

A Letter from England

by Walter Jardine
(an Anglo-Scot)

‘A time of change’ is a not uncommon phrase used by commentators about events current or past, but there has never been a time when change wasn’t happening. Any event in the past can have effects that ripple through time to the present day. Take the Norman invasion of England, for example. We are still grappling with the aftershocks of that event nearly a thousand years later.

The Normans rapidly gained control over all of England and pushed into Wales to stem the attacks by the Welsh which had begun before the Normans’ success in England. About 100 years after conquering England and Wales, the Normans turned their attention to Ireland. Wars in Ireland continued, on and off, for a few hundred years until Henry VIII prevailed upon the Irish government (that is, the Irish nobles) to declare him King of Ireland. The Irish ‘troubles’ didn’t end there. For several hundred more years, various factions tried to disengage themselves from English rule until a major settlement was reached in which all of Ireland, except for six counties in the north east of the island, became an independent republic. Of course, there are still those in Northern Ireland who would prefer that the six counties were ruled from Dublin rather than London.

Scotland’s story is a bit more complicated. Although there were invasions of Scotland by kings of England, Scotland was never conquered by Normans, nor by their descendants. But the Normans did take over in Scotland; they were invited in by the Scottish kings. Malcolm III rather liked the feudal system operated by the Normans and tried to move Scotland away from the clan system (tanistry), which allowed the Clan chiefs (effectively) to elect the king. Malcolm’s family, known as the Canmores, wanted instead to keep the crown within their family, and feudalism provided the legal framework in which that could happen. By replacing clan leaders with Norman nobles, the Canmores acquired the support they needed to remain in power. Feudalism turned out to be no more fool proof as a system of succession than tanistry and wars of succession often followed the death of a monarch.

The king who was most successful in the change to feudalism was Malcolm III’s son, David. When young, David spent some time at the English court where he became ‘Normanised’. His early reign in Scotland was marked by years of the clans trying to remove him so that they could elect a king in the traditional way. David countered this by replacing troublesome clan chiefs with Norman nobles that he invited to Scotland to keep the clans in check.

One such noble was Walter fitz Alain whom David appointed as the first High Steward of Scotland (a feudal office also known as ‘dapifer’ or ‘seneschal’). The appointment was later made hereditary, which made Walter’s family the second most powerful family in Scotland. Walter’s descendants adopted the surname ‘Stewart’ in recognition of their status in Scotland. The Stewarts (changed to ‘Stuart’ by Mary Queen of Scots) wrapped themselves in tartan to look more Scottish and through astute marriages, became rulers of Scotland in their own right.

The Norman takeover in Scotland moved full circle when James VI (Stuart) moved south to become James I of England. The Norman conquest of all the British Isles was now complete. This story is, so far, the story of the nobility of the British Isles, not of the ordinary people. To those at the bottom of the social structure, the changes looked like the ‘English’ nobility (i.e. the Normans), using different strategies for each of the kingdoms of the British Isles, gradually taking over. Attempts to democratise what had become a ‘United Kingdom’ have done little to convince

the people that they live in a ‘united kingdom’. To the citizens of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the present structure feels like an English empire, where the “English” government in London decides what is good for the smaller nations. Devolution has not dampened the fires of rebellion. There is still a desire for more change.

The situation has been made even more complex, and stressful, over the UK’s (or, was it England’s?) decision to exit the European Union. What many cannot understand is why would Scotland want to leave the UK, where they have some representation in government (albeit a weak one) but remain in the EU where they have no representation. (The EU Parliament (elected) can only discuss what the EU Commission (unelected) says they can. Any decisions made by the EU Parliament must go back to the EU Commission for implementation.)

The question of who governs and by what authority they govern, is probably one of the most important issues of the moment. By whose authority does a parliament in London, in which Scottish representatives have little influence, decide matters which govern how Scottish people live? Similar questions apply for the citizens of Wales and Northern Ireland. Even the English are dissatisfied that there is no English parliament for English matters. The structure that we have currently, is one which has been developed over the centuries by those in power.

Is it cynical to believe that the decisions over how power is granted is made by those in power to keep them in place, while convincing the electorate that it is they that control power? All the changes can be traced back to the Norman conquest of England and the nobles’ efforts to extend their power, by curbing the monarch’s power for the benefit of ‘the people’ – meaning for the benefit of ‘the nobles’.

Is it time now for the descendants of those nobles, finally to acknowledge that the real power comes from those who are governed and that if each citizen, where-ever in the UK they live, does not have an equal influence on how the laws that govern them, are made, there will be continued strife?

(It is also my belief that the EU will never become a settled political unit until it finds a way to become a democratic organisation.)