

UTOPIAS

DYSTOPIAS

for the future of Scotland

PAT KANE

questions the dominance of the social, political and economic in our articulations about Scotland's future. Why can't we draw on a broader Scottish imagination to re-invigorate our visions for Scotland's future?

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THE question of utopia and dystopia in Scottish life is most acute in the battle of ideologies and visions around Scottish nationalism. The recent Labour Party conference in Oban resounded to warnings from various Scottish-located Cabinet-level ministers about the perils of 'separation' from the United Kingdom.

At the very least, the visions raised were an attempt to picture a societal dystopia; more terrorism, more "immigration" (had they not talked to Jack about his need to populate 'one Scotland' with 'many voices?'), economic ruin through subsidy withdrawal, political instability through constitutional "wrangling". As one letter-writer to the Herald newspaper noted, in recent years we could add, "Bangladeshi-level malnutrition" and "Balkan-style ethnic bloodshed" to the list of dire consequences.

The sight of a series of technocratic, ostentatiously managerial Scots-in-London coming to Scotland to warn their compatriots about their ultimate inability to practice small-state governance will not be easily forgotten. If anything, it will merely reinforce the growing consensus that Scottish independence will mean the same mix of work, play, finances, sport, family, political responsibilities and civic rituals that pertain in a currently devolved Scotland, only more so. The 'great leap into the dark' of independence, as opinion polls steadily show, is beginning to seem for many like the outcome of a few logical and incremental 'next steps' of self-government.

This slow 'mainstreaming' of independence-mindedness is what makes the SNP, not the only independence-advocating party in the Parliament but by far the most powerful, such an overwhelmingly dull and conventional outfit, and certainly one averse to any utopian outbursts. Particularly from their perch in the magnificent Holyrood Parliament building, statehood seems only to be the realisation of the building's spirit and aspiration; a matter of filling in those 'missing teeth' in the

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already well-composed and smoothly-meshing set of institutions, executives and committees.

The parameters of socio-economic debate around independence, conducted within the extremes of low-tax, pro-enterprise Tories at one end, and dirigiste socialists and ecologists at the other, are no more remarkable than in any other developed-world nation. It would seem absurd that the Scottish polity could not work out a reasonable path between the options of modernity. This is a task that all the European states around us can clearly and effectively master.

Yet can the widening spiral of Scottish self-government really be fuelled only by the outcomes of party-political debate? In the 80's and 90's, the Scottish intelligentsia and creative classes held Alasdair Gray's injunction, printed in almost all of his books, close to their hearts; "work as if you were in the early days of a better nation". Among many writers, musicians, poets and dramatists, Gray's axiom opened up the possibility that artistic practice could somehow anticipate the energy and dynamism of a future Scotland, not just though celebratory work, but self-critical, ambiguous, exploratory, macrocosmic and microcosmic work too.

Edwin Morgan, a gay Glaswegian science-fiction-obsessed modernist poet, became the living embodiment of a Scottish future that would be more than economic or historic arguments for greater self-government. In the early days of a better nation, as one short-lived academic journal had it, there would be 'Scotlands' in plural; the nation-as-discussion-and-experiment.

It would surely be right to say

that this steadily emergent cultural vitality over the last 30 years has provided the rich environment, the moral and semiotic eco-system, within which political progress could be made in Scotland. If there was any doubt about what the vast re-settlements of power, money and democracy could mean in terms of evoking a life, politicians (or at least the more cultured of them) could point to various "makars" whose discourse took the country seriously, its experience the material for great symbolizations.

Yet Scotland's imagineers have rarely allowed themselves a genuine recourse to futurism (with Gray and Morgan the long-standing exceptions). Precise renditions of the pathologies of the present, and journeys into history and mythology, yes. But relatively few writers or image-makers have dared to embark on 'speculative fiction' about Scottish life, whether in the next twenty, thirty, or two-hundred-and-thirty years.

To me, this lack of 'Scottish science-fiction' bespeaks a deeper poverty of imagination. The American critic Frederic Jameson says that the utopian science fiction novel provides an 'archeology of the future', a way for us to live among the rubble of societal possibility, to pick our way out of the quotidian reality of our conventional wisdom, via strange new landmarks and pathways. The lack of an overtly science fiction element in the Scottish creative imagination indicates a lack of willingness to think of Scotland as a genuinely open process of national development.

One of the few examples I know of is the Demos Scotland 2020 report, which commissioned four notable Scottish fiction writers; the SF

novelist Ken McLeod, the children's writer Julie Bertagna, Anne Donovan and Riuardih Nicholl. Theirs were stories about Scottish society at that point in the future, surrounded by more social-scientific reports on future directions for Scotland. The two most interesting stories are McLeod's and Bertagna's, both evoking a Scotland existing under a common environmental crisis (an irrevocably warmed world, where energy rationing and sheer coldness are the main topics of the day), with quite different emphases.

Yet both are broadly optimistic, serving that 'options-open' function that Jameson identifies for science fiction. The instabilities of climate generate the revival of Scottish industry for McLeod; new 'ekranoplanes' that skim over the surface of the water, have replaced much of the now-banned air flight; and the need to maintain global connections in the absence of international travel spur the rise of virtual reality and tele-conferencing devices (the ones that fit on your face ('frames') in McLeod's story are, of course, a Scottish invention).

For Bertagna, the cloud of social despair that smothers Scotland generated by the severe constraints on growth and prosperity in the 2010s, is on the turnaround by 2020. The crucial factor is what seems to be a revolt against education and

towards self-education among the young. They are enabled by their God-Boxes (Bertagna's version of a super-powered personal wireless computer) to set their own agendas for learning, understanding and enterprise, which a Scottish state belatedly responds to. In her words, "the energy and imagination of the young, globalist, free from the harness of another age, is active."

What is liberating about these gritty utopias is simply their willingness to imagine a Scottish future beyond the current social, political and economic doxa, and to be brave enough to dwell on the details of lifestyle and values, of new concepts meeting old continuities, that can give tangible substance to that future.

For this Scottish futurist at least, the constitutional argument is given; an incremental process towards maximum attainable autonomy (whatever we call *that*). But even though I thirst for some disciplined utopianism from within the political classes, I think it might well be the responsibility of the artistic community (again) to take up the next stage of development of the Scottish Voice, not just to describe where we are in order to confirm who we are, but to dream of where we could be (and where we don't want to be), in all the detail and evocation that art can provide.

ONLINE

"Only security and negativity at Oban conference"
The Herald
www.theherald.co.uk/features/75406.html

"Can the antidote to today's neoliberal triumphalism be found in the pages of far-out science fiction?"
www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2005/11/20/back_to_utopia?mode=PF

DEMOS Scotland 2020 project
www.demos.co.uk/files/Scotland2020.pdf

Paul Johnston's quartet of thrillers, set in a dystopia
Edinburgh City-State of 2020
www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/pjohnston.html

The Scottish Futures Forum within the Parliament has, so far, been a procession of familiar policy gurus
www.scotlandsfuturesforum.org/default.aspx