EUROPE 03.10.2017 | Maggie Chapman

Free spirits

Why regions such as Catalonia should be allowed their independence

My enduring impression of the Catalan independence referendum this last weekend will not be what it should: people engaging in democracy and expressing their political opinions peacefully. Instead, it will be the violence wrought on voters by instruments of the Spanish state.

My enduring impression of the Scottish independence referendum three years ago is very different: the positive vision, engaged energy and hope for a more equal and just country. The last 36 months have tarnished some of this shine, but I am still immensely grateful and proud to have been part of something that was, for me and many others, about democracy, justice and peace.

I am sure that most of those who voted in Catalonia, despite the violence, will hold onto their vision of something better. Indeed, the Spanish state's response, and the lack of condemnation of the abuse of state power by the EU and others, will probably strengthen their resolve.

It is not surprising that political establishments across Europe are so determined to prevent the self-determination of small nations. Such self-determination threatens the power these elites have wielded over us for decades. What is concerning, however, is how willing they are to use the violent machinery of the state against their own citizens to protect their interests.

The violence in Catalonia is yet another symptom of the brokenness of the political and economic structures that were ushered in by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The grand deceit that led us to war in Iraq in 2003 and the crisis of political economy that followed the 2008 crash profoundly undermined the legitimacy of and trust in these political elites and the states they lead.

What is concerning is how willing those who oppose

It is unsurprising, therefore, that people are seeking alternatives to the political status quo that is increasingly seen as illegitimate. One

independence are to use the violent machinery of the state against their own citizens to protect their interests.

manifestation of this search for new political formations is in the reassertion of localism and the claims of small nations. Where there are multinational states or states with more than one nation in them, people have sought to argue that giving these nations statehood is a positive response to the failures of large states.

In highly educated modern societies, the ability to concentrate on strengths in particular areas has led to success for smaller states. Small European countries top the league tables for activities as diverse as small business start-ups and provision of early years care. That small states like Denmark, Sweden and Norway perform well across a broad range of democratic, social and economic measures makes the case for independence of other small nations stronger.

In Scotland in 2014, a great deal of the energy behind the campaign for independence emerged from arguments for improved equality and social justice. But, interestingly, it went further than that. And this brings me to my second point: what most European separatist movements have in common is that they are in countries that once held substantial overseas colonial possessions. Indeed, the British and Spanish Empires were two of the largest the world has ever known. While the British and Spanish governments have taken radically different approaches to the independence movements within their countries in the last five years, both countries have in common an imperial past. A powerful legacy of this is the desire to maintain the early acquisitions by England, the dominant partner in the British Empire, of Scotland and by Castille, the dominant partner in the Spanish Empire, of Aragon.

Both Spain and Britain have constructed a dominant national identity that is at the same time highly nationalistic while being perceived as being beyond nationalism. This form of hegemonic nationalism contains within it claims to unity, 'families of nations', and a hostility to markers of difference such as language and other cultural forms. This form of nationalism is, however, deeply nostalgic (particularly for Empire) and, as a result of its hegemonic status, is often profoundly under-analysed.

As early as 1920 the Scottish radical John MacLean suggested that to break up the British Empire was, in itself, a revolutionary act: 'I hold that the British empire is the greatest menace to the human race... The best interest of humanity can therefore be served by the break-up of the British empire. The Irish, the Indians and others are playing their part. Why ought not the Scottish?'

For many in Scotland, particularly those associated with the Radical Independence Campaign and/or Green Yes, this was the key motivation for supporting independence. Often, meetings during the campaign would finish (as Scottish Green Party conferences do) with a rendition of Hamish Henderson's anti-imperialist 'alternative' national anthem, Freedom Come All Ye. This song brilliantly seeks to create a Scotland that has moved beyond its martial past (as many as 50 per cent of British Imperial troops were Scottish at the height of Empire). Henderson describes a Scotland that 'will curse Scotland the Brave nae mair, nae mair', and instead support 'a black boy frae yont Nyanga', standing with those seeking to overthrow Apartheid (and other equivalent evils).

Much of the reaction to both the Scottish and Catalan referendum has misunderstood the democratic movements in those nations for the right-wing nationalism found in many extremist movements. The absorption of Scotland and Catalonia into imperial states preceded democracy. Indeed, in Spain any chance of a democratic resolution were shattered during the Spanish Civil War when a coup backed by Hitler and Mussolini overthrew the Spanish republic and replaced it with a military junta led by General Franco.

Much of the reaction to both the Scottish and Catalan referendum has misunderstood the democratic movements in those nations for the right-wing nationalism found in many extremist movements.

It is therefore right that the peoples of these nations are able to choose whether or not they wish to remain part of these states. The British government managed this process in a way that allowed a serious debate and (mostly) democratic decision to be made. The Spanish state has reacted in a way that echoes the actions of the fascist dictatorship under General Franco.

In an age of mass literacy, where complex societies require much more participation in their governance, it is clear that the model of the nation state developed in 17th century Europe is outdated and outmoded. The hyper-centralised state that imperial nations developed to rule their empires is particularly problematic. We need more democracy at all levels of society and government. Where hyper-centralised, post-imperial states cannot accept this, it is the duty of democrats everywhere to act and support movements for democracy.



Maggie Chapman

Maggie Chapman is Co-convener of the Scottish Green Party, Rector of the University of Aberdeen and Chief Executive of the Scottish Council on Visual Impairment. A former Edinburgh City Councillor, she has campaigned against austerity and for improved workers' rights, and taught social and environmental justice when a lecturer at Edinburgh Napier University.

-