

Kate Megan Turner

'A Beacon of Progressive Policy'¹: A Study of Contemporary Visual Campaigns for Equal Marriage in Scotland

The following analysis requires initial engagement with Benedict Anderson's theorisation of 'imagined communities', which recognises nationhood as constructed; he states: 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (6). In other words, nationalism 'is a process of calling a nation into being, practices and acts of bringing the "imagined community" into life, into mass imaginary' (Kulpa 52). Once acknowledged that the nation is 'called into being', one may recognise that it is generally constructed in masculinised and heterosexist terms; Kulpa continues, 'there is no doubt that nationalism is, in most cases, a practice which grows and feeds back to heteronormativity' (55). With specific reference to Scottish nationalism, a masculinised and heterosexist national consciousness is easily traceable; Scotland is, as Jones writes, 'famously extreme in its national investment in historical men and male identities', thus 'Scottish cultural anxiety often manifests in gendered terms' (17)².

With this in mind, the current situation in Scotland is particularly striking as the Scottish National Party (SNP) support marriage equality alongside the build-up to their referendum on Scottish independence; the inference being that Scottish pride will be ignited via its becoming - in SNP Joe FitzPatrick's words - 'a beacon of progressive policy' (qtd Littauer *Pink News* 01/02/12). This particular intersection of nationalism and homosexual law reform requires attention in order to assess the significance that contemporary Scottish nationalism holds for homosexual liberation, and the implications that the concept of 'marriage' holds for the idea of 'progression'.

Images of 'Scotland' are central to the visual campaign for equal marriage. This is immediately evident in the appropriation of the Scottish flag into the Equality Network's campaign logo (Figure

¹ FitzPatrick qtd *Pink News* 01/02/12

² See also Christianson, Aileen & Alison Lumsden. *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers* and Whyte, Christopher. *Gendering the Nation*.

3)³. One must consider whether this infers an assimilation of homosexuality into traditional heterosexual marriage, which is used to support a traditional heterosexual national identity, or if this infers a changing Scotland, holding 'equality' and 'permissiveness' as central to its identity.



The main point of consideration in this discussion is the fact that the 'progressiveness' of same-sex marriage is contentious. Moore's response to David Cameron's Conservative backing of such reform helpfully surmises the view that the subtext to granting marriage equality reads as: 'you can be gay as long as you are domesticated and committed to the idea of "normality"'. Moore proceeds in her argument to call for acknowledgement of the heterosexual and patriarchal tradition instilled in marriage that makes the concept of same-sex marriage regressive for a queer liberation campaign: 'marriage is an institution set up to protect property and patriarchal rights that we choose to overlay with our need for sex, romance, passion and companionship . . . this is not about conservatives accepting homosexuality, but about making homosexuality conservative.' ('The Only Way is Marriage?' 15/10/11). One must question how this critique, specific to Cameron's Conservative backing of marriage, is applicable to the Scottish context.

The visual campaign used by the Equality Network in Scotland acknowledges the interrelation of marriage and nationhood. Their poster campaign (Figures 4 & 5)⁴ uses the trope of wedding figures on top of a wedding cake; the two men wear traditional Scottish formal dress and the two women wear the typical white wedding dress, which together creates the image of the 'traditional' wedding - a considerable part of which stems from the maintenance of 'masculine' men and 'feminine' women in the images. 'Scottishness' is forefronted in the poster of the men by their wearing kilts, while nationalism is represented in Figure 5 by the insertion of the Scottish flag as a backdrop;

³ <http://www.equalmarriage.org.uk/>. Last accessed 21/02/12

⁴ Figure 4: <http://www.equalmarriage.org.uk/campaign/news>. Last accessed 21/02/12

Figure 5: <http://www.equalmarriage.org.uk/>. Last accessed 21/02/12

holding these up as images particular to Scotland. The creation of the typical wedding image that runs alongside images of the nation shrouds these images in tradition; Winning states ‘the sanctity of heterosexual marriage is inextricably tied to nationhood’ (285). However, where homosexual marriage is packaged into heteronormative conventions, the implication is that this form of marriage can equally uphold nationhood.



Figure 4



Figure 5

Analysis of this visual campaign holds the potential to draw pessimistic conclusions for a ‘progressive’ Scotland; it suggests that homosexuality is not only being marshalled into the ‘normal’ idea of marriage but also into that of ‘traditional’ heterosexist Scotland. If one is to accept the argument that equal marriage makes homosexuality conservative, and adheres to tradition in terms of both marriage conventions and Scottish nationhood, then the contemporary situation may be read as a continuation of Scottish nationality built typically upon dispelling, though currently upon assimilating - yet always upon silencing - the country’s queer minority.

However, I propose that this is not a satisfactory conclusion on the contemporary situation in Scotland; significance lies in the striking differences between the UK Conservative proposals on same-sex marriage in comparison to the SNP propositions. The differences in consultations unveil, initially, a far more detailed analysis carried out by the SNP, in contrast to a fairly lacklustre attempt

by the UK Conservatives⁵. The most significant differences, however, lie in the detail of the proposed amendments. The SNP proposal entails allowing religious same-sex marriages to take place, though will not force institutions to conduct such ceremonies. While this option will most likely not be taken up by, for example, the Catholic church, other religions such as the Quakers, Metropolitan Community Church, Unitarians, Liberal Judaism and Pagan Federation are openly backing the equal marriage campaign (BBC News 28/09/11). In contrast, the Conservative proposal is 'to make no changes to religious marriages. This will continue to only be legally possible between a man and a woman'⁶.

The SNP will also debate allowing heterosexual civil partnerships while this possibility is not, at the current moment, being considered by Cameron's government. These are key differences in strategy, for the consideration of heterosexual civil partnerships prioritises the notion of personal choice and truly infers a sense of 'equality' over 'marriage'. This does not fall in line with the idea of 'strengthening' marriage for, if this proposal is passed, civil partnerships will be available to all regardless of gender or sexuality - just as marriage will be. Meanwhile the Conservative proposal is as concerned with reassuring heterosexist traditionalists as it is with 'equality'; regardless of the desire of a religious institution to conduct same-sex marriages, English law will enforce that this is only possible for heterosexual couples. The failure to consider heterosexual civil partnerships also holds marriage up as a 'gold standard', of which, as long as they have no desire to make it religious, same-sex couples will be allowed to partake in. In this sense, then, Scotland does seem more 'progressive' than the UK Conservatives.

Thus, the suggestion is that flaws lie not in Scottish policy but in the visual campaign implemented by the Equality Network that presents an image of assimilation, which aside from being generally reductive also does not reflect the proposed changes to Scots law. On the other hand, The Liberal

⁵ Scottish Consultation: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/09/05153328/0>. Last accessed 30/03/12

Westminster Consultation: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/about-us/consultations/equal-civil-marriage/>. Last accessed 30/03/12

⁶ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/about-us/consultations/equal-civil-marriage/>. Last accessed 30/03/12

Youth Scotland poster (Figure 6)⁷ depicts a reordering of marriage, and thus conveys marriage reform that more accurately reflects the contemporary Scottish situation. It disposes with the rigid gender roles present in Figures 4 and 5 and - quite literally - 'mixes up' the gendering of the couple thereby dismantling the traditional 'bride and groom' image. Furthermore, it is significant that there are no markers of nationalism in this image; the only marker of this image as part of the Scottish campaign is the 'Liberal Youth Scotland' logo. Rather than blue and white, pink is heavily utilised, which infers an LGBT 'slant' and plays with the 'pink wedding' idea, thus preserving a gay identity within the wedding format. The scattered rectangular shapes in the background also work to create an image of fragmentation, suggesting the queer tactic of deconstructing what marriage actually means as opposed to accepting that homosexuality will be 'made to fit' the current idea of marriage.



Figure 6

One must acknowledge, then, that the overall visual campaign for equal marriage sends mixed ideological messages, positing a sense of radical progression alongside assimilation. One may reject the accusation that the SNP's concern is to 'make homosexuality conservative' in the run up to independence, as the Equality Network's posters promote a very different sense of marriage to the consultation itself. It is also important to remember that these posters are not governmental promotions, thus, their utilising of the assimilative tactic must be understood as exemplifying what this particular group considers the most effective method of gaining support for the issue. The proposed reform is better represented by Liberal Youth Scotland's campaign for it infers a redefining

⁷ <http://www.lyscotland.org/campaigns/equality/>. Last accessed 04/03/12

of marriage, which takes 'equality' as its main objective. In these terms, then, there is a sense in which Scotland is legitimately entitled to a sense of a progressive identity. This is certainly a Scottish identity constructed very differently to the heterosexist tendencies with which Anderson's 'imagined communities' are created. Indeed, Scotland's past treatment of homosexual law reform stands in direct opposition to the current moment in which the nation is seemingly reordering its boundaries. It seems expedient to briefly consider this past in an attempt to delineate the factors behind this political turnaround, with the hope of further assessing the potential in this moment of increased liberalisation in Scottish politics.

Scotland's past treatment of homosexual law reform exemplifies the process of dispelling homosexuality in the interests of preserving the masculinised, heterosexist nation; it failed to decriminalise homosexuality until 1980, and lagged behind England and Wales by thirteen years in realising this reform. Roger Davison has thoroughly researched the 'Scottish experience' of the period 1950 to 1980, in which homosexual law reform was debated, oft contested, and finally, in Davidson's words, 'reluctantly' passed. His findings unveil a strand of nationalism in the Scottish psyche of the time reliant upon the dispelling of homosexuality from national consciousness. This can be located as the driving force behind Scotland's omission from the 1967 Sexual Offences Act which decriminalized private homosexual acts between consenting adults over the age of 21 in England and Wales.

Davidson uncovers overwhelming opposition to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Scotland which attends to a fear of contagion of the 'community' or 'nation'. Examples include the argument articulated by James Adair, one of three Scottish members of the Wolfenden committee, who became a key figure in Scottish opposition to the proposals for reform. His opposition was based on the notion that homosexual decriminalisation was 'contrary to the best interests of the community' and implemented 'very serious effects on the whole moral fabric of social life' (qtd 'A Field for Private Members' 190). Further, the general assembly of the Church of Scotland's reaction was that homosexuality was 'so repugnant to the general consensus of opinion throughout the

nation that, even if private and personal, they should be regarded as both morally wrong and legally punishable' (qtd 'A Field for Private Members' 192)⁸. The Scotland uncovered by Davidson falls in line with academic notions of the imaginative exclusion of homosexuality in constructing nationhood. Current Scottish legal reform thus stands in direct contrast to the Scotland of less than fifty years ago, which clearly conformed to the construction of a nation via the dispelling of that which threatened the masculinity and heterosexuality tied up with this national identity.

In light of the striking change one must consider what lies behind this move to reshape the nation. This is yet to be determined, but it seems necessary to at least speculate on the issue. One cannot conceive of the SNP championing liberalism in purely left-wing ideological terms; they are, after all, working toward the political end of achieving Scottish independence. What can be acknowledged, however, is that their changing stance recognises that traditional notions of Scottishness will not win a referendum on independence; the young and liberal voices in Scotland are becoming ever more audible - indeed, it has been widely noted that the equal marriage campaign is largely driven by Scottish young people. Opinion polls show that while 60% of the Scottish population are in favour of equal marriage, 74% of 16-25 year olds in Scotland are in favour of reform (Littauer *Pink News* 01/02/12). Indeed, Sophie Tolley, director of the largest LGBT student society in Scotland last year, has commented that the SNP's treatment of equal marriage is directly congruent with their proving their ability to take on the responsibility of Scottish independence⁹.

In short, it seems the SNP have recognised that they must appeal to young voters, who will only support an independent Scotland if it accords with their values. It is arguable, then, that the SNP stance on the issue, while driven by the political motivation for independence, is shaped by recognition that the young electorate are reimagining Scotland as a liberal forward-thinking society.

⁸ For further findings on this period of Scottish history see also Davidson, Roger. 'Law, Medicine and the Treatment of Homosexual Offenders in Scotland 1950-80', 'The Sexual State: Sexuality and Scottish Governance, 1950-80', and 'Sexuality and the State: The Campaign for Scottish Homosexual Law Reform, 1967-80'. There is also a forthcoming book entitled *The Sexual State: Sexuality and Scottish Governance 1950-80* by Davidson & Davis which was not published at the time of writing this paper.

⁹ Interview conducted 14/02/12

In this sense, the boundaries are being redrawn; Scotland's national identity is being reimagined, from the grassroots up, which holds potential that nationalised homophobia may indeed be replaced by the type of contemporary Scotland conceived of by McCrone: 'to be Scottish is to define oneself as progressive and forward-looking' (107). Moreover, this looks set to become an identity grounded firmly in a sophisticated legal system, permitting same-sex religious ceremonies yet not forcing this upon unwilling institutions, and allowing for marriage and civil partnerships for all, regardless of gender or sexuality.

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