

Battle for independence is replaying the struggles of Catholic Scotland



The battle for Scotland has stirred some vivid memories for me. My instinct is for the Union: why disrupt tradition, economics, international relations? But having edited the Catholic Herald for four years, I know how deep-rooted and passionate the anti-establishment mindset in Scotland is.

Scotland has enough Catholics to keep a Catholic newspaper in business, and the Herald had (still has) a sister paper called the Scottish Catholic Observer. My duties, back in the early 1990s, included visiting their offices to promote our alliance and getting out and about to get to know the community of readers.

What I found had little to do with alliance: the community in Glasgow was rent with bitter factionalism, with Catholic locked in battle with Prod. The famous Catholic composer, James MacMillan, brought the Edinburgh Festival to a standstill when he attacked anti-Catholic bigots in a much-quoted speech. "Scotland's Shame" spoke of how Catholics felt like second-class citizens in their own country, and how segregation of jobs and schools was prevalent. If the name on your CV gave you away as an RC you could forget about certain jobs.

Westminster pooh-poohed the composer's attack – and washed its hands of the mess.

Yet MacMillan's heartfelt words were rooted in everyday reality: even the Holyrood politicians, as late as 2005, had to admit that "entrenched attitudes" made for a divided Glasgow. The Orange Order Marches, a parade of Protestant triumphalism, inevitably resulted in violence. Football matches pitted Celtic (predominantly Catholic) versus Rangers (predominantly Protestant) in a stadium that rocked with team songs and punch-ups. Catholic and Protestant schoolchildren turned even playgrounds into mini battlefields as they threw stones at one another. The Scottish Law Reporter three years ago found that most crimes in Scotland were committed against Catholics around Orange Order marches.

That kind of animosity stays with you. Not surprisingly, the polls show that the great impetus for the independence movement comes from Scottish Catholics. Alex Salmond is not Catholic and the Pope may have said he fears independence, but Catholics feel that the Establishment has always been against them, and here is a chance to cast off the yoke of English Protestant oppression.

If only Westminster and Holyrood had stepped in earlier to help Catholics, the fruit of sectarianism would not now taste so bitter

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