

Caledonian Dreaming: Gerry Hassan at Blackwell's, Edinburgh



[Gerry Hassan](#) knows he's going to vote on 18th September 2014; he's even 99% sure which way. Most of the audience at Blackwell's on Wednesday night seemed to feel much the same. Many people still have tiny wavering doubts but as Hassan says, 'Often the most interesting debate is the one you have with yourself.'

Hassan is a writer, journalist, broadcaster; he's recently gained a doctorate and he's a Research Fellow in Cultural Policy at the University of West Scotland. He's produced the [Changin Scotland](#) weekends at [The Ceilidh Place](#) in Ullapool for twelve years. His latest book is [Caledonian Dreaming: the Quest for a Different Scotland](#); he wrote it to put the current independence vote in a 'larger, wider, more historical context.' He wanted to look at how Scotland has changed over the years, and what further changes the referendum will bring about. Whatever the result on 18th September, Hassan says change will come, much of it unintended and much not fully understood for years to come.

In *Caledonian Dreaming*, Hassan examines three issues: the nature of the UK, the nature of contemporary Scotland, and what independence is and could or should be about. We are all, he says, products of many subjective influences; our backgrounds, our emotions, our experiences. We need to remember this to understand the people on all sides of the debate. Hassan's parents, like most of their generation, believed in many uncontested truths: the future would be better, working class people would have more opportunities,

and education would become an uplifting, liberating experience. They and all their friends believed in Britain. All of these 'certainties' are now problematic; the future is unknown and unreliable.

The UK is, according to Hassan (and he has the figures to prove it), one of the most unequal countries in the developed world. There are huge regional economic differences, with London emerging as a 'world city.' Amongst developed economies only Japan has more indebtedness than the UK; most of this debt is tied up in corporate finance and will be a huge drag on the UK for years to come. Politically, Scots think that UKIP will never win a seat in their country; there will certainly be a contrast between the English and Scottish vote, but a UKIP success in Scotland may be more likely than people imagine.

✘ Although some changes have been made – the Scottish Parliament exists and the SNP has achieved its wish to have a referendum – it has proven to be a fallacy that a social state can be built on top of the status quo. The House of Lords and its hereditary peers still exist – Hassan repeated [Mark Thomas's](#) recent revelation that it is still a legal offence even to *imagine* the end of the monarchy – and many archaic relics of feudalism are still with us. Despite thirty years of Labour government, the power balance has not only failed to shift towards the people – it is moving in the opposite direction. Quoting Enoch Powell, Hassan asserts that the UK has never become a fully functioning democracy. This means, he says, that Scotland isn't one either, and it is too easy just to blame the British state and the Tories for everything; the issues lie within Scotland itself. The Act of Union in 1707 created an elite autonomy rather than a democracy, that elite, and not the common people, retained civic authority and Scots identity.

Hassan's view is that modern Scotland is defined by certain myths. Scots believe that they have an egalitarian country,

that Scotland is a land of educational opportunity, and that they hold power to account – they ‘don’t do deference.’ In fact, he says, Scotland is almost as unequal as England, bright working class children are being disadvantaged and few get into the better universities. If Scots want these myths to match reality, they need to act. He sees an empathy problem in Scottish life – for example, he says that domestic violence in Glasgow plummeted when Rangers FC fell out of First Division football, but both Celtic and Rangers FCs publicly denied that there was any link. Hassan points to the crises in many Scottish institutions; the Royal Bank of Scotland, Rangers FC. the Roman Catholic Church; the media, he says, have been largely too interested in ‘succulent lamb journalism’ to ask the right questions about what has been going on. What are ‘Scottish values’? he asks; they’re not always as good as we may think.

Power, says Hassan, has become far too centralised, not just in politics but also in public bodies such as the police and the water authorities. There should be more local government, more local involvement. He sees many household names declining – the [Church of Scotland](#), the [Labour Party](#), the mainstream TV channels. Only the [Herald](#) has come out in favour of independence; the Tory press, says Hassan, are ‘waging a war of disinformation.’

Hassan asserts that the independence debate is very narrow; we are being given two versions of ‘insider Scotland’, one from the Labour Party and one from the [SNP](#), neither is enough and both have their own stakes to protect. We need, he says, to look beyond the constitutional debate to what we want to be in future. Major concerns such as the NHS and the welfare state must be examined; we must consider what values we really want Scotland to have, and what we can do about the gap between words and actions. The main players fob us off, saying that we can talk about these things later, but they need to be addressed now. The debate should be about democracy and

culture, about the people of Scotland, not just politicians, 'the full powers of parliament' or 'continuity Scotland' – two buzz phrases that Hassan particularly deprecates.

The work of Irish journalist Finton O'Toole, whose books include several on the rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger economy and corruption in Irish political life, inspired Hassan to ask people for their suggestions as to how Scotland could become a true economic and social democracy, and he lists these ideas at the back of his book. O'Toole says that Scotland's myths (eg that it is 'warm and welcoming') are just that – myths with no basis in truth. He thinks Scotland needs to 'grow up', stop blaming others for its troubles and take the 'worthwhile but scary journey' – O'Toole calls it 'the art of growing up.' This, says Hassan, is the opportunity Scots now have. If they want their country to be more egalitarian and a land of educational opportunity, they need to act to make that happen.

✘ The author also focuses on the 'missing voters' – the huge numbers of people who simply do not bother to vote. It is not just the young and the poor – the worst turnout in a recent election was in two affluent areas of Aberdeen city centre. People have left the debate, and the remaining voters are not representative of the electorate. He sees a need for more political participation and hopes that the referendum, whatever its outcome, may act as a catalyst to re-engage the voters. He is heartened to see a new generation of 20-somethings becoming politicised across Europe. They see that the system that promised them so much has failed; it is clear to them that the financial crisis was far more serious than first thought and that financial institutions were selling a dream whilst ordinary people made money for the few at the top. Young people are creating brilliant new ideas and coming up with new ways to 'do politics'; they see through all the lies. The old party model may have failed, but some sort of 'vessels' are still needed to provide leadership, as only

relatively few people want to be career activists. Although most Scots do not join political parties, Hassan sees their existence as necessary for the foreseeable future at least; however, he says the system must change – there has been too much collusion in the traditional parties. Whether the vote is Yes or No, something is shifting; young people are combining politics and activism, and they will carry through the many changes that are going to come.

An impassioned, engaging and entertaining speaker, Gerry Hassan received a warm and appreciative response from yet another packed audience (people were even sitting on the stairs.) Whatever their view on independence may be, everyone will have left this event with plenty to consider about the dreams and realities of Caledonia.

Caledonian Dreaming is published by [Luath Press](#) and available from [Blackwell's](#).

Gerry Hassan will be talking about Caledonian Dreaming again at [Word Power Books](#), West Nicholson Street on 14th May 2014 at 6.30pm.