

What Do American Scots Really Want from Their Cousins Back Home in Scotland?

John King Bellasai *

Recently, during her visit to my city of Washington, DC, First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon went out of her way on at least two occasions to insert in her public comments to the media a reference to the fact that there are more people here in the United States today of Scottish ancestry than all the Scots back home in Scotland, and that maintaining a dialog with Diaspora Scots in America, and elsewhere, is an important thing for Scotland to do—because we are kin. In neither of those instances was making a bold statement like that intrinsic to the First Minister answering the question she was being asked.

Sitting here listening to her, I said to myself, wait a minute, this is something new! Not only is it a different tone but it demonstrates an openness and respect that has long been missing in our relationship with our cousins in Scotland.

For too many years, American Scots and native Scots have been talking past each other when it comes to Diaspora matters. Most native Scots, including but certainly not limited to those in government, have taken a left-brain approach that stresses the economic benefits of Diaspora engagement—selling Scottish goods and services in America and attracting young Americans to study in Scotland. At the same time, Diaspora Scots have taken a markedly right-brain approach: We demonstrate an emotional attachment to Scotland, its culture and heritage at every opportunity—something that puzzles most back home and turns off many as being *Brigadoonish*. And we are puzzled, even hurt, when our cousins back home stand back from embracing us with equal enthusiasm.

But an emotional attachment to the land of one's origins is standard fare for immigrants, regardless of where they came from. Though most Scots who left for America did so reluctantly at best, leaving for economic reasons, or were forced out for political reasons (the Jacobite rebellions, etc.) or by their landlords (the highland Clearances), remarkably few were bitter toward their homeland. Rather, they sought out other Scots as soon as they arrived in order to keep their ethnic connections. And from my experience, newly arriving Scots (and I've met many) continue to do so today. (The original role of St. Andrew's societies everywhere—they have been common in America since colonial times and remain numerous today—was to welcome in immigrant Scots. And these and other Scottish heritage organizations continue to perform this function across our country to this day.)

The vast majority of Scottish immigrants passed down to their children and grandchildren their love for their homeland and its culture. Though many American Scots trace their Scottish origins back six, even ten generations, this love of the homeland often remains remarkably strong over time. Especially if they retain the surname, American Scots are usually anxious to learn all they can about their immediate forebears and the circumstances that led them to emigrate. But they also want to connect with others of the same name, not only here in America but back in Scotland, too. More than most other immigrant groups, who tend to retain a close affection mainly for the native town or county their ancestors hailed from, American Scots tend to relate most strongly to their surname—something which continues to drive membership in the many clan and family societies which are active in America today, and to drive genealogical research. (Surveys repeatedly show that next to gardening, genealogy is by far the most popular hobby here in the States.)

Scottish-Americans want from native Scots exactly what Scots (who by a sizable majority just recently decided to remain within the United Kingdom) want from their English neighbors: They want to be respected, to be appreciated for who they are and what they contribute, and to be heard. Diaspora Scots want a seat at the table, to be considered part of the family.

The new Irish Government Diaspora Plan reads like that, on every page. (In its introduction, it refers to the Irish at home and those of Irish ancestry abroad as “one family” and continues that theme throughout the document.) The Scottish Government's 2009 Diaspora Engagement Plan, in contrast, makes only passing mention of the Ancestral Diaspora and its value to Scotland. This is too bad—a big missed opportunity in this age of instantaneous information exchange and global networking. The appointment by the Scottish Government of a Diaspora Minister—something the Irish Government has now done—whose job is more to listen to the needs and desires of those in the Diaspora than it is to tell them how they should relate to Scotland—would go far toward implementing the sentiments the First Minister recently expressed during her American visit.

But most Scottish-Americans really don't care that much about connecting to “officialdom,” by which I mean the Scottish Government—any Scottish Government. We really are much less interested in who the government of the day is in Scotland than some may suggest. That's for the Scottish people to decide. Most of us are keenly sensitive to the fact that we do not vote in Scotland. And so we are consciously careful not to insert ourselves in subjects that are for the people of Scotland, another country, to decide—things like the form of government they should have, who can best represent their interests, how to use their land and other natural resources, etc. We here in America have enough trouble sorting those things out for ourselves—and in the view of most here, are not doing a very good job of it, either. That said, regardless of how else we see things, all Diaspora Scots here in America are enormously proud of the post-devolution renaissance under way in so many areas in Scotland, as the Scottish people demonstrate to the entire world a reawakened sense of national pride and self-determination.

The size of the Scottish Diaspora in America is a topic of broad discussion. The number nine million is probably a conservative one. This is not only a potential consumer market—the way Scotland and native Scots have long tended to see it—but a global resource for networking and communication. What we in the Diaspora really want is to connect people-to-people. We feel a keen sense of kinship—even if our ancestors departed long ago. Most Scottish-Americans want to visit Scotland at least once in their lifetime—many do, and quite a few visit regularly. We want to connect, reconnect. Many of us have living relatives there—I know I do. Meeting them was the high point of my first visit, almost 30 years ago.

Ancestral tourism is a big part of the draw for us in the Diaspora, but not the whole picture. Scottish-Americans want to engage with modern Scotland, too. But we do not want to be forced to choose between celebrating the history and culture of the land our ancestors came from and engaging with the modern nation of Scotland as it is today. We look at many other modern nations—the Japanese, for instance, the Gulf state Arabs, the Pakistanis, and others—whose people live quite successfully in the modern world, yet know and value their ethnic heritage and publicly celebrate it, including their clan identities and history. We see no conflict between the two sets of interests.

Far from being schizophrenic, this looking-back-while-looking-forward approach is commonplace among Diaspora peoples and presents no inconsistencies for us in the Scottish Diaspora. We want the relationship with Scotland that Irish-Americans have with Ireland--about blood ties, heritage and culture. Those things are timeless. The more Scotland, its institutions, its outreach messaging, and its marketing efforts embrace this truism, the closer our ties will become.

**** (A past president of the St. Andrew's Society of Washington, DC, Mr. Bellasai is currently President of the Council of Scottish Clans & Associations (COSCA) and Vice President of the National Capital Tartan Day Committee. His maternal grandfather emigrated from Stirlingshire to America at the turn of the last century.)***