edinburgh which launched the findings explored in more detail here, Steve Bruce argued the real issue for Scotland was how to live in a society which, along with some others in Western Europe, had become post-religious. And,

incidentally, he and Tony Glendinning are able to show that a majority of Scots think there is nothing wrong at all with school teachers explaining homosexuality to teenagers.

Their essay has similarly radical implications for our understanding of sectarianism. Of course, in certain areas of the country, sectarianism is alive and well, but the findings here suggest that across Scotland as a whole it is terminally ill.

That contradicts the 'common sense' view of Scotland, so much so that when the survey results were released initially, they were misreported as showing sectarianism is flourishing. Which points to a conclusion not dealt with systematically here: sometimes in Scotland we are keener to deal with our notions of reality rather than reality itself. Of course, 'Scots Relaxed About Religious Differences Shock' doesn't make much of a headline, but that is hardly the fault of the Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey.

The survey results on religion are particularly enlightening, but there is much of interest in the rest of this volume. Perhaps we felt instinctively that contrary to Gordon Brown's views, people in Scotland believe that, as epitomised by the Scottish Parliament's legislation on care for the elderly, the welfare state should be universal, with no return to the means tests which haunted the Labour party in the past. Some of the figures here start to put flesh on those instincts. And to explore some new areas. It is interesting, for example, that younger Scots have more liberal views than their parents on matters of morality, but do not appear to have more libertarian views on the role of the state. One wonders how far that finding would be echoed across the European Union.

There is one question which, necessarily, this book cannot answer, although it may furnish some clues. This is the importance people in Scotland attach to elections to their new Parliament. The first Scottish parliamentary election was atypical simply by virtue of being the first. The next should be more 'normal' and in a sense it will be a double poll: an election about who should rule the country and an election about the status of elections to the Scottish Parliament. With regard to the latter, the turnout will be as important as the result. But there will be other indicators. If voters are more prepared to lodge protest votes than they would be at a Westminster election, for example, that might indicate they do not take Holyrood very seriously and thus don't much mind if the 'wrong' party runs it. A high turnout, on the other hand, might give some beef to the view, echoed by succeeding SSA surveys and other poll data, that people in Scotland want more power for the Parliament, even if they are not much enamoured of the present incumbents.

To say this book is part of a work in progress is, I know, something of a

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cliché. It's also a polite way of saying that to get the most from it you will have to buy the next edition. The principal value of the SSA is that it is building up a body of knowledge about Scottish attitudes that we simply did not have before and allowing changes in attitudes to be mapped over time.

So there is a strong case for continuing to collect the data and continuing to collect it on the same subjects. But there are also other areas to explore in that sometimes murky field which lies between straightforwardly party political opinion and views on society in general. And with Holyrood now sitting on a body of legislation which is in some respects significantly different from UK law, perhaps it is time to ask a few more questions.

Here are a few suggestions. Do people in Scotland accept the arguments of Tony Blair that while health services should be financed from general taxation, their provision should be through a variety of means, public, private and co-operative? Or do they believe the NHS should continue to run everything? Do people accept the consensual approach to helping substandard schools we have in Scotland? Or do they believe tougher options should be available on the English model – allowing failing schools to be taken over by more successful ones, for example, or closing entire education authorities? And what relationship do the answers to these questions have to the matter of Scottish identity, which too often simply boils down to whether people feel more Scottish than British?

So there remains plenty to be done. The SSA surveys have already provided us with a mirror of ourselves. And while policy should not necessarily be driven entirely by what we see there, it does seem sound sense to keep looking.

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