

The crisis in the body politic

A Frail Constitution

The government's contortions over the poll tax betoken more than a passing cramp. Relations between the central state and other levels of government have been in disarray for more than 20 years. The poll tax was only the last of a series of increasingly desperate expedients designed to keep the system on its feet without addressing the problems which were causing it to stumble.

The reorganisation of London government in the 1960s, the reorganisation of local government in the rest of the country in the early 1970s, the devolution fiasco towards the end of the decade and the rate-capping of the 1980s were earlier chapters in the same saga. Behind all of them lay the same fundamental questions: how should the British state frame a territorial constitution suited to the late 20th century? How much autonomy should be enjoyed by geographical entities within its borders? What entities, chosen on what basis, should enjoy any autonomy whatever? But the British political class could not bring itself to ask these questions, much less to answer them. And so it staggered on, from stop-gap to stop-gap.

Part of the explanation lies in the rule-of-thumb empiricism and disdain for systematic thinking which have always been the hallmarks of British elites. But there is a deeper reason as well. The alternative to *ad hoc* staggering would have been a systematic reconstruction of the territorial constitution, based upon a coherent set of principles. The search for principles would have raised painful and divisive questions about the nature of the British state and even about the identity of the British people. It would have exposed the contradiction between the myth of local democracy which has traditionally underpinned the claims of local government and the fetish of parliamentary absolutism which underpins the powers of central government.

British politicians would have been forced to decide whether they really believed in local democracy at all, or whether they wanted central government to be omniscient as well as all-powerful. In either case, they would have had to justify their choices and come to terms with the consequences.

It would also have exposed the contradiction between singular sovereignty and multiple nationhoods. The seams laboriously sewn by the Acts of Union of the 16th and early 18th centuries, which still define the political relationship between the three nations of this island, would have unravelled. It would have become clear that the dominant English conception of Britain and the British identity is different from the Welsh conception and incompatible with the Scottish conception: that the structure and rhetoric of the British state are the products of the English conception, not



David Marquand

of the Scottish or Welsh ones: and that if that structure and rhetoric were to change so as to accommodate the Scots and Welsh, the identity and governance of the English would *ipso facto* change as well. No wonder British government after British government did its best to keep sleeping dogs comatose.

Confusion over the territorial constitution of the British state has gone hand in hand with a similar confusion over its place in the emerging European union of which it is supposed to be part. Here too the story of the 1980s differs only in

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degree from the stories of the 1970s and even the 1960s. The European Community is, and always has been, supranational, not international. The notion of power-sharing, of divided sovereignty, of the coexistence of different tiers of government all with an equal claim to represent the people, is fundamental to it.

Majority voting in the Council of Ministers did not suddenly appear from nowhere in the Single European Act. It was provided for in the Rome Treaty, as were direct elections to the European Parliament. When Britain applied to join the Community, she applied to join an entity whose explicit goal was the 'ever-closer union' of the peoples of Europe. Whether that goal was federal, pre-federal or confederal, or whether it

should have been described in quite different language, as yet uninvited, was a secondary matter. The point is that it was logically incompatible with the British tradition of undivided sovereignty and Westminster absolutism: and that in joining the Community the British state had therefore entangled itself in another set of contradictions.

As with the contradictions of the territorial constitution, the reaction of the British political class was to pretend that nothing had happened; that the supranationalism written in to the Rome Treaty was nothing but a rhetorical flourish; and that absolute Westminster sovereignty could co-exist with Community membership. That pretence shaped the European policies of the Macmillan and Wilson governments in the 1960s, the Heath government's defence of the treaty of accession in the early 1970s and the Wilson-Callaghan government's approach to the Community in the middle and late 1970s. The twists and turns of the Thatcher governments – the fights to 'get our own money back', followed by the decision to accept the Single European Act, followed by the Bruges speech and the fight against monetary union – were more flagrant than the twists and turns of previous governments, but they were part of the same syndrome.

Now room for twisting and turning is running out. The government's alternative to the poll tax will bring the spectre of an omniscient central state closer than it has been since Cromwell's major generals. The Scottish Claim of Right and Constitutional Convention have called the general principles of the Union into question. The Community's intergovernmental conferences on monetary and political union, however short they fall of the Brussels Commission's hopes, will drive further chinks into the waterlogged hulk of national sovereignty.

For 11 years, Margaret Thatcher tried to stave off the crisis of the British state which had loomed so large under her immediate predecessors. Her fall – the product, it should be remembered, of a fatal coincidence of internal territorial unrest with external European pressure – proved that even she could not stave it off for ever. Sooner or later, it will have to be resolved – either democratically from the bottom up, or autocratically from the top down. The faint outlines of an autocratic solution can already be detected in the government's poll tax and European policies. Albeit rather timidly, the Liberal Democrats have proposed a democratic one. The crucial question for the future of the British Left is whether Labour can transcend its undemocratic structure and centralist past and trump the Liberal Democrats' cards. ●

Brian Morton talks to Ken Follett

Airport Thriller?

Ken Follett is a best-selling novelist in 20 languages

Is there a connection between your political activity and your fiction?

Very little. People who are politically aware, reading my books, can sometimes guess that I'm left of centre, but that's as strong as it gets. I would like to write a novel that represented my feelings about politics. But it doesn't seem to happen.

Politics and fiction are in a way alternatives. The novel is always about the individual in society – the old cliché. The individual changes his state in life. He goes from rich to poor, or poor to rich, or he may be in love at the beginning and married at the end. These are the characteristic things that happen. But they're all about how the individual's life changes. And if the novel is any good, the changes happen because of what the individual is, and what he or she does.

Politics is about changing your life through collective action. So it's hard to see how a novel could be about politics.

But your political sympathies must be engaged with your characters?

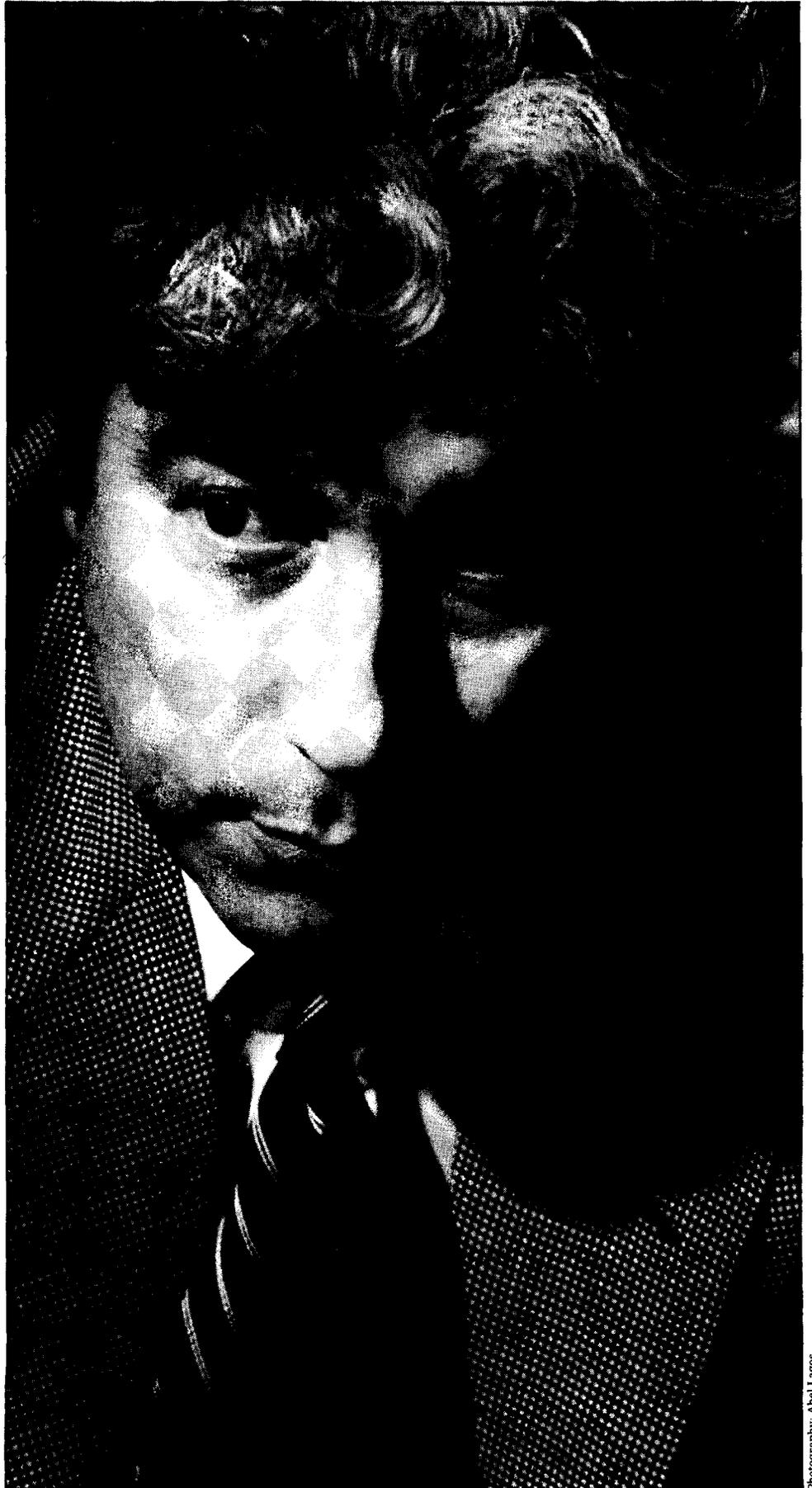
Oh yes. One of the main characters in my new book is a young girl whose father is a leading fascist. I suppose there is one thing that's different about my books. A Conservative popular novelist, if they put a fascist in a book, would almost certainly have him German or Italian.

I do it for artistic reasons rather than political reasons. It's much more interesting to have an upright Englishman, with the right accent, and a house in the country and so on, making all these fascist remarks. But there's no question but that these fascists are the villains in the book.

Thrillers are always conservative with a small 'c', always about defending your own territory. In the Soviet Union they have thrillers on television, and they're about square-jawed, blue-eyed KGB agents defending the revolution from swarthy, greasy CIA men. Or they used to be. So my thrillers, like all thrillers, are about defending some kind of status quo.

Do books like yours affect the political process in more subtle ways, reflecting a way of looking at the world, perhaps creating an atmosphere in which change is seen as necessary.

Well certainly it is a noted feature of my books that I have strong women characters and they play powerful roles in



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