The Smith Institute

The Smith Institute is an independent think tank that has been set up to look at issues which flow from the changing relationship between social values and economic imperatives.

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enlightenment lectures 2002

A series of lectures held at
the University of Edinburgh between
February and April 2002

Edited by Ben Shimshon
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Preface
Wilf Stevenson, Director, Smith Institute

The Smith Institute is an independent think tank, which has been set up to undertake research and education in issues that flow from the changing relationship between social values and economic imperatives. In recent years the institute has centred its work on the policy implications arising from the interactions of equality, enterprise and equity.

The series of lectures here transcribed were held as a tribute to the late Donald Dewar, Scotland’s first First Minister. Their aim was to examine some of the ideas that flourished in 18th-century Scotland in the period now known as the Scottish Enlightenment and to bring out those aspects of that period’s political and economic philosophy that still hold relevance for today’s world. Over the course of the four lectures, the ideas of Adam Ferguson, Joseph Black, David Hume and Adam Smith were each discussed by an academic of distinction and by a contemporary commentator or politician. It became apparent that many of their concerns, and their approaches to them, resonate closely with present-day issues such as the development of a healthy civil society, links between academia and enterprise, the balance between economic liberalisation and social fairness, and the problems of moral relativity.

This group of lectures was extremely well attended, with upwards of 800 attendees over the four evenings. Each of the events had a lively exchange of views with the audience, curtailed only because of shortness of time.

The Smith Institute is grateful to the University of Edinburgh and in particular to the then principal, Lord Sutherland, and the then information officer, Ray Footman, for their help in organising these events. The Institute also gratefully acknowledges the financial support of Pfizer Inc and of Scottish Power plc.
Foreword
Ben Shimshon, Smith Institute

At first glance, a discussion of the Scottish Enlightenment may appear to sit uneasily with the contemporary focus of the Smith Institute. An examination of the ideas and work of a group of 18th century Scotsmen may seem to fall outside the remit of a think tank researching 21st century policy for today’s very different society. There are, however, many connections between the values of the late John Smith MP, from whom the think tank takes its name, and those championed by Scottish Enlightenment thinkers: cosmopolitanism, religious tolerance, social conviviality and moral, scientific and economic improvement. By asking that each topic be discussed not only by an academic of distinction but also by a contemporary commentator or politician, we hoped to square this circle.

What comes out of the excellent series of lectures transcribed here is not only the sense of a group of people who championed these values and who were central to their becoming embedded in our common political vocabulary; but also of a vibrant culture of debate and engagement between people across the boundaries of interests and disciplines that are often considered separate and disparate.

The main facilitators of this rise of cross-fertilisation of ideas, practice and understanding were the clubs such as the Wise Club in Aberdeen, Glasgow’s Literary Society and the Select Society in Edinburgh. While such institutions seem outdated, the accounts presented here seem to show a paradigm of thought and discussion that may be said to represent examples of ‘joined-up thinking’ about diverse problems, the promotion of which is very much at the heart of the Smith Institute’s agenda. The clubs acted both as a space in which ideas were taken up and improved, or criticised and sunk, and as a conduit whereby the various institutions of Scotland, with which many of the enlightenment thinkers were involved, shared ideas and transferred knowledge.

The term ‘Scottish Enlightenment’ was first coined in 1900 by William Robert Scott, who identified in the lives and work of figures such as Adam Ferguson, Joseph Black, David Hume, Adam Smith and many others, a ‘diffusion of philosophic ideas in Scotland and the encouragement of speculative tastes among the men of culture’. This understanding, which highlights the elite nature of the movement and does little to describe the social and cultural drivers of the period, was soon supplanted by the analysis of historians such as Hugh Trevor Roper (Lord Dacre) and, later, Roger Emerson and M.A. Wood, who
depicted the Scottish Enlightenment in terms of its contribution to the development of certain areas of human thought and understanding. These historians stressed, variously, the development of political economy and the growth in a positive ‘scientism’ as the major contributions of the Scottish thinkers. However, recent investigations, such as that of Richard Sher, have approached the period less in relation to individual subjects or ‘streams of thought’ and have concentrated on finding a cultural definition of the Scottish Enlightenment. This approach acknowledges the advances in science and economics but sets them in the context of a growing culture of enquiry that embraced ethics, history and philosophy as part of a cultural agenda that promoted intellectual engagement with every aspect of contemporary Scottish life.

In his essay ‘An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?’, Immanuel Kant wrote that the ‘motto of enlightenment is ... Sapere Aude! Have courage to use your own understanding.’ He saw, in the process of enlightenment, “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity”; a growing desire to use the human capacity for free thought to analyse every axiom and dissect every accepted truth. At the core of the Scottish enlightenment culture was a firm belief in the social nature of human beings and of the importance of discussion and debate to the process of increasing human freedom of thought and rationality of action. Unlike many enlightenment thinkers from other areas, such as Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau, the Scots had very little truck with the idea of a social contract by which isolated man decided to become social. Adam Ferguson in his ‘Essay on the History of Civil Society’ insists that ‘mankind are to be taken in groupes, as they always subsisted.’ Adam Smith highlights this view of ‘man-in-society’, in both the ‘Wealth of Nations’ and in the ‘Theory of Moral Sentiments’, suggesting that an essential aspect of human happiness involves the need for approbation from one’s society, not only for the results of an action, but also for the motives behind it. Hume believed passionately in the need for people to be active members of ‘parties’ and factions, groupings that ensured a healthy political debate and a vibrant, mature, political life. He considered the interplay of these interest groups crucial to the formation of just laws and policies. The same belief in debate and discussion was played out in a practical fashion in Joseph Black’s concentration on teaching as a central part of his work and in his work across boundaries as a sort of 18th century ‘scientific consultant’.

This social element, the belief in the power of discussion and debate, that pervaded the Scottish Enlightenment is clearly established over the course of these lectures. As each discussion ranges from an overview of the thoughts, actions and interests of these thinkers into a consideration of their relevance to today’s society and today’s politics, we
hope that what comes to the fore is the value, the excitement and the importance of discussion and debate across a wide range of expertise and subjects. Such debate can lead to the development of a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the issues and problems that face us today and of the directions in which we wish to drive policy.
Lecture 1

Adam Ferguson: How civil will future society be?

A lecture held on 25 February 2002 at the Playfair Library Hall, Old College, University of Edinburgh

Speakers:
Lord Dahrendorf, House of Lords

Professor Sir Neil MacCormick MEP, Regius Professor of Public Law, University of Edinburgh

Chair:
Professor Alice Brown, Professor of Politics, University of Edinburgh
Introduction
Professor Alice Brown, Professor of Politics, University of Edinburgh

The Enlightenment lectures have been organised by the University of Edinburgh in partnership with the Smith Institute as a tribute to the late Donald Dewar, Scotland’s first First Minister, whose sudden death in 2000 shocked and saddened all of us.

Over the course of the series we will welcome leading academics, scientists and political figures to the university to present and debate the work and ideas of Adam Ferguson, Joseph Black, David Hume and Adam Smith. In addressing their work, our aim is to ask how well their thinking has stood the test of time, and to consider how relevant their thoughts are to the issues facing modern society.

The Scottish Enlightenment of the 18th century was a period in which some of the greatest thinkers developed radical new ways of understanding the world. In a period during which Scotland was making the transition to a modern capitalistic economy, these thinkers offered new ideas about politics, science and morality.

The first of these lectures is entitled “How Civil Will Future Society Be?”, and will relate to the work of Adam Ferguson, professor of moral philosophy at Edinburgh. I am delighted to introduce Lord Dahrendorf, a most distinguished academic, who has had a wide and varied career and has held key positions in different parts of Europe. Lord Dahrendorf is also former director of the London School of Economics. Our second speaker is Professor Sir Neil MacCormick MEP. Professor MacCormick was a vice-principal at this university before taking up his parliamentary position. He is currently Regius Professor of public law and the law of nature and nations, and one of Scotland’s most renowned academic lawyers. In keeping with the ethos of the Enlightenment, these events are intended to stimulate debate and discussion and we will allow time for contributions and questions from the floor.
Address
Lord Dahrendorf, House of Lords

Professor Brown, ladies and gentlemen: the rediscovery of civil society is one of the most striking features of contemporary politics. For a century if not more, the dominant theme of political thought and action was the state, and its capacity for rational planning. Not surprisingly it had its main advocates on the European Continent. Although Immanuel Kant, arguably the greatest of all Enlightenment thinkers, insisted on civil society as one of the true purposes of history and even dreamt of a world civil society, he was, in the views of many, eclipsed in his influence by Hegel. For Hegel, civil society was merely the negative moment, the antithesis in the march of the world spirit from its primitive beginnings to its eventual fulfilment: the state as the embodiment of morality. Marx, by positing class struggle and changes in the dominant mode of production as the motor of history, pushed Hegel’s ideas a step further, all the way to a final stage of a communist association, but its precondition was the suicide of the state after the final fling of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Enlightenment concepts in the history of British political thought
I have long been surprised at the hold that such Prussian thinking found among British political theorists such as TH Green and LT Hobhouse. In this sense, the United States was the only country in which the Enlightenment, and with it civil society, remained untainted, at least among reputable thinkers. I was even more surprised to find that, like Hobhouse, some of the proponents of the state in Britain were, in party terms, Liberals. It is not easy to recognise liberal sentiments in LT Hobhouse’s claim that society has a soul to be saved, let alone in his assertion that: “At the end is the rational order of conduct founded on the conditions of human development and directed to the furtherance of that development at its supreme end.” No trace of the invisible hand here.

Two other liberals, John Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge, are of different ilk. Yet they may fairly be described as the promoters of the state in British political history; Keynes as the inventor of state-led economic management, and Beveridge as the missionary of the welfare state. Whatever the party, the language of the benevolent state came to replace the language of civil society. But then in the 1980s a sea change took place.

At first it went almost unnoticed. The American economist Mancur Olson had written his book on the Decline of Nations through Stagflation & Social Rigidities. He actually
thought that it would take a revolution or even a war to break the vested interests, represented by the state class, in the status quo. In the event it did take a revolution in the late communist countries; the revolution of 1989 in which the Nomenklatura was swept away and the search for pathways into the open society began.

By that time, however, less dramatic changes had taken place in the OECD countries. Perhaps Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher did set in train something not far from a revolution. In any case, the state was suddenly seen as the enemy of liberty. The economy and society had to be liberated from its grip. Two discoveries marked this liberation: they were accordingly the market economy and, later, civil society. I need hardly remind you of the convulsions to which this process led – both in the recent general political climate and the recent history of political parties.

I remember Neil Kinnock making fun of the habit of French presidents to go on television to address their countrymen as citoyens and citoyennes. He would be laughed out of court, he told me, if he addressed people as citizens, and in any case there was no feminine form. Having looked in the Oxford Dictionary, I told him that there was the obsolete English word “citizette”.

Kinnock’s successor John Smith, under whose auspices we are assembled today, was more inclined to look at the changes happening under our eyes. Gordon Brown MP shares the view that one of the central tasks of politics today is to balance state power by strengthening civil society. As Chancellor of the Exchequer he has done much to promote this end.

**Reinventing the Enlightenment**

What is it that we are rediscovering in the process? All sorts of terms have been used in the hectic newspeak of our time. I remain unconvinced by postmodernity, which smacks of the rudderlessness of a world in which anything goes. There is something to be said perhaps for the notion of a second modernity proposed by some; but I am more inclined to suggest that we reinvent the Enlightenment – the great movement of the mind and the principle of institutions. And how topical it is: fundamentalism, and its attendant violence, reminds us of the liberating strength of a view that separates religion and the law and encourages people to stand on their own feet.

The Enlightenment is a product of the second half of the 18th century when not only were there great individuals, like Immanuel Kant, but also great intellectual and political
movements: the authors of the French Encyclopaedie; the founders of the United States, some of whom wrote the Federalist Papers; and the extraordinary group of Scottish thinkers to whom these lectures are devoted.

I like the idea of Adam Smith taking a stagecoach in Glasgow at eight o’clock in the morning, and arriving in Edinburgh before lunch the next day in order to attend a long session of gastronomic and intellectual pleasures with other members of the aptly named Select Society such as David Hume, Alexander Carlyle, Lord Kames and, from 1756, Adam Ferguson. Arthur Herman has brought to life this extraordinary period in Scottish history. A period when the country was politically dependent, not yet strong economically, but intellectually Scotland was the centre of Europe. Herman has brought this to life in his splendid story of how the Scottish Enlightenment created “the basic idea of modernity” (these are his words), and indeed made Scotland the model for all nations who must pass through the fire of modernity past, present and future.

**Adam Ferguson and the Scottish Enlightenment**
Adam Ferguson was not the most brilliant, let alone the most original member of the group, but in some ways he was the most representative. His *History of Civil Society* represents the collective thinking of the Select Society and other groups like the Poker Club. It gathers together the thoughts of these groups so comprehensively that Ferguson has sometimes absurdly been charged with plagiarism. In fact, he simply embodies the spirit of a particular time and place. As a person he was anything but representative – he was the only one to come from a Highland family; he liked to speak the old Gaelic language; he had a colourful career in the army before, with the help of select friends and some money, he eventually got a chair at the University of Edinburgh, and he lived, unusually for that time, until the ripe old age of 93. Lord Henry Cockburn remembers the old man:

> His hair was silky and white, his eyes animated and light blue, his cheeks sprinkled with broken red like autumnal apples, but fresh and healthy. His lips thin and the under one curled. His gait and air were noble, his gestures slow, his look full of dignity and composed fire. He looked like a philosopher from Lapland.

Whatever that is supposed to mean; one wonders how many philosophers from Lapland the author of this phrase had met!
An Essay on the History of Civil Society

An Essay on the History of Civil Society was first published in 1765 when Ferguson was 43 years old. It is a long book, varying between discursive sections and accounts of what happens in other parts of the world. The notion of civil society is never defined or even discussed at any length, yet it is central to the core thesis, as can be seen from the author's assertion that: “It is in conducting the affairs of civil society that mankind find the exercise of their best talents, as well as the object of their best affections.”

In other words, as we engage with others in society we come to use our talents to the full, and to realise our goals and objectives.

Ferguson had a lenient view of human nature – no homo hominae lupus for him, and no war of all against all. Even war is a part of the civilising process. Ferguson believed in progress, in the development of human society “from a rude state”, as he puts it, “towards a polished state”. The terms “rude” and “polished”, borrowed from the diamond trade, speak not only of the cultivated and civilised condition to which we aspire, but also of the human effort involved in pursuing those aims.

Ferguson’s belief in human agency is never more apparent than in his approach to the law and the rule of law. The law is not something imposed from above; for him, “Law is literally a treaty to which the parties concerned have agreed and have given their opinion in settling its terms.”

This is most true in “democratical” establishments, where “citizens, feeling themselves possessed of the sovereignty, are not equally anxious, with the subjects of other governments, to have their rights explained, or secured by actual statute. They entrust to personal vigour, to the support of party and to the sense of the public.”

Another way of putting the same thought is to say that they trust civil society.

Civil society and political freedom

In Ferguson’s terms, indeed in the world about which he was writing, civil society is simply the society of confident, enlightened and civilised citizens. It is not without structure; there are important conventions and organised groupings. Ferguson likes to refer to parties but, like James Madison in his contributions to the Federalist, he does not simply mean political parties. Rather, he is referring to all groupings in the public sphere, of which there are many. These “parties” provide a protective network against despotism.
and even against the abuse of majorities.

This is not altogether easy to understand. However, it is crucial, not just for appreciating the concept of civil society, but also for the main point that I want to make in this lecture: for Ferguson and other Enlightenment authors, civil society is simply the social world in which we are living once we have reached a certain stage of civilisation. It is the network of family and community, church and party, of clubs and their federal associations, which holds us, gives our lives content and meaning. We do not always behave in the civil manner that such a society requires. Therefore, the rule of law is needed, and with it what John Locke called civil government. But essentially civil society is there before government. It is government that needs to be constructed. The whole point of the Federalist Papers in the United States was that the process of construction is difficult because it always risks threatening those liberties that are naturally protected by civil society.

Comparative history is not my subject here, but it needs to be said that this conception of constructing government in relation to civil society was very different to the Continental European idea of how a state was formed – at least in the modern age. There, in one form or another, for the most part through aristocratic rule, the state was long present and often omnipresent. The question was often how to forge a space for civil society.

Today the construction of the state stands solid and strong and the liberties of civil society are imprisoned in what Max Weber called “the iron cage of bondage of modern bureaucracy”. Therefore, what is needed is the liberation from state bureaucracy by the reconstruction of civil society. At the beginning of the 21st century – indeed as I hinted earlier, for some 20 years already – the task is not to add a sensible government to the reality of civil society, but a strong civil society to cut the ubiquitous tentacles of government.

This means among other things that civil society today is not as natural, as clearly given, as it was for Ferguson and his contemporaries. Today, civil society has to be defined. It is the multitude of associations in which we live our daily lives, with “association” implying that these are voluntary and autonomous. Their most formal version is what has come to be known as “the third sector” of voluntary organisations, often charities, which exist alongside the two more formal sectors of government of a state, and of business or the economy. But I repeat that this is only the formal tip of the iceberg of civic associations, which includes brass bands and soccer clubs, church choirs and pigeon breeders,
stamp collectors, and hundreds – indeed thousands – of often local community-based organisations and associations.

**Civil society as creative chaos**

I have difficulties with words like “third sector”. Government is all about rules and the attendant structures. The economy, assuming it is a market economy, is bounded by certain rules, which actually constitute a market. But civil society in my ideal world is a creative chaos. Adam Ferguson would have something to say about the conventions which are needed in order to make sure that the chaos does not become bellicose rather than creative. And the Charity Commission as well as Customs & Excise, and indeed the Chancellor of the Exchequer, also have something to say about the accountability of the chaos players. But the point is that at its core, civil society is not organised by anybody. This, however, is clearly only a part of the truth, and it is the point at which I return to the underlying social political analysis of this lecture.

The rise of the state in the 20th century, starting earlier in many countries, was not a historical accident. Civil society was not strong enough to cope with the needs of people. Valiant attempts were made; friendly societies arose and co-operative societies and charities of many kinds. But the needs of modern industrialised society exceeded the ability of voluntary agencies to maintain civilised living conditions for all. A degree of redistribution was needed. Public services had to be provided. Exploitation had to be mitigated. Few have described the predicament which gave rise to more state activity better than William Beveridge, from his early works on unemployment to the very last ones on philanthropy. Some would say it was necessary to curb private privilege by mobilising public power. The issue today is a different one; it is to curb the new privileges arising from an uncontrollable public power. By that I do not mean in the first instance corruption, although in many countries this is a real issue; I mean above all bureaucratic power – the apparatus of the state which, through no fault of particular individuals, creates entitlements and exclusions which deserve attention.

Some believe that the answer is simply to reduce the role of the state radically and leave the market to cope. There may be areas in which this prescription makes a certain amount of sense, but if one asserts that there is a public interest in certain services, including a degree of redistribution to finance them, and if at the same time one wishes to reduce the power of bureaucracies, then new ways have to be found. They have to do with the new relationship between the state and both the market economy and civil society.
A reconstruction of civil society
Such new alliances have indeed become the core of policies that aim to be both social and liberal. As an outright liberal, I have not found it easy to come to terms with this new version of civil society. It produces hybrids which are neither easy to understand nor necessarily effective. These include the public-private partnerships which are in some cases taking the place of privatisation. The notion that the government sets objectives, but private agents are contracted to deliver the goods, has undoubted attractions, and there are examples from rubbish collection to the supply of energy which work reasonably well. There are others, including the railway network, which clearly work less well, and whether the principle is applicable to the National Health Service remains to be seen.

Closer to my theme is another hybrid involving the state and civil society more narrowly defined – that is the third sector. The new deal to combat youth unemployment is one example. Most community regeneration schemes operate as a combination of public target-setting and voluntary sector activity. Actually, even the National Health Service would be nowhere without its 800,000 volunteers. And while Scotland has made a courageous attempt to provide public care services for the needy and the elderly, I suspect such promises will only be kept if voluntary services and charity finance can be enlisted.

The new tasks of civil society activities and organisations have now led to yet another hybrid in the form of the closer linkage of charitable and business activities. Sustainable charities cannot live on grants alone. They have therefore begun to engage in commercial activities ranging from high-street shops to low-profit insurance services. Some charities, especially in the housing sector, but also in community regeneration, have issued bonds in order to finance their work. A whole new language has come to be developed around terms such as “social investment”, “social enterprise” and “social capital”, which attempts to link civil society with the market sector. The point I am making by these references is that after a century of reliance on the state, we are experiencing a rediscovery and in many ways reconstruction of civil society.

But this new civil society is not the natural condition of people living a civilised life in the company of others. It is not simply the polished social world of citizens. Rather, it is a deliberate effort to replace alienated bureaucratic machines by mobilising a wide range of organised yet voluntary effort to achieve a defined public good.

Adam Ferguson and his friends would probably not have recognised civil societies of this kind. I myself am, as I hinted already, a reluctant convert to this new world, and one
who would wish to make its acceptance subject to two conditions: the first is that the separation of the three realms – the state, the market and civil society – must not be abandoned altogether. Hybrids have their place, but the underlying principles of the three spheres each have their own right. The state is about the public good and about service. The market is the meeting place of interests seeking, for the most part, material gain. Civil society in the narrow sense of the third or voluntary sector is about altruism and the free association of citizens. Keeping them separate, or better, having a lively interplay of the three, is actually one way of defining the liberal order.

A little anarchy cannot do any harm
A country in which the state swallows all is certainly not free; one in which the market principle informs all human activity is not fair; and one in which there is nothing but civil society may well be a bit too anarchic for many. However, a little anarchy cannot do any harm. It may indeed be the spice of the liberal order. For that reason if for no other, it is worth defending charities and other voluntary activities which are not incorporated in hybrid arrangements with business or government, but keep alive the idea of the creative chaos that is civil society.

This is related to the second condition, which I will detach from the new civil society as a deliberate construction. The key to civil society is not some organising principle, but voluntary human activity. Adam Ferguson devotes two sections of the first part of his History of Civil Society to the subject of happiness. This is his version of the definition of the purposes of progress. The Enlightenment authors were more sanguine in their approbation for the idea of “progress” than we are likely to be after the creation and application of deadly means of self-destruction.

It should seem, therefore, [says Ferguson] to be the happiness of man, to make his social dispositions the ruling spring of his occupations; to state himself as the member of a community, for whose general good his heart may glow with an ardent zeal.

A desirable state of affairs is thus one in which people are active members of civil society – true citizens. Whether such activity makes us happy may be an open question in this more sceptical age. But there can be no doubt that active citizenship is an indispensable part of a liberal order. In some, then, civil society and liberty remain indivisibly linked. But we can no longer regard civil society as given by the natural progression of civilisation – we need to defend and advance it, if we want to escape both the bureaucratic age of bondage and the dangers of market fundamentalism.
Address
Professor Sir Neil MacCormick MEP, Regius Professor of public law, University of Edinburgh

Vice-principal, friends (“friends” is a noun of the common gender, I think, and it is actually true of about half the people here present, so far as I can discern from the stage here): it is an enormous pleasure to be taking part tonight, and to be following and commenting on such a brilliant presentation. It is also, for me, a particular pleasure to think of the benign philosophical Laplander, almost, as it were, looking down from behind me. I spent many, many years attending committee meetings in the Raeburn Room downstairs. These meetings were sometimes less than riveting and I would often sit in a seat from which I could catch the eye of Adam Ferguson in the Raeburn portrait, and imagined him looking slightly sceptical about the fusses we were making about the troubles we were having. And it would be nice if he had been hung here tonight to cast his eye upon us.

Another eye that might well have been cast upon me, another two pairs of eyes indeed, could have been those of John Smith and Donald Dewar, who were dear friends of mine from our university days together. I was always a politically disreputable friend, and they spent a lot of time with me, I think with not entirely altruistic motives, persuading me that my true place was academia! That is as it may be, but actually tonight I am parading in the unusual colours of the politico. These talks were supposed to be set up to juxtapose a distinguished academic and a political hack who would confront each other in front of a distinguished audience. I am quite clearly tonight here as political hack, although I have to say Lord Dahrendorf has served in two parliaments and I only in one, and he has been a minister of state in the Federal Republic. So there we go – there may be hope for me yet!

Civil society in the European context
I want to disagree slightly with the line Lord Dahrendorf took about Ferguson, about the state, about civil society. I do think myself that it impoverishes the concept of civil society to focus it just on the so-called third sector. I think we do need to think about it in a somewhat different way, and I do think that the juxtaposition of state and civil society or of constitution and civil society needs to be teased out somewhat differently, but anyway that is what the discussion will maybe focus on afterwards. In my current capacity as a member of the European parliament, I think it vital to consider what becomes of civil society once you transcend the state. In Western Europe we do not any longer live in a state, but in a confederation of states of a curious kind. What is the future of civil society in that context?
Today we are much agitated about a constitution in Europe. We have got this “Convention on the Future of Europe” on which I have the honour to serve as an alternate member. It will ask the question, “Should the European Union have a constitution?” Will it, if it does, inevitably become a state or a superstate? The answer seems to me to be obviously in the negative. States have to have constitutions (although some people think the UK has got on fine without one). But many other entities have constitutions as well; golf clubs, charitable associations, and almost everything you can think of in the third sector has a constitution of its own.

The European Union has been said, rightly I think, to have established a new legal order of its own kind – sui generis in the mystifying Latin we sometimes lapse into. It should on this account be acknowledged as being a remarkable commonwealth of its own kind. It is, perhaps, capable of being described and apprehended as a sort of confederation, but a confederation of a new and different kind. What bearing then would the question of a European constitution, a debate which is to take place over the next year and a half, have on the issue of the possibility of civil society Europe-wide? What will be its impact on Europe as the theatre of a single but multifarious civil society?

**Constitutions, liberty and civil society**

I think we should maybe start focusing again on what Adam Ferguson had to say about the state and civil society. A constitution obviously defines a state as a legal entity. But it is not only a legal entity, it is also a political entity, it is a theatre for the exercise of political power through discourse rather than simple violence. And the quality of a state therefore depends not just, perhaps not even mainly, on its laws but, according to Adam Ferguson, also on the character of its citizens and on their dedication to public virtue. Political liberty, as Ferguson never ceases to remind us, depends on the active spirit of citizens, and their espousal of vigorous party rivalry, faction even, and on their vigilance against the encroachment of governments and magistrates.

Constitutions and charters of rights are a good thing, but they are not enough. I quote:

And the influence of laws, where they have any real effect in the preservation of liberty, is not any magic power descended from shelves that are loaded with books, but is, in reality, the influence of men resolved to be free; of men, who having adjusted in writing the terms on which they are to live with the state, and with their fellow subjects, are determined, by their vigilance and spirit, to make these terms be observed.
Where that spirit prevails, a constitutional state can achieve a kind of institutional actuality, and it does so to the extent that power is actually exercised largely in conformity with the provisions of the agreed constitution. The norms explicitly and implicitly laid down in the constitution have to become actually operative rules and conventions of conduct, observed and respected by those who claim to hold offices defined by it.

A state that aspires to be both a law-state (a Rechtsstaat, as a much more rich German term has it) and a social state or a welfare state has to have a substantial body of public law (Lord Dahrendorf has been talking about that), beyond the basic elements of simple constitutional law. We require some form of administrative law concerning education, health, social welfare, consumer and environment protection, transport services, and all that stuff. Since the late 19th century, public law has typically included norms that establish and regulate agencies of the welfare state implementing rights to, and discretionary schemes concerning, such subjects. So there is a risk of massive overcentralisation, and that is what the movement in thought of which Lord Dahrendorf has been speaking is a reaction.

**The principle of subsidiarity**

Anyway, the principle that we have come to call, in deference to the Thomists, “subsidiarity” counsels against strategies that exclude the value of local knowledge from administration. Respect for subsidiarity calls upon governments to localise decision making and keep it as close as possible to the individuals and communities affected, handling centrally only that which has to be so handled for the sake of either equity or efficiency. The minimum alternative to massive overcentralisation is to ensure that public law provides for effective local government as a form of government subordinate to central legislation and executive. More ambitiously, as we have seen, there can be devolution to regional agencies of subsets of the legislative and executive power established by a constitution, and this can be even more effective, perhaps, in satisfying the demands of subsidiarity. Similarly, in appropriate contexts, such as that of Germany, a formally federal constitution can achieve this even more securely. That brings me to words which I think are relevant to contemporary concern. Words by Adam Ferguson in the Essay:

In proportion as territory is extended, its parts lose their relative importance to the whole. Its inhabitants cease to perceive their connection with the state, and are seldom united in the execution of any national, or even of any factious, designs. Distance from the seats of administration, and indifference to the persons who contend for preferment, teach the majority to consider themselves as the subjects of a sovereignty, not as the members of a political body.
Civil society as the interaction of free persons

So constitutions, and subconstitutional public law, are not alone sufficient to constitute or facilitate the existence of civil society within and alongside of the state. Civil society is not just (it includes, but is not just) a collocation of charitable organisations, voluntary societies, non-governmental organisations and the like. It is that state of affairs in which persons can interact reciprocally with each other as at least formally equal beings, however different individuals may be in character, beliefs, origins and resources. Again I quote: “It is in conducting the affairs of civil society that mankind find the exercise of their best talents as well as the object of their best affections.”

Civil society is the context of voluntary associations and of economic activity among free persons. The activity envisaged includes orientation both through non-commercial ends – religion, philanthropy, political speculation and mobilisation, environmentalism, what have you – and to commercial and economic ends. Civil society therefore requires the existence of an effectively guaranteed body of law. To quote: “Law is the treaty to which members of the same community have agreed, and under which the magistrate and the subject continue to enjoy their rights, and to maintain the peace of society.”

This means that constitutional obligations must include the obligation to uphold and apply, in addition to any statute law or common law, rules defining fundamental rights alongside an adequate body of private law, commercial law and criminal law. The law of a state acquires institutional reality to the extent that, as well as respecting the spirit of the constitution, courts and other official agencies do actually respect and uphold these bodies of law. The particular institutions of private and commercial law require an actuality that effectively constrains action by eliminating choices. That constraint is a practically unavoidable counterpart to the upholding of rules that have formal validity within the whole constitutional system.

This does not presuppose either that all persons affected have fair or equal opportunities of participation in civil society, or in the advantages it makes available to at least some of its members. Nor does it imply that all persons who are institutionally bound by the law are either fully aware of it, or consider themselves bound in conscience by it, or endorse it as a scheme of interpersonal justice. But it does seem to be a practical necessity that some, at least, should – with a high probability that those who find the burdens imposed by the law to be at least compensated by the benefits that it confers, accept the law as binding on moral as well as prudential grounds. Such individuals or groups can be considered as autonomously endorsing the law and freely acknowledging the binding
character of the legal norms involved. They are participating in the great “treaty” of law making and law observance.

Persons in that position do typically find their mutual affections and other directed expectations reinforced by official action, and for them the security provided by regular, even if not invariable, official enforcement of law confers a further sense of legitimacy on the norms endorsed and on the expectations and judgments founded upon the norms. As Ferguson says, “there is no peace in the absence of justice. It may subsist with divisions, disputes, and contrary opinions; but not with the commission of wrongs. The injurious, and the injured, are, as implied in the very meaning of the terms, in a state of hostility.”

**The political will**

Always with Ferguson the point is that laws are a necessary, and therefore the state is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition of secure liberty, secure mutual respect of rights and thus the very being of civil society. There must also be a powerful and continuing political will. Listen to his words about habeas corpus:

We must admire, as the keystone of civil liberty, the statute which forces the secrets of every prison to be revealed, the cause of every commitment to be declared, and the person of the accused to be produced that he may claim his enlargement, or his trial, within a limited time. No wiser form was ever opposed to abuses of power but it requires a fabric no less than the whole political constitution of Great Britain, a spirit no less than the refractory and turbulent zeal of this fortunate people, to secure its effects.

I like that!

**The European context**

I am actually rather proud to have made, lately in the European parliament, an appeal to what might just be described as just that refractory and turbulent spirit. I did so having forgotten that passage from Ferguson, but it jumped off the page at me as I re-read it.

We are, in the European Union, as many of you know, in the process of introducing a thing called a European arrest warrant that will save the necessity for extradition between member states in cases of cross-border crime and cross-border surrender of individuals to stand trial. This makes sense in itself. But observe that it greatly extends the power of public prosecutors and police. Such extensions of the power of the magistrate should, according to those of us who share Ferguson’s perspective, always be accompanied with matching safeguards.
My political colleague Ian Hudghton and I with the backing, in the end, of 155 colleagues from all the parties and all the countries represented in the European parliament, proposed last month to write into the arrest warrant decision provisions for a European habeas corpus order that would also have built-in safeguards, akin to those of the Scottish 110-day rule, which even more effectively limits the amount of pre-trial detention that is permitted. I have got a quote, immodestly, from a speech I made in the European parliament. This will create a first occasion for everyone in the room; it will be the first time you have heard words that were uttered in the European parliament!

All of us in this house have agreed that it is a good thing to move towards a creation of a common European judicial space. We are also agreed, particularly in respect of the arrest warrant, that it makes the adoption of common and high minimum procedural standards a matter of urgency. Our leaders have asked us today to take it on trust that this will be done as a matter of urgency. We have to take some things on trust, but I would be reluctant to take all on trust. Furthermore, standards alone are never enough – because standards can be broken. The only thing that guarantees high standards being observed is effective remedies.

One of the most effective remedies ever devised was devised by the English common lawyers (I speak as a Scotsman) in the way of making sure that those who are wrongly detained or brought to court are released if the jailer cannot show cause for keeping them there. That is a really effective remedy. In adopting the European arrest warrant, each of our states makes its own judiciary the instrument of justice in another state. It is a good thing that we help each other. But it should also be the case that if the powers of one country's courts are abused by misconduct of prosecutors in another country, they can be recalled with an effective remedy. An effective remedy must be a Europe-wide remedy and one that diminishes the risk of undue detention pre-trial, like the old 110-day trial rule which we celebrate in my country.

Well, as I say, you have probably never heard a speech from the European parliament before.

There are several sad things to report; 155 MEPs voted for this but the majority rejected it. Meanwhile the debate was, excepting two excellent pieces in the Guardian and one in the Daily Telegraph, totally ignored – totally ignored – back home in the United Kingdom. Newspapers that trumpet their fear of the encroachments of Europe, none more than The Scotsman under its present editorship, maintained that studious silence which they
always bring to bear on any initiatives, either in the European parliament or by the Scottish National Party.

How true the earlier quoted remark from the essayist appears to be: “Distance from the seats of administration, and indifference to the persons who contend for preferment, teach the majority to consider themselves as the subjects of a sovereignty, not as the members of a political body.”

And that is what I fear about Europe as it is at the moment and as our media represent it to us. We do have to face four-square the challenge of the effects of remoteness from the common seat of decision. The European Union has this problem – yet more acute than Ferguson saw it. In proportion as territory has extended, its parts lose their relative importance to the whole. Its inhabitants cease to perceive their connection with the union. We have of course nowadays advantages in the way of near instantaneous communication across long distances that Ferguson and his friends could not, I think, even imagine. Of course, the trouble is we do not have much to say to one another across these distances! Those of us who serve on this Constitutional Convention, will, I believe, have no deeper problems to tackle than this issue of subsidiarity. How much more vividly it is expressed in Ferguson’s words:

Small communities, however corrupted, are not prepared for despotical government. Their members, crowded together and contiguous to the seats of power, never forget their relationship to the public. They pry with the habits of familiarity and freedom into the pretensions of those who would rule.

I think there are at least two first ministers who would sign up to that!

But that very spirit is the hardest thing to maintain with remote governments extending their view over vast territories. As we prepare to enlarge the European Union towards half a billion citizens and 25 or more countries and contemplate what constitution to give it, the problem is a pressing one. The vocation we must acknowledge if we are to do it in the spirit of Adam Ferguson will be to retain at full strength the vigilance of our smaller polities over their own rulers, and over their capability to interact with central lawmaking, not as clients who seek favours but as co-ordinated authorities in the self-governance of the whole. The idea has to be one of partnership, not clientship, of setting common standards, not merely receiving them – the “treaty” idea of Ferguson. This will, I think, call for a radically new look at the states, in their relation both to the Union and to their own internal nations and regions.
In this hall there is no need to draw attention to the impropriety of categorising Scotland, a nation with its own rather distinctive internal regions, as a mere region of the United Kingdom. Scotland is not alone in this position, but it may well be the first one to provoke a question about internal enlargement by seeking its own seat at the top table. That is a matter for decision.

The remoteness of the European Union in decision making in any event will not be cured by always routing inputs and outputs through the member state government to the union institutions through the council of ministers. What I have, with regret, to call crackpot schemes for turning the council of ministers, with longer-term functional presidencies, into the executive arm of the union will not redeem the democratic deficit. In what sense could, say, a French agriculture minister chairing the agriculture council for two-and-a-half years be, or be perceived to be, answerable to the European parliament? To the United Kingdom parliament? To the German parliament? To the Scottish parliament? To none! For such a minister is not answerable to any such assembly. And the same would go for a UK minister chairing the justice council or for a German minister chairing the fisheries council – it doesn’t matter. If you have a system of answerability you must ask where the lines of answerability go in designing your institutions.

So I think we have big problems if we are to get these relationships right. But I do believe, for the reasons that Lord Dahrendorf argues so eloquently, that we are confronting a new conception of relations between public law and civil society, between the constitution even of a beyond-state entity and the society which inhabits the space defined by that. Above all it will work, in my judgment and, I am sure, in that of Adam Ferguson, only if the local becomes far more effectively wired into the centre, with reciprocity of communications, not top-down rulings.

Thank you.
Discussion

Audience member
I would like to ask Lord Dahrendorf whether he is optimistic or pessimistic about Scottish civil society?

Response: Lord Dahrendorf
Optimistic is the simple answer, but can I just make this one quick point? I do still believe, having listened very attentively, that there is quite a fundamental difference between a situation in which one can say a civil society exists and you now create more formal institutions, and another situation in which these formal institutions exist and you have to fight a battle for civil society, and that I am afraid is as true in Scotland as it is in many other countries in Europe.

And incidentally just in passing, that of course is the trouble about subsidiarity too, because when subsidiarity was invented in the Catholic church, it was invented in order to argue against the creation of state rights over certain areas of human welfare – that is, in favour of keeping the responsibility of the family, of the local community or whatever. That is a totally different situation from one in which you have to try and wrest some powers back from existing central government on the grounds that they should not really meddle with these things because they are legitimately local or regional or whatever. So both with respect to civil society and subsidiarity we are in the same, rather difficult, position that we have to recreate what once existed in a much more natural way in the pre-governmental days of those countries which have a long-standing liberal tradition, and Scotland is certainly one.

Audience member
Would the speakers care to comment on how one actually engages with civil society now instead of just the usual suspects from the voluntary sector, and do they think that a constitution would be one way of encouraging people to participate more fully in civil society?

Response: Professor MacCormick MEP
I think we are back to the chicken and egg discussion that has been going on between Lord Dahrendorf and myself. I do not suppose that there are direct causal nexuses either way; it is not that the state by its very existence or by its very possessing a constitution generates a robust condition of civil society, nor vice versa. You cannot say that there are
recipes for generating robust civil societies, which will therefore bring in their wake sound and libertarian states. The truth is that they co-evolve. However, I might say at least this: that civil society exists only where you have a respected legal framework – so yes, a constitution is essential. But the spirit in which it is upheld – the weddedness of citizens to the rights they have demanded – is also a necessary condition for the maintenance of a robust civil society.

In Europe at the moment, there is an argument that runs: “Isn’t it better to leave it as treaty among states rather than call it a constitution?” and the counter-argument to that is often couched in terms of “People cannot possibly conceive themselves allied as citizens to an entity which simply from time to time defines itself via treaties among states.” On the other hand, if we are going to get a constitution we will only get it by an approved treaty, so I am not sure that these antitheses are very exact either. So I think what I am going to say is that I agree with you that a good constitution is a necessary condition, but it is not a sufficient condition.

Response: Lord Dahrendorf
Well, above all, by doing things. I actually agree with Sir Neil that one should not confine the concept of civil society to a third sector – it is the last thing I would do. A bit of my lecture was (as some people present know) a kind of discussion in absentia with Gordon Brown, and his, in my view, fascinating and important views on what the problem of our society is and what we should do next. And so I did spend more time on the third sector than I might have done if I had not been involved in that discussion with him.

But it is an example. There are enough voluntary organisations for everybody; the greatest risk – and I had never thought of this in the past – the greatest risk is that we all become apathetic “couch potatoes”, we do not take an interest in anything. I do not mean an interest in politics – it does not have to be an interest in politics in the narrow sense of the word, it does not have to be party membership, but it has got to be a permanent readiness to be active.

My greatest teacher, Karl Popper, sort of assumed that people would never tire of trying new things, and if they fail, correct themselves and again try new things. I sometimes fear that we are beginning to live in a world in which people stop trying and just sit back and do nothing. That is my worry about the apathy phenomenon, and so the simple answer is: do something, rather than moan about the dreadful state of the world and sit back and watch television.
Response: Professor MacCormick MEP
That does depend on having some sense that one has a chance of putting one’s hands near some kind of lever that can bring about a result. “Do something” implies exercise a capability to change the world, and that requires structures and institutions, agencies.

Response: Lord Dahrendorf
If I want to play the clarinet in a jazz band I can play the clarinet in a jazz band – it is not a particular lever of change. I really emphasise: civil society is not all about politics.

Professor MacQueen, Law Professor, University of Edinburgh
It is a thought prompted by the reference to couch potatoes and watching television, which is something I do a certain amount of myself. But one of the things that strikes me is that civil society is built round common experiences, and actually one of the great common experiences is watching television, and it was bored into me yet again by the success of the Scottish (as I will call it) team in curling, which it appeared that the whole population of Britain had been watching last week on television. And it was undoubtedly a shared experience of a large number of people in this country. Is it therefore, in some sense, an aspect of civil society?

And the thought that then goes on is prompted by Neil’s remarks about communications that do not mean anything across great distances. Yet nonetheless it is possible to see developing round, for example, the internet, large numbers of communities who never meet, or at best meet occasionally and very rarely, but nonetheless involves very substantial groups of people, once again in shared experiences – to some extent shared rules, or at least some sort of concept of a community; if you like, a civil society. And I therefore wonder if in some sense the couch potatoes are nonetheless an aspect of civil society.

Response: Lord Dahrendorf
On television I agree up to a point. It is quite interesting that with the proliferation of channels, the number of common experiences have been greatly reduced - you have described an exceptional situation which does not happen very often in the course of the year, and it is no longer obvious that if you go to your hairdresser you can have a conversation about a particular television programme which everybody has seen - because you cannot. And that is quite interesting. What happens to the common experience when you have this enormous proliferation of television channels? Because I agree with you on the common experience and its importance.
I have grave doubts actually whether these famous internet networks provide the kind of common experience you have in mind, grave doubts. It is conceivable – no, it is true – that the internet is a useful medium to organise an antiglobalisation demonstration in some remote place, but that is a technical use of the internet. But I do not somehow believe in these communities which are virtual abstracts which exist somewhere between someone in Auckland, someone in Bogotá, and someone in Lapland. But there I think the answer is yet to be given – common experience, yes. Modes of finding common experience are becoming more difficult rather than easier.

Response: Professor MacCormick MEP
Moving straight in on the internet, it is interesting that once you create arrangements, to put no grand word on it, with a kind of legal element in it, which generate new possibilities of intercommunication, interaction, then people are in society with each other in ways that they were not formerly, or can be in ways that they were not formerly. Whether anything else follows from that depends on the kinds of things that they do. But of course at the very least you are always apt to change one person’s mind in at least one small way by any thought that you impart. I hope this is true!

So I think you are right to say that our concept of society gets yet broader and even as we begin to worry about the possibility of European society, globalisation is happening all around us, with not always happy consequences.

Audience member
Thank you. If you would forgive me, I would just like to return to the first question we had this evening. My experience of devolution and subsidiarity is very positive in the sense that I feel closer to my government and I feel closer to local authority. On the other hand, I also fear that they are about to have a propensity to legislate deeply into my life, and I have often admired central government for restraining local government. If I could just return to the point: do our speakers feel that subsidiarity in principle is taking us towards a more civil society?

Response: Professor MacCormick MEP
If I may be the first this time. I wanted to agree with what Lord Dahrendorf said about the origins of the term “subsidiary”, though perhaps not the concept, and certainly it was deployed in the context of a doctrine that subsidiary help from the state should only be made available when all other means had failed. Though that did, I think, have implications also about the third sector – about leaving space for churches and charities
and other bodies to do things, and that was not even in its context, especially set against some of the tendencies of the 19th century “state-ism” – especially perhaps in France. I think that was a not unimportant movement in thought and not entirely reactionary and negative.

But to take the thing further, I do believe that it is the ways in which the localities interact with each other in larger groupings that offer the most positive possibilities. This is for a number of reasons, among them those that you have mentioned. After all, just suppose that the Hunting with Dogs Bill violates some right in the Charter of European Union Rights – to take one case where it was said that the local legislation has been excessively interfering in private matters. I do not agree with that view, but it is one of these cases. It will be because we have this great charter, agreed among 367 million, that the aggrieved citizen of the town of Galashiels or whatever will be able to challenge and have an effective remedy. Now of course there is a further condition which will require the agreement of our government, which I gather may be about to be forthcoming, namely that we acknowledge that this charter should have legal teeth.

Response: Lord Dahrendorf
Well, who am I to get involved in a debate about devolution? But I mean civil society does have an element of common experience, and much common experience is local in a certain sense; and so there is in my view, in any living concept of civil society or living reality of civil society, a strong sense of local belonging and common local experiences.

When it gets to regional, and I am using my language very carefully – and it is your language which I am using; in other words, I am not talking about Scotland. When it gets to regions I worry. I am going to speak out against regional government in England when the issue comes up in the Lords. I think I am probably going to say some really very rude things about regions being about “jobs for the boys”, and to some extent the girls nowadays; that is, they are creating positions for an interested class of functionaries, though they do not actually bring any citizen any closer to any major decision.

Now that is not naturally true for Scotland or for Catalonia; I use these two, but it is true (and we won’t get involved with this now) for Bavaria! In other words, the German Länder are regions and are in that sense quite different, and you could have considerable doubts about the precise role of the German regional institutions. Sometimes I describe them as German schools of politics, that is to say they exist in order to educate future central government politicians, and almost all German ministers were Land ministers or more
before they went to the federal government. So, I worry about regions. I like localities; I like countries as units of experience. But regions often have an artificial and unfortunate aspect. There again the common experience part, the common experience problem is quite a significant one. I doubt that there is an enormous West Midlands consciousness, which is crying out for institutions to represent it.

Response: Professor MacCormick MEP
Yes, I have a great friend from a different party in the European parliament who has said to me, “The thing about England is that English civil society has been conformable for countless centuries with counties and cities. These are real places where real people live. But the West Midlands is an invention of a statistician,” and I think again a kind of Fergusonian point is that governments should run with the grain of the sentiment of active citizens, not be imposed upon it. That means, therefore, that any sensible constitution rating on the scale of the UK, far less the scale of Europe, has to be in some sense subject to a variable geometry. You cannot be looking for a single blueprint of the powers that are to be exercised at just this level, just that level, and just another, and you must have a dialogical relationship among them.

Audience member
May I suggest that the United Nations is an example of where governments and civil population were very apathetic over a period of almost 56 years, and the result is we are still in the position where governments use the apparatus of the United Nations for their convenience? What therefore are the views of our speakers on terms of international law relating to Europe - who should take the initiative? The civil societies or the political masters? Because I would judge in the long term that the apathetic public – and there is a great apathetic public out there – they have very little interest in the European formation of constitutional rules and regulations, but they have a great deal of interest in the social welfare that may accrue from being part of the European community.

Robin Harper, Rector, University of Edinburgh
You talk about the technicalities of the state. There is a remarkable similarity now in the timetables and what is there for students to study in secondary schools in Scotland. Do you think there are implications for secondary, and for that matter higher education, in the very robust view that you have adumbrated this evening?

Ken Munro, Former Head of the European Commission in Scotland
The great range and number and vigour of civic organisations in Scotland was brought
home to me a decade ago, when Edinburgh was preparing to host the December 1992 European Summit and I was in the commission office here in Scotland, and a vast number of organisations came to my office asking for help in organising something to mark the fact that this great occasion was being held here in Edinburgh (there was a second question sometimes, which was “Did I have any money to help them?”), but that's by the way!) But I was struck at the time by the fact that this great demonstration, if you like, of state or government power was the occasion when civic society actually bestirred itself and made itself visible, but not in any antagonistic sense.

But my question to Lord Dahrendorf is this: in many ways the weakest part of civic society is the point at which the citizen tries to make an impact on the state and on government, and that is by membership of a political party. And the events of the last three or four weeks have brought home to us in very stark form the difficulties of financing political parties. Now, Lord Dahrendorf is well embedded in the political system here, but as Neil mentioned he does have a previous experience of a different system of financing political parties, and I would very much appreciate his comments on state financing of political parties.

Professor MacQueen
Both speakers mentioned active citizenship. I wonder if I could raise that point? In the past year I have been privileged to hear two addresses by senior law lords – or senior lawyers – Lord Clyde, a House of Lords judge, and Mr Justice Stephen Bryers in the American Supreme Court, in which they focused (but they didn’t know about each other's speeches), they focused on the difficulties of professionals to contribute to anything beyond the narrow professional sphere because of the pressure their work puts upon them. Do the speakers think that the modern economic order makes it difficult for people to participate in civil society?

Response: Professor MacCormick MEP
I think Lord Dahrendorf should get the last word, so I should go first!

The United Nations: I completely agree with you, but the fact of the matter is, however tentatively and, initially, in however risible a spirit, the European Union has contrived to think out the idea of citizenship as membership of the union, of course it is a second order citizenship – you get to be a citizen of the union by being a citizen of one of its states. But alas, we have not yet got to that point when we have a sense of citizenship of the world on account of our states being members of the United Nations. You may, if you are
lucky, have some sense of being a citizen of the world, but it is not to do with the UN structures, and I suspect it will be by reflecting upon ways in which the great regional confederations like the European Union put their act together. Or it might be that we will see how it would be if we were to turn the World Trade Organisation from something more than just a free trade club into some sort of a basis of a common universal citizenship. But I certainly think that is what we have to aim for.

As far as education is concerned, one of the things which most worries me as I look back on my life (this is, of course, just old guys reflecting on how much better it was when they were young guys!) is that there has been a shift, a perceptible shift, in universities and, I think, in schools as well – though perhaps it has happened earlier in schools – from what I would call a rhetoric of self-governance of the academic community to a rhetoric of management. And I do not myself think that that is in every respect healthy, because I do not believe the pursuit of learning and knowledge can be carried forward except among a self-governing community of scholars and scientists. So I think that there are real worries about the structures that we are moving into and towards and about pressures on the professions.

One of the things that Adam Ferguson was most insistent about was that societies are most in danger when their citizens become most obsessed with the pursuit of personal wealth, and with the pursuit of difference, differential wealth, and I think this is one of the things that has happened to us in the last 20 years; and for all his, I think genuine, commitment to conceptions of human justice, Gordon Brown and others have not changed this. There is no longer a commitment, as it were, to decent variances of well-being among our community and a certain sense of a decent minimum that no one should be denied – that has been lost, and I think among the big things that would get it back would be if those of us who work in these professions, and I am very guilty of this myself, were to stop being workaholics as though it all had to be done by us and with commensurate reward.

So that, I think, is just a piece of self-directed homily – but true nevertheless. Kenneth Munro’s point about the funding of political parties was addressed to Lord Dahrendorf, but maybe I am allowed to make one comment about it? I was on the Houghton committee, which looked into the issue in the UK and reported in 1976, and the majority said we should have state funding of political parties. I was of the minority that said that on the whole we should keep it the way it was, with a good deal of state support, with free post at elections, election addresses, and all that kind of thing, meeting accommodation,
on the grounds that you can never keep money out of it, and it better be white money not black money that goes into politics. But I do think a step forward has been taken in the rules about disclosure and that may in the end bring its own cure.

Above all, I was very encouraged, and I naturally would be, when I discovered what a small amount of money my own party had been able to spend in the last general election. Nothing could have made it more evident that votes are not bought, because we, with a very small expenditure per vote, got just about the turnout we would have expected, and the government, with a colossal expenditure per vote, got the lowest winning margin since 1919 – in terms of votes actually cast for it! So there we go!

Response: Lord Dahrendorf
To start with political parties, then. There are many countries in which there is state finance for political parties, often by quite complicated legal constructions. In the German case it is because parties are mentioned in the constitution that there is an argument that they are actually part of the legally established system – you had better be careful in your European convention and think hard about the question of whether you want to introduce parties into the text or not.

The real issue, in my view, is that parties have ceased to be membership organisations, they are machines for allocating jobs – you become active in them if you want to get somewhere, you don’t become active in them because you believe something. While this may not be true for yours, it is true for most parties and therefore they are very greedy for money and they do not have the base of membership which was characteristic of parties 50, 80, and even 100 years ago, and these greedy machines cannot get enough from the state, and therefore, even in countries with state financing of political parties, there are extreme cases of corruption. All I need to mention is the case of the former German Chancellor, Kohl. Indeed all great scandals in Europe, in political Europe in the last 10, 20 years, started with illicit party finance and then went on to a number of other things, manipulating the legal system and so on and so forth.

But this is a problem which we will not resolve by party finance; now don’t ask me how we are going to resolve it.

There were two questions, the first and the third, to which I want to give a similar answer.
Non-governmental organisations as a part of civil society also raise problems, because in some areas they have become so organised that they see themselves almost as parallel governments, and if not as parallel governments then as the true representatives of the people. Giuliano Amatto once told me that he was faced with these antiglobalisation people actually in Washington when he was Prime Minister of Italy, and they said to him, “But Mr Amatto, we represent the people.” And he said, “That’s strange, I thought I represented the people because I am the elected Prime Minister of the country!” And they had this wonderful dispute about who really represents the people.

Now I do not think NGOs should claim to represent the people in a sort of valid and legitimising way. Of course they represent views, and possibly views which are not otherwise represented as clearly and as strongly. But I think once civil society fancies itself as being another government or another parliament, we are running into very, very difficult, and not truly democratic country. Don’t forget where I started, when I argued that civil society should be a creative chaos rather than a highly organised system, which in parallel to others tries to exercise similar power. NGOs are no substitute for governments, and while it is pleasing if there is a vast number, one hopes (I hope) that they are not all going to get organised and play a political game.

I totally agree with what Professor MacCormick said about higher education. I think in secondary education this whole notion of active citizenship is important and it is more than teaching constitutions or political processes, or anything of that kind. It’s really close to my answer to the lady who asked: “What should one do?” I think young people should begin to practice activity while they are at school and get some experience, and many good schools actually do that in any case, but that seems to me the way forward, rather than formal teaching of constitutional rules.

And finally, the time people have, and the pressures of the modern economy: this is entirely true. And it is to some extent true that when one sets up a new small charity, one as a rule looks for a retired (perhaps an early retired) accountant or whatever to deal with the precarious finances of the organisation. But can I add one other point? My experience is that the most active and pressured are also the most likely to engage in further activities.

I mean nowadays one of my disputes with Gordon Brown is that he thought you could get unemployed young people into the third sector - into voluntary organisations. Not on your life you can’t, because they are the ones who will say, “Why should I do for nothing something for which I want to earn some money?” Their first concern is to be part of
the pressured world. And once they are – and indeed professionals who are very highly pressed, for whom this is certainly true – once they are, they may be prepared to give some time to activities which are not paid, which are above and beyond their obligations. Incidentally, good companies nowadays help this process by enabling their employees to take time off for civil society activities, and I think that is a highly desirable contribution, even if it may be in some way of interest to the good company.

However, having said that, I was very pleased that Sir Neil MacCormick referred to an aspect of Ferguson which we have not discussed at all – but could have done – and that is his profound aversion to a society of greed and his insistence on a society of active citizens under the law. I certainly entirely agree with you, and we both agree with Ferguson; that is one of the great things about the man we were talking about.
Lecture 2

Joseph Black: Science, progress and public trust - the need for an informed public

A lecture held on 6 March 2002 at St Cecilia’s Hall, Cowgate, University of Edinburgh

Speakers:
Dr Robert Anderson, Director of the British Museum

Elspeth Attwooll MEP

Chair:
Lord Sutherland, Principal and Vice-chancellor, University of Edinburgh
**Introduction**  
Lord Sutherland, Principal and Vice-chancellor, University of Edinburgh

This evening’s lecture celebrates the life of Joseph Black, a great chemist, who also held a chair of medicine in the university. In those days they were perhaps less distinguishable than they became, but as far as I can see they seem to be merging once again. Our sponsor is Pfizer, the drug company, who have major international commitments in the health and welfare of human beings and who, most importantly for this lecture, clearly exploit what happens in chemistry for the benefit of the community and those who live throughout the world.

Joseph Black came to a chair in the university in 1766. Before that he had 11 years lecturing in the University of Glasgow, so even then there were brain drains from West to East, and East to West, and so on. He was a remarkable man in many ways. One of the commentators on him suggested that when he got his chair he stopped doing research and became a teacher, but I am not sure that was strictly true. I am afraid he would not get away with that today, in the days of the research assessment exercise. In any case, he did take teaching seriously and felt it very important not to miss lectures. This concern may have been informed by the fact that professors were paid by the class, based on the number of students who turned up. Professors who did not turn up found that they were not well paid, if paid at all.

Black inherited a class that had been well cultivated by his predecessor in the chair, William Cullen, and at that time (the numbers may surprise you) there were 145 students taking the class. He must have been good at his job because he built the numbers up to over 200 students. These were significant numbers of students, and Cullen, and especially Black after him – who I think was an elegant and good teacher – did make the subjects of chemistry and medicine popular. Well-educated students were expected to know something about science, a good tradition that perhaps we have slipped up on over recent years. Another sign that he was a good teacher is that he left £20,000 when he died, a significant sum of money in those days. I do not think that, pro rata, professors leave those sums of money in their wills any longer. He was a fascinating man but of course his contribution, interacting between what we call chemistry and medicine, is one that is alive and well today.

I am delighted to welcome back into the university Robert Anderson, Director of the British Museum, formerly Director of the National Museum of Scotland. He is also an
honorary graduate of the university. It was one of my early delights that he was awarded an honorary degree in my first year here.

Elspeth Attwooll is a member of the European parliament since the last European election and she is a Liberal Democrat. She has been well involved in higher education and education generally – and indeed this very day she has given a lecture in Glasgow – so she has come hotfoot across to give a rather different lecture this evening.
Address
Dr Robert Anderson, Director of the British Museum

Though he would be a famed figure to a late 18th-century Edinburgh audience, Joseph Black is not much talked of today, so I thought that I might start by distributing photocopies of two contemporary images of Black so you can at least gain an impression of what he looked like. One was sketched by a student whilst he was taking notes at Black's lectures in 1767. The other is an etching of Black lecturing towards the end of his career, some 20 years later.

Of the four Enlightenment figures discussed during this series (Ferguson, Hume, Smith and Black), Black must be the least well known. Obscurity is perhaps the fate of scientists, past and present, in today's society. Though scientists are sometimes considered to be threatening figures, they are also anonymous, rather unknown people. There might be, in our world dominated by cult TV personalities and pop stars, a few celebrity intellectuals but none of them, I would suggest, would be described as a scientist. There is Stephen Hawking, but probably that is because of his great triumph over adversity. I do not think we know of many other astronomers, and physicists and chemists are scarcely known at all.

The position of science within the Enlightenment
The situation was different in Enlightenment Edinburgh. The etching I showed you came from a published volume of John Kay's portraits, one of a series depicting Edinburgh characters drawn in the 1780s. Most of the personalities of the day were landowners, lawyers, and ministers of religion, but a good many of them are doctors and what we would now call scientists – I should add that the word "scientist" was not coined until the 1830s; in the 18th century they would probably be called philosophers. Kay chose the subject of his portraits with marketing in his mind: he made a living by selling his prints.

The important difference about the 18th century would be that the educated person of the time would be male, probably a university graduate, and educated in science to a considerably greater degree than his counterpart today. Education in the 18th century was simply more all-embracing. Had it been proposed at the time, CP Snow's two cultures idea (about the chasm which divides the sciences and the arts) would have seemed ridiculous and quite inexplicable. Also ridiculous to Enlightenment man would be the argument, such as it is, made by Simon Jenkins in the Telegraph on 13 February 2002, entitled “Who needs science in our schools anyway?”: Access to science, Jenkins argues,
can be gained through history, biography and television, and systematic study should not be attempted.

All of this would both bemuse and appal Joseph Black, whose lectures at the Old College were both deeply systematic, and at the same time, highly popular. In some years, more than 300 people paid their subscriptions to attend, and medical students, for whom the lectures were primarily intended, were in the minority. Indeed, special courses of lectures in chemistry were given by Black for specific groups of Edinburgh society of the day, such as lawyers – James Boswell was one such lawyer who attended.

**A brief biography**

At this point a brief biography of Black is needed. As I said earlier, he is a little-known person today, even a shadowy figure, yet he was a key intellectual of his day, sought after by his peers throughout Britain, Europe and farther afield. Catherine the Great tried to recruit him to teach in St Petersburg. He is still written about by a few academic historians but the last attempt at a biographical monograph was way back in 1913, by the Glaswegian chemist and Nobel Prize winner Sir William Ramsay.

Joseph Black was born in Bordeaux in 1728, his Ulster father, John, being a merchant and wine supplier there. John was proud to be acquainted with Montesquieu, and he sent him a copy of Joseph’s MD dissertation. Joseph was sent to school in Belfast, probably at the age of 12, and only two years later he transferred to Glasgow University, where he studied the usual arts course of Latin, Greek, logic, ethics and natural philosophy. His father then pressed him to undertake further study, which would lead to a profession, and Black decided to undertake work in medicine, a subject that had become highly regarded in Scottish universities by mid-century.

During the three years that he stayed in Glasgow, Black came under the influence of a former ship’s surgeon, William Cullen, already referred to this evening by the principal. Cullen taught chemistry in a most unusual way for the time. He encouraged students to undertake their own experiments in his laboratory. Few, he complained, took up the offer, but Black did. The other unusual aspect of Cullen’s teaching was that it was not directly associated with pharmaceutical matters. Most chemistry at the time was to do with medicine. But Cullen saw that chemistry was a key to the improvement of industrial processes and listed three particularly important issues for Scotland: increasing the efficiency of bleaching cloth, with less time in the sun or using cheaper materials; improving dyeing methods (particularly for linen); and increasing the efficiency of
agriculture in fixing its principles and applying manures. Black moved to Edinburgh in 1762 to complete his studies for his medical degree; at the time, Edinburgh was a more prestigious university than Glasgow. For graduation Black was required to write a dissertation and present it to his examiners in published form.

His research work as a student was brilliantly conceived and undertaken. It concerned the nature of alkaline substances and its importance lay in determining what was the chemical nature of an alkali. His meticulous work led to the chemical characterisation of a gas for the first time, the gas being carbon dioxide, or as Black called it, “fixed air”. Up to that time it was appreciated that different gases had different qualities but it was thought they were fundamentally the same substance with different levels of purity. They could be distinguished by their smell or their colour and these factors were nothing to do with their chemistry. Black showed that this was all wrong. A gas was a chemical substance as different from another gas as salt was from chalk. What was so very innovative about Black’s technique was that he weighed his substances at every point in a cycle of experiments and thereby could show that “fixed air” was a component of alkali, incorporated within it. It could be driven off chemically and then could be put back again.

The ideas that he proposed at the time are not easy to grasp, even today, or perhaps especially today. Black’s work became known throughout Europe very rapidly, and the scientific community transmitted it at a quite surprising speed. His fame was to bring him his first proper job. When Cullen was offered a medical chair in Edinburgh, Black was appointed to his former teacher’s post in Glasgow. Black was to remain there for the next 11 years, until 1766, and was to perform further key experiments in Glasgow, on the nature of heat. Black pondered why it is that when a lump of ice was warmed and reached its melting point, it did not all melt at once. Why do you need to provide more and more heat to melt the ice? He worked out how many degrees an equal weight of water would be raised, if it were provided with the same amount of heat as was necessary to melt the lump of ice. The answer was 142°F. Black coined the term “latent heat” for the additional heat that was necessary, that is, the heat necessary to melt a unit quantity of ice at 32°F.

What was quite remarkable and coincidental was that at Glasgow University there was someone else interested in these same issues. But this person was of a much less theoretical frame of mind: he was James Watt, later of steam engine fame. Watt was successful in improving the efficiency of the steam engine - he did not, as people sometimes suggest, invent it. What he did do was devise a means of efficiently condensing the steam that had
pushed the piston up the cylinder, thereby making the steam engine a viable source of power. Black could have explained this improvement in terms of his latent heat theory. Crudely, it could be said that Black was a scientist who developed a scientific concept of heat while Watt was much more the practical engineer. Black had trained as a physician and was appointed to an academic post at Glasgow University. Watt had served an apprenticeship and held an artisan’s job, as “mathematical instrument maker” to the university. So there is an interesting issue here about classes not dividing people. The two developed a lifelong friendship and had a great mutual admiration for each other’s ability. It is unlikely that this easy-going relationship could have developed prior to the 18th century, or in England.

In 1766, playing musical chairs with the professorial chairs, Black was brought back to Edinburgh as professor of chemistry in Cullen’s place, who had moved to a medical professorship in the university. Watt left Glasgow eight years later and went to Birmingham to enter a manufacturing partnership with Matthew Boulton. Black’s days of pure research drew to an end and for the next 30 years he devoted himself to teaching, attracting students from all over Europe, including Russia, and even America and the West Indies. But alongside his systematic and demanding courses, Black became well known as consultant for the emerging industrial scene. Entrepreneurs, landowners and speculators were in continual touch with him. He was described by one aristocrat as perhaps the best judge in Europe of inventions. In addition to all this, Black was in contact with a number of institutions, typical of the Enlightenment period, that had been established in Edinburgh: the Royal Society of Physicians, the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary.

Though he remained hugely popular as a teacher, he did not remain at the cutting edge of his science, and the ideas spinning across Europe at the time were not absorbed into his lecture course. In particular it took a long time to convince Black of Lavoisier’s work on combustion. There was an old and excessively complex argument about why substances burned, involving a substance called phlogiston which was said to be released. This was overturned by Lavoisier with a much simpler theory, the oxygen theory, whereby the newly described gas was incorporated chemically with the substance that was burning. Black’s students took to this theory more readily than their eminent professor did, and it was only towards the end of his life that Black (slightly grudgingly) accepted that Lavoisier was right.

To round off this very rapidly drawn picture of Black before I return to specific issues,
I should say something about Black’s social and domestic life. He was in contact throughout his career with his large number of brothers and sisters. He did not see much of them, as they were dispersed throughout Europe, but their centre of gravity remained in Ulster. The one successful Black was besieged with begging letters from his brothers who were continually going bankrupt. Black helped them out of trouble – and perhaps his estate might have been even greater had he not been so caring. Black never married, though he was said to enjoy the company of ladies, and ladies were said to enjoy his company. He was certainly hospitable – he bought joints of lamb for his dinner guests even though his delicate state of health precluded him from eating meat himself. He played the flute and after dinner occasionally sang with a reedy voice. He was clubbable and spent much time dining and debating with his bachelor peers at the Oyster Club, and others.

It may be worthwhile considering how this sort of social interaction of intellectuals in the 18th century led to the development of their ideas. Nowadays families take precedence over peers and universities are no longer the social communities they once were. As well as matters of the mind, Black also discussed his own well-being with his friends (he was a bit of a hypochondriac), though it has to be said that his health does not seem to have been particularly robust. He disliked travelling and during the summer holidays he left his town house in Nicholson Street, opposite Old College, and rented houses at Leith Links or the Meadows, less than a couple of miles away from home. He lived to a ripe old age for the time, dying in a calm and celebrated manner at the age of 71.

**Edinburgh University and the Scottish Enlightenment**

Now we know something about Joseph Black, I would like to talk about some of the issues that have resonances for us today. First of all there is the scholarly environment in which Black operated. It was no accident that Edinburgh offered one of the great intellectual centres in 18th-century Europe. The university, founded towards the end of the 16th century, threw off its medieval character at the beginning of the 18th century with major reforms from 1708.

We should remember what a depressed state Scotland was in at this time. Much of its capital had been invested in the disastrous Darian scheme, while the union with England in 1707 had stripped the nation of its parliament, its privy council, and its treasury. With this there was a general exodus of nobility and gentry from the city. Edinburgh University, and particularly the development of its medical school, was identified by some as playing a major part in the capital’s revival.
In 1713 a professor of chemistry and “physic” was appointed. Principal Carstairs wrote to the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh to say, “considering that, through the range of Professors of chemistry and physic in this kingdom, the youth who have applied themselves to that study have been required to travel and remain abroad for a considerable time for their education, to the great prejudice of the nation by the necessary charges occasioned thereby”. In other words, there was a brain drain of talented students to the Continent. They not only took the costs of their education with them, but furthermore they might leave Scotland never to return.

One man in particular took up the challenge of creating a university with a Europe-wide reputation for excellence. This was the legendary figure of George Drummond, who was city treasurer and who then served as lord provost on six occasions between 1725 and 1764. It was he who was largely responsible for the city becoming a European centre. Drummond’s first action was to encourage the career of a young anatomist, Alexander Monro, who had studied at Leiden in the Netherlands. Monro was appointed to chair of anatomy in 1720 by the town council. (The council ran the university and continued to do so until the middle of the 19th century.)

From 1718, four other promising young men had been sent to Leiden to study: John Rutherford, John Innes, Andrew St Clair and Andrew Plummer. Back in Edinburgh the Royal College of Physicians licensed all four men in 1724. This was clearly a carefully devised plan and later that year the four jointly purchased a house just up from the Cowgate, and turned it into a pharmaceutical laboratory. They then placed an advertisement in the Caledonian Mercury newspaper to inform the public that they were offering an extramural course in medicine. Two years later the university appointed all of them to chairs in medicine and chemistry, though it was made clear that no salaries accompanied these posts. At the same time a chair of midwifery was established, so that in 1726 the medical faculty came into being with six new professors.

Drummond’s work, however, was far from over, for in 1741 he arranged for William Adam to design the first Royal Infirmary. The medical school had the required effect. Not only did students stay in Scotland to study medicine, but students from outside came to attend courses. They came from Europe, Russia, America, the West Indies, and of course from England (non-Anglicans were excluded from Oxford and Cambridge). It was in this exciting atmosphere that Joseph Black became an Edinburgh medical professor, of the second generation. If truth were told, some of that first generation were not terribly good teachers: Andrew Plummer’s chemistry course was terminally dull, though he was
successful enough at making money from his drugs business. I have always imagined that
his classes in drug manufacture produced a dual income: not only did he get the class fees
from his students, but he was able to sell the drugs he had prepared to local pharmacies
afterwards. The scholarly community, of which Black was a member, was seen as pre-
eminent by the outside world, and Edinburgh soon superseded Leiden as the most sought
after place for the study of medicine.

Drummond’s programme for revival through excellence covered more disciplines than
medicine alone. During his several periods as Lord Provost, other professorial chairs were
famously filled by the likes of the mathematician Colin Maclaurin, the rhetorician Hugh
Blair, and the moral philosopher Adam Ferguson. One of the compilers of Encyclopaedia
Britannica, William Smellie, recorded the observation made by “Mr Amyat, King’s chemist,
a most sensible and agreeable English gentleman”. Amyat said: “Here I stand, at the
Cross of Edinburgh, and can within a minute shake fifty men of genius and learning by
the hand.” Many of those men of genius would unquestionably have been university
professors, including Black himself; despite his reticence, he had become a personality.
Visitors of stature arriving in Edinburgh would request an audience with Black. We know
that amongst his callers were Dr Johnson and Benjamin Franklin.

So, did Drummond’s scheme work? Certainly the Edinburgh medical school was recognised
as a centre of excellence and it had a widespread reputation. In the period from 1769
to 1794 came 132 students from North America, several of whom were involved in
establishing medical schools after they returned home. Four out of five of the first five
medical professors at the College of Philadelphia (later to adopt its present name, the
University of Pennsylvania) possessed Edinburgh medical degrees. Even during the
American War of Independence, Americans came to study with Black and his colleagues.
A number of established mature chemists came from the European mainland to hear
Black’s celebrated lectures. From Helmstadt in Germany came the celebrated professor of
philosophy of medicine, Lorenz von Crell, a significant communicator of science. The
Swedish professor of mining, Johan Gottlieb Gahn, a very significant figure, was present
at the 1772 session. Princess Dashkova from St Petersburg came with her two sons to
study medicine in Edinburgh. And even the future Lord Chancellor Henry Brougham
studied chemistry under Black.

I have mentioned that Black’s classes sometimes exceeded 300 registrations. It would be
rare even today to find 300 students of chemistry in the same place at the same time.
It is difficult to estimate the resulting level of economic benefit to Edinburgh, but during
the latter half of the 18th century Edinburgh certainly became prosperous. Alexander Monro secundus (son of Alexander primus) calculated that over a 40-year period of teaching anatomy (from 1725 to 1764), the city had received over £300,000 in income from anatomy students. Drummond's ambitions had been fulfilled.

**Edinburgh University and Scottish industry**

As well as bringing in capital from outside, there are other ways in which the economy of Edinburgh, and indeed of Scotland, prospered by having a medical school. This was by way of exploiting the university's greatest asset, its professoriate. It can be debated whether developing scientific knowledge in the 18th century had an effect on the development of the industrial economy, and here there have been two recent views. One came from Peter Mathias, the economist; the other from the industrial historians AE Musson and Eric Robinson. Mathias took the view that innovations were by and large not the result of the application of science, and that formal scientific training was less important than determination and curiosity. As he put it, the factors were “quick wit, clever fingers, luck, capital (or employment) and a backer to survive the period of experimenting”.

On the other hand, Musson and Robinson proposed that there was a relationship between the industrial revolution and the scientific revolution. To quote them, “Knowledge of science was more widely diffused throughout industrial society than has hitherto been suggested.” In the particular case of the development of Scotland's economy in the central belt (and the knowledge base being developed in Scotland's universities, particularly at Edinburgh), there is no doubt in my mind that Musson and Robinson were closer to the mark than was Mathias. This becomes clear when the surviving correspondence of Joseph Black is examined. There survive about 800 items to and from Black, with the majority of these letters including reference to science and its application. What is remarkable is the range of subjects covered: mineral analysis, bleaching, sugar refining, alkali production, dyeing, metal extraction, tar production, salt extraction, glass making, vinegar manufacture, pharmaceuticals and much else besides.

**Joseph Black as industrial consultant**

Black became known as the person from whom advice should be sought before embarking on a project, or when things went wrong. Some of this work was performed for the Board of Manufacturers in Scotland, a kind of precursor to research councils. The government recognised the problem of the meagre industrial base in Scotland, and following the 1707 Act of Union made the annual sum of £2,000 available, initially with the intention of encouraging the wool industry. But no mechanism was established for distributing funds
until 1727, when a trustee body was established and further monies were made available. Black and his university colleagues became closely involved in offering advice to the board.

It became particularly interested by problems posed in the bleaching of linen, an extremely important activity in Scotland and Ireland. The crisis had been caused by a 50% rise in the cost of the imported plant (Spanish barilla) from which alkali, vital to the process, was extracted. Black and others looked at other ways of whitening the cloth. Farm manure had long been used but was now seen only as a rustic alternative – the process was desperately inefficient. The professor of material medica, Francis Home, proposed the use of dilute sulphuric acid, and for his pains was awarded a £100 premium by the board. However, this process had problems as it weakened the fibrous structure of the material, and Black worked hard over a long period to produce cheaper alkali from both mineral and plant sources. Publications followed, including his explanation of the effects of lime on alkali salts, and a method pointed out whereby it could be used with safety and advantage in bleaching.

These experiments (some on a large scale) were carried out in the confines of the Old College, though with little success. Another approach was to determine the economics of extracting alkali from seaweed, collected from different locations in the Western Isles. If you had collected seaweed from Colonsay rather than Mull, you would have made a much greater profit. Black himself received a reward from the Board of Manufacturers in 1783 for this work.

I would like to refer to one other example of Black’s involvement in industry. A land-owning naval officer, Lord Dundonald, owned the estate of Culross on the Firth of Forth. One of the problems that beset wooden ships at the time was that their hulls tended to be eaten by worms. Dundonald considered that a solution to the problem was to coat hulls with tar and he planned a tar distillation works on his estate using local coal. But though he felt the process might be profitable, he knew that he lacked the chemical and technological understanding and business skills, so Black was called in as industrial consultant. His detailed analysis took a range of factors into account, including whether the country was at war at the time. If it were, then the demand for tar would be greater and the price higher. He also considered the profit arising from some of the by-products of the process. These included varnish that could be made from the resin, and coke which could be sold for iron smelting at the nearby Carron Works. Black’s advice proved correct. By 1788 Dundonald’s British Tar Company was initially making a clear profit of £5,000 per year.
These details indicate that Back and his university colleagues were practical men as well as being good medical teaching professors. Perhaps the two sides of their lives were not all that different, anyway. Doctors have to be hands-on when they practise medicine, and most Edinburgh medical professors practised to a greater or lesser extent, in addition to carrying out their teaching. Black himself treated a few friends, including David Hume during his last and sadly drawn-out illness. Black was also a manager of the Royal Infirmary and was deeply involved in reviving the Edinburgh Pharmacopoeia, arranging to publish three different editions of it. The last thing that could be said of these university men was that they were cloistered. You can easily imagine them in one of our present-day industry parks, tacked onto university towns and cities, presumably because of the availability of scholarly expertise that can be cheaply harnessed from impoverished academics.

**Ethical values**

There is much talk these days about the responsibility that we expect from the scientific community. Of course, most scientists don’t have their heads in the clouds and many were agonised, for example, during the mid-20th century when nuclear experiments were undertaken. I think we can see very well that ethical issues were on the minds of scientists a lot earlier than this and there are clues that Black considered such matters. He agonised over a particularly tricky problem. One day he was medically consulted by the sickly nursemaid of a solicitor’s family named Scott, one of the sons having been named after his father, Walter. He discovered the woman to be tubercular and knew that if he revealed this fact to Mr Scott, she would be immediately dismissed. His conscience told him that he simply had to. And Black today might be given credit for enabling that child to grow to be an adult, one who was to write some of the greatest romantic novels of his age.

Black was cautious about recommending fashionable new drugs and treatments, but he did send some of his patients to Buxton to take the waters. He was scathing about some sources, saying that the exercise of walking to some mineral wells did more good than imbibing the waters when he got there. Black wrote to the industrialist John Roebuck, advising against the use of arsenic for pottery glazes because, as he put it, “arsenic is so very dangerous to the health of the poor workman, it cannot be used without constant apprehensions of its doing mischief”. A beneficial task that he undertook on a number of occasions was to analyse the quality of the Edinburgh water supply, for the commissioners and the Leith and Edinburgh police.
Concerned with religious attitudes, it appears he was a sceptic. He mentions the word “God” just three times in his letters, and on each occasion the word is followed by an expletive. In a rather underhand way he corresponded with Robert Adam, trying to persuade him to drop his plans for a chapel in the designs for the new university building. Black said that he considered such provision as an imitation of English and foreign colleges. He had subtle reasons for this view. Adam had to fit a lot on the restricted site, and Black was pressing him to include a house for the professor of chemistry at the spot where the chapel was meant to be.

In one important area Black did not leave a legacy. From 1766, the year in which took up his Edinburgh post, his fundamental researches in philosophical chemistry came to an end. He was reluctant to theorise and averse to publishing his work. Members of the college pleaded with him, stressing that if he did not write up his work, then others would do it for him, and that is indeed what happened. For his chemical ideas, which he was happy enough to reveal in his lecture courses, were of course pirated. He seemed to be quite unconcerned about training other chemists in research. True, each candidate for a medical degree had to produce a dissertation, but that never seemed to involve the kind of laboratory experiment which Black himself conducted, first of all under the guidance of Cullen in Edinburgh and then in Glasgow.

But perhaps worst of all, he identified the wrong man as his successor. In Thomas Charles Hope, he chose someone with similar attitudes but without the genius he possessed. This was a serious miscalculation: Hope was to occupy the chemistry chair from 1795 until 1843. By this time the German research enterprise had really got into gear and budding research chemists once again had to go abroad for their education, just as local students had to before the setting up of the medical faculty in Edinburgh. Edinburgh was not able to recover its position in chemistry until at least the end of the 19th century. Opportunities were missed, and today similar situations are not infrequently signalled, indicating concerns for the future of British science.

Before I started writing I have to admit feeling somewhat uncertain about whether these meetings would be able to make the point they were intended to. In my particular case, having considered Black's role in the context of the Enlightenment, I can see how useful comparisons and contrasts can be made with the current position of science, its organisation, and the society in which it exists.

Thank you very much.
I have to begin by thanking Dr Anderson for giving me advance sight of his lecture. Prior to receiving it, my notes consisted of a distressingly blank piece of paper unfilled with ideas and consequence. I am certainly grateful to him for an explanation of Black’s experiments on alkaline substances and latent heat. I have to confess that they completely baffled me before I had the privilege to read his lecture.

There are so many thought-provoking points that it is difficult to choose which to address most directly, but I think I would like to take two and try and link them to the responsibilities of politicians. The first relates to the manner in which scientific information informs world decision making. And the second relates to the nature of politicians’ intervention in scientific development. To put both in context I refer to Dr Anderson’s mention of the more all-embracing nature of education in the 18th and 19th centuries. In fact it seems to me to be particularly appropriate that this series of lectures on Enlightenment thinkers is in tribute to Donald Dewar, whose own breadth of erudition paralleled theirs.

For most of us today, however, there is simply too much information available and we begin to specialise at an early age. I think we often tend to keep our knowledge in compartments and do not often unlock the doors between them. Where we develop an expertise it may well be a narrow one, and we are in a limited position to assess developments in other fields. This in itself poses a problem for politicians: few of us are in any position other than to rely on the scientific advice given to us. It is no disparagement of the discipline to say that mistakes can be made in it, like any other. By the time these are corrected, reliance on the earlier information may have attracted a considerable cost.

**Politicians and developments in science**

Take, for example, the campaign being waged at the moment by Christopher Booker of the Sunday Telegraph in relation to white asbestos. He claims that it is being demonised by being classed along with blue and brown asbestos, largely because of a report in the 1980s that, he says, misread the evidence. He claims that it is actually chemically indistinguishable from talcum powder and that not one example has been given of a death resulting from it. Yet we have an EU directive from 1999 banning the marketing and selling of white asbestos from January 2005. Canada has already appealed to the World Trade Organisation about an earlier French ban and the Health & Safety Executive in the
UK is putting forward new legislation to require its removal from buildings. I am in no position to judge the accuracy of Christopher Booker’s view, but what if ... ?

This seems to me to lead to a broader point about science. We see it nowadays as an interpretive activity as much as an experimental one, and, like the interpreted novel, what is true takes the form of the theory to which the professional community is currently committed. Much as in Black’s time the old ideas about phlogiston were, as Dr Anderson said, reluctantly in his case, displaced by Lavoisier’s work on combustion and the new oxygen theory. This understanding of science, together with the fact that there may be gaps in scientific research, poses politicians various problems. For example, what do we do when there are differing opinions in the scientific community?

Take foot and mouth disease and the various options for tackling it: culling infected animals and those in their proximity; culling infected animals with ring-fence vaccination and subsequently culling the vaccinated animals; and lastly, allowing the disease to run its course, with animals being destroyed only on humane grounds, with the surviving acquiring a natural immunity. The Dutch would tell us that in taking the first of those options we made a mistake – they maintain we should have gone for the second. Who is correct? Again, how should we approach matters when scientific knowledge is insufficient, inconclusive or uncertain? In places where it is recognised that there may be a negative effect, Europe has introduced two principles – the “precautionary principle” and the “principle of preventive action”.

The precautionary principle and the principle of preventive action
This involves a risk assessment on the basis of existing information, followed by a political decision as to the acceptable level of risk to those upon whom risk actually falls. Where appropriate, measures are taken to reduce the risk accordingly. Now this may seem a little difficult to follow, expressed as tightly as that, but the approach is illustrated by an excerpt from a recent Health & Safety Executive press release on white asbestos which responds to Christopher Booker’s arguments. It reads as follows:

Building maintenance workers might be exposed to an estimated average of 0.1 fibres per millimetre of white asbestos over a working life, creating a risk equivalent to one death in 5,000 workers. But there is considerable uncertainty in this estimate, which could be lower, or, under a more cautious reading of the evidence, could be significantly higher, perhaps as high as 1 in 750.
Health and safety executive John Thomson said: “The scientific evidence does not provide us with an easy answer to the question just how dangerous chrysotile white asbestos really is. Our belief, based on the best available scientific evidence, is that the risk is real and we must act accordingly.”

On reflection, however, I am not sure how new the precautionary principle and the principle of preventive action are. Are they not just what informed Joseph Black to tell the Scott household of the tubercular condition of their nursemaid?

Unfortunately assessments of risk do not always point as clearly as one would like to the acceptable level of risk, nor do they tell us how far this level should be determined by considerations of a socioeconomic kind. Take this example from the fisheries sector. I recently wrote to the European Commission about the toxins in scallops that cause amnesic shellfish poisoning. In response I was told, “harvesting of these molluscs, taking into account the variability in toxin content, uses a trigger level in the sample of 4.6 micrograms per gram, identified by experts as the threshold where only one scallop in one thousand might slightly exceed the legal limit of 20 micrograms per gram of toxin in the edible parts”.

Not being a scientist I had difficulty following this, and what I really wanted to know was what does this actually mean in terms of the chances of someone getting amnesic shellfish poisoning. I was told, whether accurately or not, by someone supposedly in the know, that taking the amount of toxin actually needed for actual infection would involve consumption of between one and two kilos of scallops (while the answer would actually depend on the level of toxicity in the scallops). I came to the conclusion therefore that even a scallop lover such as myself was not in a great deal of danger. Now, in this case the scope of the example seems to be a particularly narrow one.

I add in the issue of genetically modified crops as something about which there is widespread concern in terms of current field trials and the possibility of future commercial planting. What actual and potential risks and benefits are involved, and just how do we quantify the different types of risks and benefits against each other? What weight do we give to scientific and to wider opinions, and, most important, how do we ensure that all those with contributions to make are properly consulted?

**Politicians’ involvement in scientific investigation**

Now, I have already taken far more time than I had intended on the first of the two points
that I said I would cover, but I hope I have shown just how dependent responsible political
decision making is on science. In that context it is very much in the interests of politicians
themselves, as well as of society at large, to foster scientific research. But of course the
benefits of scientific development extend well beyond these partially selfish concerns. One
only has to think of recent announcements about the potential of stem cell research to
lead to the cure of a wide variety of diseases, alongside the obviously more commercial
applications. Both of these considerations were drivers of the investigations with which,
as Dr Anderson has shown, Black and his contemporaries were closely involved.

These wider benefits of science, though, give rise to a new range of problems for political
decision makers. Under what circumstances should scientific activity be curtailed by
ethical considerations, and who should be in charge of establishing these circumstances,
both in general and in particular cases? Is this a role for politicians or is it a matter for the
judgment of peers? In such cases, how should we weigh different values and interests
against each other? Are there, for example, grounds for justifying a ban on animal testing
for cosmetics but not yet for medicinal products, or are there grounds for both? Should,
in fact, public funding be restricted to research that is not ethically contentious? What
are the advantages and disadvantages of allowing commercial funding for research in
public institutions such as universities? Should there be any restrictions on the type of
commercial benefit that can be derived from research? For instance, what if any, are the
boundaries of the patentability of living organisms?

Giving limited public funding, to what kinds of research should funds primarily be
directed, and where should it be directed? Should it concentrate on building centres of
excellence, as Drummond made of Edinburgh University? In modern circumstances, must
being a European centre of excellence involve being part of a pan-European network of
similar institutions? If so, then what valuable research will go unfunded and then perhaps
undone because of exclusions from such clubs? Now, these may seem abstract questions,
but most of them have been the subject of recent and often heated debate in the
European parliament. Indeed, the temporary committee on genetics and other new
technologies in modern medicine sat for over a year before having its report rejected,
largely because both sides on various arguments thought that it went too far in favouring
the other. Equally, I know of two small research institutions that are already expressing
concerns about the future of their funding, because they do not seem likely to be involved
in some larger grouping.
Now, none of these questions involve easy answers, and I am sure that in the course of Dr Anderson’s lecture you yourselves will have thought of many other questions to which it has given rise. I would just like to finish by saying that in addressing them, it seems to me that we could actually do worse than remember the words of Adam Ferguson. It is a long quotation so I hope you will bear with it, but I think you need the flavour of all of it.

Man is, by nature, a member of a community; and when considered in this capacity, the individual appears no longer made for himself. He must forgo his happiness and his freedom, where these interfere with the good of society. He is only part of the whole; and the praise we think due to his virtue, is but a branch of that more general commendation we bestow on the member of a body, on the part of a fabric or engine, for being well fitted to occupy its place and produce its effect.

If this follows from the relation of a part to its whole, and if the public good be the principal object with individuals, it is likewise true, that the happiness of individuals is the great end of civil society: for in what sense can the public enjoy any good if its members, considered apart, be unhappy?

I do not know if Joseph Black ever gave his approval to these words, but I would like to think that he did. Thank you.
Discussion

Peter Davison
Elspeth Attwooll has raised the issue of scientific policy, white/blue asbestos and foot and mouth disease eradication. I could add the issue of removal of asbestos where it is safely sealed in buildings, certain medical treatments and also BSE. When scientific evidence suggests a change, how do you assess the influence of past policy positions and decisions of politicians and civil servants, and how do you deal with them?

Response: Elspeth Attwooll MEP
I think it becomes very difficult to approach that. Partly because in many cases there has been such a strong financial commitment to the previous situation, and partly because of the uncertainty we all have about science and scientific change. There is always slight caution when new ideas come in, so I think, perhaps wrongly, that politicians tend not to want to shift from the position they adopted before. An interesting aspect of this is that the European parliament has decided to have another temporary committee inquiry on foot and mouth disease. It will not be looking critically or in any sense of blame at what happened, but will discuss what should be done in the future. So I think what we want to do when things change is try to learn from the lessons of the past and try to take a better path in the future. Sometimes, however, we have to go about that with a degree of caution because of past commitments and continuing costs. This is not ideally the way I would like it to be but I have to say that is just the way the world is, sadly.

Response: Dr Robert Anderson
You mentioned it was Canada that was objecting to the new limits. Obviously politicians do have local issues that they do have to take into account, and if your constituency happened to have an asbestos works which was responsible for most of the employment in your constituency, how do you take a decision on that basis?

Response: Elspeth Attwooll MEP
All those local issues become extremely difficult for politicians to deal with. There come times when you are clear that something is so dangerous, that irrespective of the fact that it is going to have an effect on the livelihoods of one's constituents, one just has to be brave and say that on this occasion what I have to do for you is to try and cushion the blow of the change. You cannot do anything else. Where the problem really comes is in cases where there is this kind of doubt. I was trying to use an example where there is a degree of uncertainty in the minds of the politicians and you really do not know which way to go.
Another example (and this, again, is the livelihoods of fishermen generally, rather than constituents) is the present cod and hake recovery plan. What the commission have done there is to set a level of total allowable catch (at which one has to say what their best scientific “guesstimate”, rather than their certainty, is) that will give a high degree of probability that the biomass of cod will increase by 30% and the biomass of hake by 15%. Now, we all know that cod stocks in the North Sea are in real trouble, but I have to ask questions about what is meant by “high level of probability”. Where, on the probability scale between 0.5 and 1.0, does their figure lie? Should one put it higher in order to pursue the conservation aspect, or should one consider the socioeconomic effects?

Maybe one should take just a little more risk in conservation if that is going to result in not requiring such a vast fishing reduction effort as that which this plan will actually require, and which would give rise to real socioeconomic difficulties amongst people fishing, because the fishing effort reduction plan actually involves the catching of less fish other than cod and hake anyway. So it is all very interrelated and complicated and for somebody who is, as you have probably gathered, far from being a scientist, it becomes extremely difficult to work through these decisions and to be sure that you come to the right one in the end.

Sue Dunmore
We have heard something about the difficulties politicians have in translating scientific knowledge into action, but there is a third dimension that perhaps was not present to this degree in Joseph Black’s day. That is the general public, and interpretation by the media of what scientists publish for the general public. I wonder how much that influences political decisions? I am thinking especially of the current MMR issue.

Response: Elspeth Attwooll MEP
I think I am quite grateful that the MMR issue is an indigenous UK one, and I know that the Scottish parliament (the health committee particularly) has done a great deal of work on the scientific case and what the legislation requires us to do. For example, if you talk about the field trials (ie deliberate release) of genetically modified crops, that is basically a purely scientific assessment. So, there is room to consult the public over existing legislation that is actually just in the process of being superseded by another. But it appears that that consultation of the public does not mean taking anything into account other than the scientific evidence that the public may give. When all the scientific evidence is amassed, a risk assessment is done and then the decision is taken about whether there is an acceptable level of risk.
A new directive (something that still has to be worked through) actually seems to allow more to come in because it makes reference to the precautionary principle and preventive action, and it also makes reference to ethical principles. I am not quite sure what that means, even though I have been through the whole process of parliament. There is a petition in the petitions committee of the European parliament at the moment saying: what is your view about what we actually mean about ethical principles? I happen to have my private opinion about the MMR issue as to what should be allowed, but I do not think I should reveal it, because it is not my remit, and I am really thankful that it is not. There are so many issues that come before politicians that involve this kind of sensitivity both to scientific evidence and to public opinion. How we resolve the conflict between the two is one of the most difficult things facing us all.

Response: Dr Robert Anderson
I think there is a big issue about how people know about things, how well they know about things, and what is kept from them. It seems to me that from the point of view of the press (and the press is one of the major ways in which people find out about things) that bad news is good news and good news is not news at all – so it is very difficult to make a proper assessment. I will simply say that I think within the 18th century there was a much greater understanding of science itself. The public understanding of science today is not about the understanding of science at all – it is about the understanding of social and economic consequences of science. If you were an ordinary citizen in 18th-century Edinburgh you could probably find out about science by going to lectures; many people went to Black's lectures who were not taking medical degrees. They just went because they had an interest. People do not and cannot go to lectures today, largely because it is impossible conceptually – science is too difficult for people. They can, however, find out about it through reading books that interpret science, but the problem is the interpretive layer between the science and the reader.

Moira Forest
My question has been partly answered. Bearing in mind the information explosion, the superficiality of the information available, the pervasiveness of the internet and the opportunities it offers, what place in the e-government agenda do you see for science?

Response: Dr Robert Anderson
My own view about trying to find out things from the internet is that there is a great deal of nonsense as well as a few good bits on it. Furthermore there is no sensible filtering process that can be adopted to eliminate the bad stuff and keep the good stuff. I think
there is a fundamental difference between the good stuff on the internet and publishing books. Publishing books is an economic issue: a book has to be worthwhile publishing and printing. The economic issues of publishing stuff on the internet must be entirely different. One knows a certain amount, and one looks on the internet to find out what is said about it, and a lot of it is nonsense (but then a lot of stuff in the press is nonsense).

Response: Elspeth Attwooll MEP
It is something I have found as well; that quite often one gets letters from people because they have come across something on the internet that turns out to be a pure scare story - as there are indeed sometimes similar scare stories in the press as well. There is a problem with a kind of journalism that is not responsible. On the other hand, I do have to say that if you can get onto a site which is properly constructed it can be invaluable. For example, two or three weeks ago I had a letter and had subsequently been to a meeting about a new renewable energy plant which was planned for a particular part of Scotland. The locals were very concerned about it and were telling me that this plant proceeded by fast pyrolysis. Not being a scientist, this was absolutely meaningless to me, but people who work with me in Brussels found a website on pyrolysis and this enabled me to understand it and how far it had been established as safe/dangerous. This seems to me to be a case where the scientific evidence is not conclusive as not enough research has been done. I felt so much better after reading that, as I at least had some grasp of what it was all about.

Lord Sutherland
I suspect there will come a time when there will be accredited sites, when you will pay for the information from an accredited site, and if you do not want to pay you may well get rubbish.

Norman Butcher
I followed Robert Anderson’s comment about the public and science, and one of the events organised throughout the UK will be Science in Libraries. I would like to ask what the speakers think about the closure of the Scottish Science Library, because the Scottish Executive had refused to grant the extra funding - quite modest - to keep it open.

Response: Dr Robert Anderson
Yes, of course that library should be open. It is disgraceful that this country funds its institutions such as libraries and museums to such a pathetically low level. It should take a leaf out of France’s book. At the British Museum we estimate that income has declined.
by over 30% over the last decade. I say this because there may be a politician here who might take note of it! It is very sad indeed that the Scottish Science Library has shut at this particular moment. I hope there are plans to reopen it.

Response: Elspeth Attwooll MEP
On the closure of the Scottish Science Library: I have to confess I was not aware of this. The problem with spending a significant amount of my time in Brussels or Strasbourg is that I do not always manage to get right through the newspapers at the weekends, particularly the Scottish newspapers, which are quite difficult to get hold of. All I can say is I am perfectly willing to write to the executive to ask why. It is not strictly European business, but I do from time to time write letters about other issues.

Geoffrey Boulton, Scientist/Vice-principal, University of Edinburgh
Harry Truman is said to have called for a one-armed scientist – someone who wouldn’t say: “On the one hand this, and on the other hand that.” If he had asked a question such as “What is the speed of light?” or “What is the acceleration due to gravity on this planet?”, he would have had his one-armed scientist. But for practically all the complex problems with which public policy is concerned, I am afraid there is no one-armed scientist available. Most of the science with which we are concerned is highly uncertain science. We are very rarely even in the position to say there is a 20%, 30% or 40% probability of something happening.

Certainty, in a sense, is being able to express a probability in areas such as the estimation of the effects of particular doses of pollutants in the environment on individuals. Here the experimental data is almost inevitably such that the uncertainties are almost beyond the bounds of statistical techniques to capture them. In other words, it is not as if the business of making public policy from science is merely a technical one. The scientists on the one hand say this is this and that is that. The politicians on the other hand say, “Well, that leads inexorably to the following policy, doesn’t it?” The gulf between scientific understanding and policy making is absolutely enormous.

So, is it enough to have science advisers on the one hand and politicians on the other? Do we not actually need new institutions that are capable of representing public values, largely because the impact of science on our lives has now become so great? Are we up to it politically to be able to address some of these problems? Do we not need to think more about how public values can become incorporated?
Response: Dr Robert Anderson
This is a very complicated question and I think there is a fundamental difference between very measurable questions (eg speed of light) compared with the application of science, that is very much more difficult to measure. I think the other issue I should mention is that, at the time, there were controversies, eg Galileo’s work where there were many people who had their doubts. We now know that he was right.

It is very difficult for us to gain a common language now about science. Science has raced ahead of public understanding and I do not think it will ever recover. If one were to be asked a date at which it was difficult for a generally educated person to understand science, I would say that time was probably towards the end of the 19th century. Scientists are now saying they cannot understand what colleagues are doing in the room next door to them. There are real difficulties in understanding science.

With regard to setting up independent institutions, I do not believe there is such a thing as an independent institution. We can see what happened in the Soviet Union over the years of setting up scientific institutions by the government to give advice that was clearly highly flawed. The fact is that the person who has control, or the organisation who has control, is the one which provides the funding, and the funder for this is bound to be some sort of government body, which by its very nature is very difficult to be independently minded.

Response: Elspeth Attwooll MEP
I think this is important but I am not sure how we go about it, as I am not sure whether you are talking about the setting up of some kind of public values board or how one would do it. One thing I find very encouraging is that the Scottish parliament is so much more open to contributions from the public, and discussions with people, in particular civic Scotland. In the European parliament we are also benefiting enormously from people coming to see us to talk about concerns. Sometimes these are commercial concerns, sometimes they are ethical concerns. I know here that lobbying has a bad name, associated with uncomfortable commercial dealings, but lobbying is at one level the lifeblood of the European parliament. I am concerned about it because there is lots of one-sided lobbying. In the debate about the future of Europe, I would like to see some kind of structure put in place which allows balanced lobbying through clear channels, rather than my being informed on the off-chance by somebody actually thinking it would be a good idea to go and talk to that particular person. Politicians have got to open themselves up much more to talking to people engaged in different areas of society.
Whether there should be a special forum in which that is done and quite how one would achieve it I do not know, but in principle there is a lot to be said for the idea. Public consultation should not mean telling the public what it is that they are going to enjoy having done to them. We have to try and cure that. As for talking language that is unintelligible, I do think that although understanding science and its complexities may be beyond anyone who is not involved in some particular aspect of science, there are ways in which scientists, at times, could present their findings in a more comprehensible way to the general public. I feel guilty saying that, as I am trained as a lawyer and you know what we are like!

Robert Balfour
The phenomenon of what happened in Edinburgh 200 years ago during the Enlightenment has been discussed at very great length on a number of occasions by a number of distinguished people, with the hope that perhaps we might be able to make it happen again. The single most important point is that in the 18th century, people with interest and with sufficient understanding came to lectures (even if they were not proper members of the university) and could listen to people talking in a language that would enable them to understand what was going on. They could go on to take up positions of responsibility in the administration of science and so forth.

What are we doing today in the universities to try and get over the problem of having answers from people in positions of responsibility, who in turn have had answers handed to them by scientists – answers that are generally unintelligible to those who receive them? Is there room for courses in the foundations of science for the public and those involved in administration?

Lord Sutherland
May I thank those who have given us such a marvelous evening. First our sponsors, Pfizer, for their help in making the evening possible, as it does require organisation and finance. We appreciate their willingness to promote public discussion on these issues that must be very near to their own interests, commercially and otherwise.

Our two speakers have given us a marvellous conspectus. I do not think you can sensibly discuss contemporary issues without having a knowledge of the history of the subject, and one of the reassuring things (and this came out in the lecture) is that universities and intellectual activity have hardly changed at all. In the 18th century there was strategic planning to set up a medical school, appointment of six professors, professors setting off
to carry out consultancy, setting up of start-up and spin-out companies commercialising technology transfer. It all happened here first! The one trick I have not yet learned is how to appoint professors and offer them no salary. I’ll go back to the books to follow that one through. Of course, it is a delight to understand the history of one’s own city, particularly when it has had such significance.

How do we assimilate, understand and make decisions on the basis of the huge technological advances we are subject to at the moment? That, I think, is one of the key questions for democracy. That is why, when we planned this series of lectures, we were so determined to have a theme based on great scientific contributions that Joseph Black and many others, including Hutton, made for the Enlightenment. I thank our two speakers for introducing these issues, for stimulating us and raising questions of importance.
Lecture 3

David Hume: Morality, reason and passion in public policy

A lecture given on 14 March 2002 at St Cecilia’s Hall, Cowgate, University of Edinburgh

Speakers:
Lord Sutherland, Principal and Vice-chancellor, University of Edinburgh

Rt. Hon. Sir Malcolm Rifkind QC, Former Secretary of State for Scotland

Chair:
Professor Alice Brown, Professor of Politics, University of Edinburgh
Introduction
Professor Alice Brown, Professor of Politics, University of Edinburgh

Tonight’s lecture celebrates the work of David Hume – in the view of some, the greatest philosopher in the English language. It is argued that Hume’s scepticism and religious heterodoxy prevented him from election to chairs at both Edinburgh and Glasgow. However, it did not stifle his work, nor did it prevent him from becoming Keeper of the Advocates’ Library and from participating in all the leading clubs in Edinburgh. He did not temper his views on other topics. On the question of national identity he noted: “I do not believe there is one Englishman in 50 who, if he heard I had broke my neck tonight, would not be rejoiced in it. Some hate me because I am not a Tory, some because I am not a Whig, some because I am not a Christian and all because I am a Scotsman.” However, this most famous of Edinburgh citizens also saw himself as a citizen of the world.

In examining the work of Hume, our speakers will address the topic of morality, reason and passion in public policy. It is a very appropriate topic, especially given the challenges facing modern Scotland. It is appropriate, too, in an era where there is a decline in ideology and, one could argue, a narrowing of policy differences between the political parties in a society which is increasingly diverse in its make-up. We can rightly ask then: on what foundation should governments base their public policy, and what is the role for moral judgment in this process?

These were some of the issues which exercised the minds of the Enlightenment thinkers in the period when the system of government was given ideological shape by the emerging ideas of rationality. That is the belief that following reason in politics will produce a well-regulated society, and also the belief that reason was what made a polity civilised – Hume’s parable that “your corn is ripe today, mine tomorrow. It is profitable for us both that I should labour with you today and that you should with me tomorrow.” This belief that society is built upon on human beings’ mutual dependence survives into the much more secular world of today.

Our speakers tonight are extremely well placed to comment on such matters. Although we have devised this series as a division between the academic and the politician, I think we can safely say that both are equally comfortable in the two roles. It is extremely difficult, I think, to do justice to the contributions that both have made, in this very short introduction. But I am delighted to introduce Lord Sutherland, principal and vice-chancellor of the University of Edinburgh. He began what was to be the start of a most
distinguished academic career in Wales in the 1960s; he later held posts at Stirling University and King’s College London, before becoming principal of King’s College and taking up the post of vice-chancellor of London University in 1990. He has been principal and vice-chancellor at Edinburgh since 1994. Lord Sutherland has played an active part in public policy in a number of different ways, for example as inspector of schools and founder of the Office for Standards in Education. More recently he chaired the royal commission on long-term care for the elderly, a role for which many of us in this room may be grateful as we enter, or currently enjoy, our “third age” at the moment. He is to become president of the Royal Society of Edinburgh later this year, when he stands down from his post as principal.

Our other speaker is the Rt. Hon. Sir Malcolm Rifkind QC. It is fair to say that Sir Malcolm is one of the most experienced former politicians in the United Kingdom, having been a member of parliament for over 20 years, and a member of the Cabinet for over 10. This audience will remember particularly that he was Secretary of State for Scotland between 1990 and 1992. He tells me that he has been variously described as being on the centre right or on the centre left of his party. I suppose it depends who is commenting and making the remarks. What is perhaps less well known is that Sir Malcolm is a graduate of Edinburgh University, and began his career as a lecturer at the university of what was then Rhodesia in the 1960s, before being called to the Scottish Bar in 1970. He is actively engaged in the business world and is President of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party.
Address
Lord Sutherland, Principal and Vice-chancellor, University of Edinburgh

Let’s just get one question off the agenda straight away. This is partly sponsored by the University of Edinburgh and no, I did not vote in myself to do this. In fact the way I would characterise this now is that someone had the damn fool idea of getting the principal on the platform and here he is. The honour, however, implicit in such an invitation I do appreciate very warmly, because this has been a very distinguished cast of speakers we have had for this series and will have through to the next lecture. To join these is quite marvelous, and to speak just for this once on an academic theme is a delight because I am getting a bit out of practice at that. It is a fine opportunity to try and revive the skills.

Hume in Edinburgh
David Hume the contemporary is the focus I want to put on my remarks. There are certain things that apparently everyone knows about David Hume. He was born and brought up south of Edinburgh in a little place called Ninewells in Berwickshire, went to the University of Edinburgh, was the most distinguished student of philosophy we have ever had and perhaps did not graduate but spent time here and left his mark. (They did not actually graduate in those days.) We do not know exactly which courses he went to, but he went from here determined to follow through philosophical questions. When he was a student it was not obvious that this was a genius in the making. Nor was he obviously a genius in the making in due course; because of the prejudice and interference of politicians (and, I have to say, in part academics), he was denied a professorship in this university. As a consolation prize, many years ago, a rather ugly building was named after him.

And now, to justify the claim that he would not have sought this. One thing that not many people know about David Hume is that he is one to whom, amongst others, we are indebted for the very fine prospect we have in Princes Street. Princes Street was already taking place when Hume was living in Edinburgh, and when he moved to the New Town there was a proposal to build on the south side of Princes Street, which evoked serious reaction. It was an 18th-century developer who clearly saw his opportunity, and Hume was one of those who took up the case, preserving for you what is now a very fine view of Waverley Station. But more importantly, he kept the prospect of the castle and all that developed there. He was one of those involved, so we give him tribute for that.
Hume's varied careers

He was in many ways a man with several careers (or half-careers). He was a diplomat at one point, and he was most improbably enrolled in support of the British army, and anyone who has read much about Hume would see this as improbable. He was a private secretary to a general. It is a bizarre episode. He was invited to become a private secretary and since he had no means of support he accepted this post, thinking it would be interesting. And in fact when he joined the regiment in question, at first the plan was to go to Canada to fight the French, but for some reason the delays kept coming and they did not manage to set sail from the South West of England. So what I suppose was the War Office at the time suggested that the forces go off and put about a bit of stick over in France, lay siege to a town or sack and pillage something.

They wondered where they should go. They walked around local shops in Portsmouth looking for maps, found a rather large-scale map of France and identified one of the towns as a potential target. One of the group said he could navigate to get to that town, eventually failed to get to that town but found a town and thought it was his duty to lay siege to it. This they did reasonably successfully, and there were rumours that 20,000 British troops were laying siege to this small French town. People in the town were a bit concerned about this. The rumours were not confined to the French, however, and the British came to believe that the true number of British troops (around 3,000) had become known to the enemy. The same rumours reported that French reserves were due the next day. So they struck camp at 3am and drifted back to their boat and set sail. About 5am the French came out to surrender, quite bemused at the absence of a British army! So that was Hume's time in the army. Interesting, but not his intellectual or diplomatic high point.

Hume was, on leaving university, apparently something of a drop-out from society. He retreated to northern France (possibly to work out some psychological problems – and this is the interpretation most people put on the clues), to live within his means, which was quite hard as he did not have a lot of cash. There he wrote and wrote and wrote, including opening volumes of his great work *A Treatise of Human Nature*. He then had forlornly to comment that when it was published it fell stillborn from the press. So he did not win any Booker Prizes or find himself on any chat shows talking about this great new book. But in the end the person I regard as the greatest post-Reformation European philosopher, Immanuel Kant (closely rivalled by Hume), paid the appropriate tribute to him. It was said that Hume's effect on Kant was that he “awakened him from his dogmatic slumbers”. He set Kant rolling, and late in life Kant produced the great works which changed the face of European society. Hume was refused a chair – they would not make
him a professor, partly because of the content of the book and also because of what Alice was hinting to in her introductions.

He was put forward for a chair in the university, but commented himself in April 1745, “such a popular clamour had been raised against me in Edinburgh, on account of scepticism, heterodoxy and other hard names which confounded the ignorant, that my friends found some difficulty in working out the point of my professorship which had once appeared so easy.” Two months later, meeting the council on 5 June, Hume tells us, “the matter was brought to an issue by ‘the cabals of the principal [I take due shame on that], bigotry of the clergy and the credulity of the mob’. Because of all of these we lost it.” And it is no consolation to recognise the fact that six years later, the University of Glasgow did the same to him. Nonetheless, despite his comments on the clergy (and he wrote a very sharp essay about the clergy), he could truthfully have said some of his best friends were clergymen, the moderates in the church.

**Hume on religion**

He has been referred to as a sceptic, an atheist and an agnostic, and regarded as a zealot against religion. Not one of these terms is adequate or even accurate, because he often hid his real views behind the glass of irony, and he was not the first genius in difficult contexts to do that – nor the last, no doubt. He wrote, I believe, the best book ever written on the philosophy of religion, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion; but he could only arrange for its posthumous publication, such were the difficulties of the time. Nonetheless philosophers and theologians today are still puzzling about which of the three characters in this book represents Hume’s view – and this was part of his great skill as a writer; they were genuine dialogues.

In terms of irony he could be rather mischievous. He did bring some of the calumny down on his own head. He concluded the explosive chapter on miracles in the Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding with a very double-edged comment. He wrote: “The Christian religion not only was at first attended with miracles but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one.” You think about that! Of course you know the fact that, quite clearly from our own contemporary experience, people still do believe in miracles. I am told that 10,000 a week turn up at Tynecastle in the hope that they will see one!

I hear you ask: why am I talking about Hume’s views on religion? You thought I was going to talk about values, passion and morality and so on. Well, what has that to do with
Hume’s view on politics and ethics? I give you a quotation. Hume remarks: “the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous”. That is why I start with religion, and since Neil MacCormick boasted in an earlier lecture that he just had given you a piece from an MEP’s speech in the European parliament, I have to confess and boast that I actually used that quotation in my maiden speech in the House of Lords. I am not sure if the lordships are used to having Hume discussed in open session, but they did that night. Whereas the errors in philosophy are merely ridiculous, those in religion are dangerous.

The issue is this: the attacks on Hume as an atheist missed the point. He was content for those who wished to believe, to believe. He was not intent on persuading everyone to give up religious belief. That was not the primary focus, I believe, of his writings on religion, and indeed his general philosophy. As I say, he might reasonably have said that some of his best friends were clergymen. But what he found unpalatable, and indeed dangerous, was on the one hand superstition and fanaticism, and on the other any attempt to derive moral and social values from a religious premise. What he wanted to do was produce a disjunction against religious belief and say, “Fine, if you want to have religious emotions and sentiment, that’s an interesting fact and you make the most of them – that’s a matter for you. But do not attempt to derive a code of ethics and social and moral values from a religious premise, because it’s then that the dangers begin to set in.” And I cannot but put in brackets 11 September 2001 and all that surrounds it. I will return to this quote again towards the end of this lecture.

Hume was not arguing that all religious belief leads to fanaticism, of course not. He had plenty of good friends who were clergymen of the church. Nor was he arguing that religious belief leads to division, because he got on very well with all of these people. Nor was he suggesting that the ranks of the believers do not include many good men and women, because it is evidently true of all major religions that they do contain good men and women. But Hume did not believe that you could discriminate between different religions in terms of a rational hierarchy or a hierarchy of rationalism, saying that that one is more reasonable than this one.

Uncoupling religion from morality
There is another book he wrote explicitly on religion, called The Natural History of Religion, and that ends with the judgment: “The whole is a riddle, an enigma, an inexplicable mystery.” It is there for empirical enquiry, for anthropological and sociological enquiry, but he did not think religion could be judged in terms of one being more rational and the
other being less rational. This meant (as that formidable scourge of the ungodly, Cardinal Winning, was quick to point out) Hume was denying the credibility of the task of ascribing moral content to one’s life by reference to religious beliefs. Winning was right to spot that, as it is absolutely what Hume was doing, it was a major part of his project. Hume made a radical disconnection between religion and morals, and if that was conceded he had no further need to argue against religion and therefore he did not pursue the path of radical atheism.

But if you accept that disconnection, from where could we, should we, or do we, derive moral and social beliefs? How should men and women live together in a mature civil society when that civil society does not any longer depend on the coherence of a single religious framework? A most contemporary question.

And of course the particular variation on that today (and I hope we have time for a little talk about this, not least because we have someone who has experience as Foreign Secretary on the platform) is in the cruel reminder of the 11th of September. How do we create the prospect of a civil society that is not just national, but international in character? Or is the area of diplomacy and international politics simply a matter of interests and power? How many guns do you have behind you, and what is the economic leverage that you have? How, if at all, can issues of value give content to the shape of a world that has many different religious and ideological frameworks is a question that I think we can reasonably draw from Hume (though he did not tackle that one in quite that direct a way).

As well as the 11th of September, there are issues of this kind applying to Scotland, Northern Ireland, Albania and all over south-east Europe. If it is not a single religious framework that is operating, or a single ideological framework, how do we live together, let alone across many societies? Perhaps we think: if only we could identify the best elements in most religions and produce some form of unification of thought where we distill the essence and put them together. In many ways the Butler 1944 Education Act tried to do that for the Christian religions, by deciding what should be taught in school. I think Churchill’s remark about that was pretty accurate. He referred disparagingly to the county council creed that had come out of this particular act, which would shape, as it was thought, the pattern of religious education. Hume did not think that it was a matter of using something we might define as “sweet reason”. In the end, he thought, if you are talking about an argument between committed believers from different religious bases, we will inevitably run into the truth of his claim that “the errors in religion are dangerous”.

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An alternative approach to ethical and social values

How, then, did Hume move in terms of producing an alternative approach to ethical and social values? For much of the 19th century Hume was regarded as an iconoclast who had no positive statement to make. But I am happy to say that a very distinguished professor of philosophy in this university, Norman Kemp Smith, at the beginning of the 20th century, rescued Hume from that judgment. For me, and for many others, he wrote convincingly of what he called Hume's “philosophical naturalism”. Now, what does that mean?

This is not a context for a detailed discussion and textual batting back and forth of quotations from Hume. I simply want to outline what I take the essence of his positive response to be, and then look at how these relate to two very important but rather contemporary issues of political and social direction. If you are trying to understand what Hume had to say positively, you must start with his scepticism. This was not simply a stance; it was not that he was auditioning to be a Guardian journalist or be editor of Private Eye, or be John Humphries, or whatever. He actually believed that it was an essential part of human life to ask all the difficult questions you reasonably can.

He started with scepticism. He argued from the position that morality was not to be based on reason alone, and he argued quite convincingly – at least, some were convinced. In the end he was quite shocking in what he said. He wrote, “it is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of Rome to the scratching of my little finger”. He said there may be something terribly wrong about that, but it is not irrational or against reason. It is perhaps very wicked, but it is not contrary to reason. The sceptical question he was raising was that if you cannot draw a straight deduction from principle to conclusion that outlaws the destruction of Rome, rather than the scratching of Nero's little finger, how can you base moral conclusions on reason alone? He would not have seen Hitler's wickedness as simply a form of being non-rational. Nor would he have seen any point in trying to persuade him, on a purely reason-based premise, that what he was doing was wrong.

He did not think that reason was where morality came from. Nor, alternatively, would he have sent in an evangelist to convert him – he did not think that would have done it either, because religion is no more the basis of morality than reason. Rather, and this where he becomes positive, he wants to replace religious understanding of human beings with what he called a “science of man”. To understand human beings was his first priority. The importance of empirical methods in understanding human beings was
essential for the new way of thinking he was introducing. Just a couple of quotations from the introduction to his great treatise: he says, “There is no question of importance whose decision is not comprised in the science of man,” and, “There is none which can be decided with any certainty until we become acquainted with that science.” The science of understanding what it is that moves human beings was for him the replacement for a religious ideology, or today for a Marxist ideology.

He would have been just as sceptical of modern ideologies as he was of traditional religions. The trouble with Hume is he did not spend enough time spelling out the implications of that, which is why people often see only the sceptic in Hume. But to understand human beings was essential. It is evident, he says, that all sciences have a relation to human nature – and that was in the early to mid-18th century. He argued that those who decide what is to happen in any given arena must consider the human reactions and consequences of a given action. We may think this is pretty obvious, but they didn’t in his time. We now use fashionable expressions like “evidence-based policy” and “evidence-based medicine”. I would not like to be treated by a doctor who did not practise “evidence-based medicine”, but apparently it is a new thing.

Understanding human beings
Evidence, understanding what humans are like, was the basis for him of all knowledge – but, on top of that, of all sensible, social and ethical policy. At the very heart of his account of the derivation of values, ethical and social, is his belief (and this is fundamental and contested today) that there is a common human nature shared by all people. He writes, “The capital or centre of these sciences that comprise the science of man is human nature itself” – understanding what is common to human beings. Again, it seems very obvious, although in our culture there are very learned and able people who deny that, because they see cultural difference as producing forms of relativism which suggest that we do not have a common human nature. Hume was unambiguous in that. That is where we start: a common concept of human nature. Therefore, he would argue, the attempt to give an alternative account of what defines human relationships and what holds human society together through religion was bound to result in mistakes, because religion did not obviously start with human nature. Religion in our culture starts with God, not surprisingly. Hume believed, in the end: that human beings do draw moral distinctions was to be traced to them having common sentiments.

The passions
We do approve of some things more than others, and that has to do with a very basic fact
about human nature: that when confronted by some situation, some action, some
characters, we have a particular kind of feeling of pleasure or approval. Confronted with
others we have a particular kind of pain or of disapproval. The most probable hypothesis,
he says (which has been advanced to explain the difference between vice and virtue
and the origin of moral rights and obligations), is that “from the primary constitution of
human nature, certain characters and passions by their very view and contemplation
produce a pain – others in like manner excite pleasure”. This is rock bottom where
Hume starts. We react in comparable ways to different situations.

I wanted to give you an example of what I mean to put some flesh on those rather
abstract bones. This is quite a painful example. It is from a piece of writing by Albert
Camus called “Reflections in the Guillotine”. And he is talking about a time when the death
penalty was observed and part of French law, and death was often by execution by
guillotine. He spoke about a case (before the 1914 war) in Algeria, where he lived, of a
particular case about a farm worker who had killed in a sort of bloodthirsty frenzy, but
had aggravated his case by robbing his victims. The affair, he says, created a great stir.
It was generally thought that beheading was too mild a punishment for such a monster.

This was the opinion [he writes] of my father, who was especially aroused by the murder
of children. One of the few things I know about him in any case is that he wanted to
witness the execution for the first time in his life, as he was so incensed at this particular
type of murder. He got up in the dark to go to the place of execution at the other end
of town, and amid a great crowd of people, what he saw that morning he never told to
anyone. My mother relates merely that he came rushing home, his face distorted,
refusing to talk, lay down for a moment on the bed, and suddenly began to vomit.

He had just discovered the reality hidden underneath the noble phrases. Now, that is what
Hume is talking about. Confronted with a particular situation or form of cruelty or
viciousness, there is a common human reaction. And if there is not, Hume would argue,
then there is no prospect of common sets of values. He is tracing moral values, opinions,
discriminations and approvals, to our response.

Can feelings lead to policies?
I will give you a more pleasant example. I think I have got this one right but if I haven’t,
somebody will tell me. I don’t know how many of you have seen Ingmar Bergman’s film
The Seventh Seal, a medieval story of the journey of a knight (this occurs during a great
game of chess in which his destiny is being played out by the devil). The knight sees a
young father and mother playing with a very small baby, and he sits down, entranced with delight.

That is the positive side of it, something that delights us, something fine, something we value. For Hume these were the base points of how you construct values and systems. There is as a result a series of questions for Hume about whether or not this is an adequate system. We may well debate some of these in the discussion. I cannot go into all the main issues here, but of course one of the great charges against Hume is that he has given way to subjectivism and relativism. After all, if it has to do with your feelings, how subjective can you get, as they are notoriously fickle?

We are obsessed with feelings today. Every time a journalist goes to a particular scene of tragedy, what they really want to know is: “How do you feel?” I can imagine the situation of a few millennia ago when poor old Job was going through the wars, and he ended up sitting in a dung heap covered in boils. I just wondered at what the reporter or a television reporter of the day would say, “Well, Job, here you are; you are covered in sores and scratching yourself with sheer misery at how awful it is. You are sitting on the top of a compost heap that smells appalling, you’ve been bankrupted, your children have either gone haywire or died, and what’s more your mother-in-law is blaming you for all of it – how do you feel?”

Today we are obsessed with feelings, and we do worry perhaps about a position like Hume’s, relying too much on what seems to be subjective. Well, I think this is a misunderstanding, but I think Hume is partly to blame for this because a big chunk of his treatise, in which he began to discuss this, he did not include. He wrote a more popularised version, still several hundred pages long, called The Inquiries, and he did not include the material on the emotions and feelings and passions, and perhaps those who came after thought that therefore this is unimportant. I don’t think he developed it as well as he might either, so perhaps he is to blame for being misunderstood, up to a point. But just to drop in another commercial for the philosophy department in Edinburgh. If you want to look at this, a revival of the whole issue was put together here by a PhD student, Pall Ardal, in the late 1950s, and his book Passion & Value in Hume's Treatise. For all the scholars in the audience, this is a very important re-stimulating of the debate to which I am referring now.

**Educating the emotions**

One of the problems we have today, of course, is that we are very dismissive of emotions
and sentiments and passions. The words have lost their meanings; they have changed or, as Eliot would say, “slipped”. Start with the word “passions”, which for Hume had a rainbow-like quality. It was a whole range of possibilities he was talking about, whereas this rainbow-like quality of the word “passion” has now been confined to a monochrome scarlet, and that is what we associate with the word “passion”. It is a development, but also a downgrading of the term as Hume would have used it. In the same way, the idea of sentiment was very important in the 18th century, but that too has been debased as we have constrained and diminished the ways in which the word “sentimental” is used. To refer to something as sentimental is to jointly dismiss it and put a slur on what you are talking about. The word “emotional” is immediately associated in our minds with the word “ephemeral”.

But I think Hume had more to say about the emotions and passions than that. He wrote in the treatise, “certain characters and passions by their very view and contemplation produce a reaction of a particular kind of pain or pleasure, and that is the foundation of approval or disapproval”. Either this is true or it is not. Either you can sit down with someone from wherever, and viewing wanton cruelty, react in the negative way (very dramatically in the Camus example), or you see what is delightful and you react positively. If there is not that sharing across humankind, then I think we are in a dire situation.

I want to make two points about this. Today in our education system, I think we systematically underestimate the education of the emotions, and I think that is a failure. In fact, in spite of ourselves, we do recognise the importance of the emotions, because if a teacher is teaching they want to be stimulating, interesting and lively, as they know an emotional engagement of the pupil is important. But nonetheless we do not actually give much systematic thought, in what I have seen of our education system, to educating the emotions. What could that possibly mean? That is a question I put to you very seriously. It is a question from Hume. If he is right about moral distinctions being based in the emotions, how do you begin to discriminate, how do you teach young children to discriminate between a whole range of base emotions, passions and sentiments that they have?

You might say that in fact in Scotland we have got it exactly the other way round, and in terms of the whole picture we have of morality and the passions, morality is a matter of subduing the passions. Hume would say: no, we’ve got to find out which emotions are central to make moral discriminations and then question how could you possibly do this? How can we educate the emotions? There are a hundred and one ways. But I offer one
suggestion from a French philosopher, Simone Veil. At the centre of her educational thinking was the absolute importance of helping children learn how to see and how to look. We do not spend enough time doing that. We live in a society obsessed with images, but actually the speed at which they are used very often prevents people from seeing and looking. Just watch any of the kinds of film or television aimed at a teenage audience. It is image after image after image. It is not the opportunity to see and to look. It is the opportunity to be affected.

I remember being on holiday in Madrid, visiting the Prado gallery. Being naturally high-quality tourists (intellectually and artistically sophisticated), we tended to move from one painting to another, recognising those we had seen on chocolate boxes and the like. This contrasted quite significantly with a father and a boy of about eight. They were sitting in a corner and the father was teaching the boy how to look. He was not explaining the picture. He was not saying: there is a symbol of youth, or of wickedness, or of vanity, etc. He was actually teaching the boy to look at the colour, the shape, the light, the texture and the characterisation, so that the boy could react and see what was in front of him. That was education of a high order. That is what I mean by referring to Simone Veil. How do we teach ourselves (and certainly those in the process of formal education) how to look and how to see? That, and how we put that into our education system, are questions I leave on the table.

And now to give you another example to go alongside the Camus example on capital punishment. When I was a young man, I thought capital punishment was appropriate for the main range of crimes which it was used for then. Then I saw a film called The Queer Fellow, based on a Brendan Behan play. It taught you to see what it meant for society to license someone to execute others. And that is a very arresting series of experiences one had. But it was actually seeing and looking and having a response of what Hume would call a “passion of the sentiments.” That is one of the issues for today.

Applying the “science of man”

What about religion? The errors in religion are dangerous. What does that really mean about international dialogue? I am going to be what they call in my trade speculative, meaning I am trying something on to see what you make of it. This is not expanding Hume by any means, but it is a question that is raised by reading Hume, as it could be raised by reading others. Suppose you were to say to Hume, “How do we get on with other people who by and large we don’t always understand as well as we should, who have a different set of values, based perhaps on other religions or ideologies?” Well, his first advice would
be to avoid the temptation to try to find a route to religious truth through reason. In other 
words it would not, for example, be worthwhile sitting down and saying that maybe Islam 
got it right or we have got it wrong. Or that maybe we have to persuade them that 
we have got it wrong or we have got it right, and it is a matter of rational discussion. 
He said: that is not really what religion is like. A second piece of advice would be that it 
would be a mistake to try and cull from these religions some common elements, saying 
that we could build on the fact that Christianity, Judaism and Islam are all monotheistic, 
and they all have a commitment to truth.

Hume would say, I am pretty sure, that actually if it is an error to try and deduce ethics 
from one religion, it is probably three times as bad to try and deduce ethics from three 
religions, however mixed together. So his advice, not surprisingly, would be this: if you are 
looking for a long-term basis for international peace, look to the “science of man”.
Pay attention to what men and women have in common as a matter of empirical fact – 
and this, he believed (you will not be surprised to hear), includes common sentiments, 
common emotions, that lie at the base of our value system. To say this is to state baldly 
an inferred application from Hume’s *Science & Man*, rather than to defend it against all 
counter-arguments. But this is the advice he would give us today, I have no doubt.

Here is my speculation. I believe that if we now look at Islam particularly, that we have 
major problems in terms of understanding and responding. Few political leaders in 
the West have any conception of the complexities and varieties that constitute Islam. 
They seem to understand that you cannot go from “X accepts the teaching of Islam” to 
“therefore X is a terrorist.” They have got past the gutter press to that extent, but they 
are puzzled by the effectiveness and indeed the affectiveness of some terrorists, owing 
much to the fact that they see death which accompanies terrorism as martyrdom, and 
not as suicide. So, the religious beliefs are there in the kinds of terrorism we have seen 
significantly recently. And we say: surely there is a connection, and the problem is Islam. 
And therefore we have got somehow to agree with it, or disagree and persuade them they 
are wrong. Not so, according to Hume.

**The value of enlightenment**

I think a Humian construction might be something like this – and this is a construction in 
the light of Hume’s teaching and the impact it had historically, and all I say is that this 
may well be unwelcome to some of my Islamic friends, just as it is to some of my 
Presbyterian and Roman Catholic friends. But I do believe that one of the differences 
between Christianity and Islam is that Islam has not been through the experience that
Europe has had of Renaissance or Enlightenment, in so many words and so many ideas. Whatever else is true of Islam, there are many great thinkers as part of Islam and we do well to remind ourselves of figures like Averrēs in the 12th century or Iqbal, a great Pakistani thinker of the 20th century. And we forget at our peril that it was the scholars of Islam that kept the texts of Plato and Aristotle alive when we were going through what is called the Dark Ages. So this is not an anti-Islamic tract by any means. Deep respect for what has been achieved.

But there has been, as yet, no Erasmus for Islam. What did Erasmus do that was so special, this little scholarly fellow? What he did was he took the techniques of humanistic literary scholarship and applied them to the sacred scriptures, and some have never forgiven him for that. He did that in Europe and that, I believe, was the beginning of the change of how people have come to see the religions of Europe. In Islam, there has not been what Erasmus did, which was apply the techniques of scholarship to this two-volume work which we call The Bible.

Furthermore, there has been no empirically driven development of scientific enquiry within the Islamic culture, albeit the great successes of Islamic computational thinking and its application to astronomy and so on. There has not been the same empirical drive to go from an empirically evidence-based approach to all questions that we have had in the West (although we may not have accepted them completely). The difference is much like what they found in Marxist societies – at certain points the questions had to stop because the ideology settles the argument.

My own view is that we are watching Islamic communities, in some cases in one generation, going though a pressure to absorb what Christianity has still not yet fully assimilated in half a millennium. I think that is what is going on at the moment. And of course there is a particular painful pressure of this for first and second generation immigrants into this country and other Western countries. In one generation they are going from 16th-century thinking in some places to all the impact of contemporary Western culture. And that is somewhere we ought to provide support, help and sympathy, as it is happening in many of our cities.

The political version of this is to be seen at work in those societies that wish to resist some forms of globalisation – and they do not mean Mercedes and McDonalds. Rather, what is under issue is how many questions you are allowed to ask. There comes, in certain religious communities, a limit to the questions. You can ask so many, but you cannot ask
this one. What we learn from Hume is that you cannot limit questions in that way. You can prevent them physically up to a point but you cannot limit them forever. I believe that this is what the Soviet Republic discovered, because they wanted the benefits of technology as well. And they thought they could confine the scientists’ free thinking to the laboratory – “The minute you leave the lab, don’t ask any awkward questions.” Societies cannot exist in the long term like that. I think this is an issue for Islamic culture and I do not think there are choices. Do they want the benefits of modern science and technology without the empiricism that is its foundation? Karl Popper would say “No” and would argue this very, very, strongly.

The composition of Islamic culture, and our response to it, must be to begin to understand these issues. The first part of this response is to begin to talk with our friends, not in terms of “can we persuade them to be the same as us by adopting our religion” – or “should we switch to their religion” or “find a common amalgam” – but actually put on the table the science of man. We are still struggling to take account of this, and there are many in our society who do not want this.

**Trust and the international civil society**
The last point I want to make in relation to this is how are we seen. If we are trying to discuss the possibility (to go back to our first lecture in this series) of a civil society that has international dimensions, I see two examples of how we might advance this. One, that we are in danger of losing, is through the professions. A major part of civil society has been the existence of professions. I think the professions have sometimes let the ball drop, but you cannot conceive of the profession of medicine without standards and ethical principles and values. That is true across the whole world. The professionals in one culture talk to the professionals in another culture, and, indeed, have to. The same applies to law. If you are going to sign a commercial contract, there has to be a basis of understanding of what leads to trust in these things across communities, across cultures, and not simply within them. If you are going to build buildings, you need a common set of standards so that you do not build a building purely on the grounds of cheapness (so that buildings fall down in six years’ time).

In the professions there are ethics developed, there are common values that have to exist. This takes it out of the diplomatic arena, and I think a refocusing of our international strategies (long term) into the professions and lastly (you would be amazed if I did not say this) education and the universities. They are major forces within civil society for cross-cultural dialogue of the kind I am advocating, based on empirical considerations, looking
to common sentiments. We have students from 120 different countries in this university – they are all richer for the need to live and talk together. It is not a one-way process. We learn as they come and they learn, I hope, being with us.

**Lastly, a little empirical story ...**

What do I mean by professions, and in this case the academic profession, creating the possibility of discussion that we find difficult at diplomatic level? Just at the end of the last major war in the Middle East, as Iraq had been forced to withdraw from Kuwait, I went in with a small British team, government-sponsored, to look at how we could help the reconstruction of a society devastated by war.

We were looking at reconstruction of schools and universities. One of the stories they told us concerned a university we visited (it had been pillaged and everything taken, including the books from the library). The academics told us that these trucks would roll in from Iraq and they would roll up in front of the library. Out would come the soldiers driving them, clearly armed, and a bunch of academics were sent into the library to identify which books were worth taking. By and large they ended up taking them all. These academics were actually close colleagues. It was like me talking to a colleague in Newcastle or York University. They knew each other, and the academics from the North had to say, “We have no choice: they have our children and wives at home; this is a job we have to do.” But what was interesting was that they felt ashamed. That is what Hume means by common sentiment – they felt ashamed. Perhaps they should not have felt as ashamed as they did. If you have a wife and children hostage at home, you do different things from what you might do otherwise. But those sentiments and passions would be the basis when Iraq once again joins the community of nations in the way that we all hope it will.

This is not an anti-Iraqi statement. These are the sentiments that will be the beginnings of a form of civilisation that is based on a kind of civil society as Hume spelled it out. I must stop now, but I will just say once again: science of man, empirical approach, common sentiment, shared values – this must be the way to go.

Thank you very much.
Address
R.t Hon. Sir Malcolm Rifkind QC, Former Secretary of State for Scotland

Ladies and gentlemen: Lord Sutherland, in his excellent address, reminded us that David Hume was the person you had to be grateful to for that splendid view of Edinburgh Castle and Waverley Station. I could not help but reflect on the American visitor to Edinburgh who said: “Gee it’s a wonderful castle you’ve got here, but why did they build it next to the railway line?”

I take the point that Hume’s problem that he was refused a professorship was the responsibility of the politicians on Edinburgh town council and various academics and others – I have to tell you, some things never change. Those of you who have read Cockburn and Memorials of His Time may recollect that he records, in 1795 during the Napoleonic Wars, that Edinburgh town council, to use his own words, “resolved to ruin the French by abstaining from drinking Claret at all municipal festivals”. Cockburn goes on to say that the vow was not kept! And so the French were not ruined.

I must say it is also significant that if it was the 18th century that gave us Hume, Adam Ferguson, William Robertson - and others of the great Scottish Enlightenment - it is rather sad that the best the 20th century could do was to give us the Hume Tower, William Robertson Building and the Adam Ferguson Building. And although I absolve the present principal for that act of sacrilege, I must say I had one great aspiration when I was Secretary of State for Scotland - and that was to create a new listed building system: where a building was so ugly that it was A listed, you would get an 80% grant for demolishing it!

Lord Sutherland in his address mentioned a quotation from Hume, and it is central to our interest this evening. His quotation: “the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous”. Alongside religion, add also ideology if one wants to adapt this view to modern circumstances - that is not to suggest you believe religious fanaticism is somehow something of the past. It was in this country, indeed Scotland just a few years ago, that Lord Mackay, the then Lord Chancellor, had to resign from the church where he belonged because of the criticism of his attendance at the funeral of a Roman Catholic colleague. I recollect the wee Free Minister, told that he had to take an ecumenical service which he thoroughly disapproved of, going into the pulpit and looking at the front row of pews and sitting there was a Roman Catholic, and a Baptist, and a Methodist, and a Unitarian and other denominations and the wee Free Minister began his service by saying: “Gentlemen, we are all here to serve the Lord, you in your ways, and I in his!”
The 11th of September is, of course, an issue which dominates our thinking and is relevant to our discussions this evening. Islamic fanaticism is an issue which is before our minds, but do remember that religious fervour was also to be found in other faiths. The Crusades were not exactly an expression of liberal belief. We know that the burning of heretics was a pleasurable theme for many years, and even in our own time – it was, after all, in the 20th century that the greatest evil, the Holocaust, the killing by advanced scientific means of millions of people in gas chambers, took place. No wonder when Gandhi was asked what he thought of Western civilisation, he replied that he thought it would be a good idea.

**Fundamentalism and “modernity”**

The consequences of what we are now facing is that there is nevertheless a change compared with other generations, and Lord Sutherland commented on this. We have what many believe to be fundamentalists – and some would argue these are medieval in nature – but today they are combined for the first time ever with two other things: modern technology, including modern weaponry, and mass movement of population. The result is that you get different communities with fundamentally different beliefs with access to weaponry. And I do not just mean weapons of a military kind, but the means that the terrorist uses now, which are far more sophisticated than ever before and which can have profound consequences.

**Common values**

Now, some say that the turning point was the end of the Cold War, that it was the “end of history”, as we were told at one stage. I think that is the most superficial view – I tend to believe the view that when one door closes, another door slams in your face! New problems emerge. Some suggested that what we are now facing (Lord Sutherland touched on this) was a clash of civilisations. That is a view that has been argued with some profundity in some quarters. I think it is too simplistic. And I think it is too simplistic for this reason – that if you go beyond some of those who capture the headlines, and you look at what is happening in societies different to our own, you see very common values and common beliefs.

The tens of thousands of black Zimbabweans desperately trying to vote, standing outside polling stations day after day, were expressing the kinds of values and beliefs and the need for representative government that we believe in. The 70% or 80% of Iranians in Iran who chose the President, against the wishes of the Ayatollah, who has been trying to introduce moderate reform; those who, by their populist uprisings, overthrew governments in Indonesia, the Philippines and elsewhere. India has a vastly different culture but for 50
years has had a practising parliamentary democracy and a rule of law, despite a culture which could hardly be more different to our own. These demonstrate that although there are clearly different civilisations, some of the values are common and fundamental.

**Pragmatism and policy formation**

Now, against that background let me for a few moments – I don’t want to speak for long - say, “What, then, should public policy be based upon?” Should it be based on religion or ideology in the modern context? Or has it got to be essentially pragmatic? I opt for the latter, and I do so for these reasons. Firstly, a public policy that was based on ideology – on fixed principles and beliefs of doctrinal kind – will inevitably be too rigid and too inflexible; it will lead to that phenomenon, “It works in practice, what’s wrong with it in theory?” And it also has other problems that when you have an approach which relies purely on reason, reason can be a very seductive process – it can provide you with what would appear to be convincing arguments justifying conclusions that you wish to reach. But the power of reason is limited to human fragility. And someone did very wisely once remark that “logic is the art of going wrong with confidence”.

I think that essentially these approaches are approaches which we have to be very careful and very qualified about, and the alternative to a public policy based on doctrine or ideology or religion is not one that has no values or beliefs at all. There has to be a framework of basic principles and objectives, but one must always judge – as I suspect Hume would have judged – what will be the practical consequences of a particular course of action? Not what will be the theoretical objective of the doctrinal implications, but what is going to be the impact on people’s lives?

**Ethics and objectives in foreign policy**

Should there be an ethical foreign policy, for example? And the present administration for a period of time were enthusiastic about that very phrase – slightly less often now. And the reason why I think it has become less fashionable is because it essentially always was based on a misleading set of assumptions. It implied that you could put down standards of foreign policy, and apply them with consistency and determination and courage; and yet as soon as you begin to approach an issue in that way, particularly in the sphere of foreign policy, you realise its limitations. Let me explain what I mean:

One of the elements of an ethical foreign policy has always been the belief that the democracy should not be too close to – should not take as friends or allies – governments that are led by dictators. This suggested that, during the Cold War, the Americans were
too keen on Latin American “generalissimos” and other despots who, as long as they were anticommunist, were considered acceptable allies. It was suggested that this was somehow fundamentally improper. I think you have to decide what is your overall objective and how could it best be taken forward. The best example of that is during the Second World War, when Churchill and Roosevelt formed the closest possible alliance with Stalin – not because they were blind to Stalin’s crimes, but because they recognised that without such an alliance Hitler would not be defeated. And indeed on one memorable occasion, when Churchill was asked to comment on this, he said that if Hitler invaded hell he, Churchill, would at least make a favourable reference to the devil! He was quite clear that the overriding objective had to be pursued with total singularity of purpose.

Likewise, the ethical foreign policy often implies that we should be hostile to the sale of arms, and of course you have to be very careful and cautious as to who you sell arms to, but we know one of the practical consequences when arms were not sold to South Africa or Israel, that these countries simply developed their own weapon manufacturing industries, and the consequences were less susceptible to international opinion rather than more.

We are told that sanctions should be applied when governments fail to meet basic standards of principle and human rights; sometimes there are good arguments for such an approach, but we equally know that sanctions can often hurt the weakest far more than the powerful. And the enforcement of sanctions against Iraq over the last 10 years has led to many people taking the view there that it is not Saddam Hussein who has suffered but Iraq’s own citizens.

Now, I am not saying these arguments must always apply; what I am saying is you have to look at the practical consequences of each example. You have to ask what will be the implications of sanctions in the particular case – who is the ally you are linking with and what is the greater evil you are trying to deal with? Human rights? You would imagine that it was always justifiable, right and proper to advocate human rights and to punish those who deny them. But, again, you have to look at the consequences. It was very much on the issues of human rights that the West withdrew its support from the Shah of Iran over 20 years ago, that led to the collapse of his regime. Are we entirely convinced that the ayatollahs represented an improvement in human rights for the people of Iran?

Similarly, in Turkey, where today many quite understandably criticise the very poor record of the Turkish government in relation to human rights, it is important to reflect also on the fact that the area where human rights is least observed is with regard to whose
who are threatening the secular nature of Turkish society, who wish to replace it with a theocratic state; and it is at least arguable that if they were allowed to go about their business in a normal democratic way the end consequence might be a Turkey that ceased to be secular, and where human rights were ultimately less respected than they are now.

And there is always a danger of an arbitrariness, where governments seek to pursue a policy based on alleged moral grounds.

We have the example of the conflict in Kosovo, where both the American and the British government argued with a passion that they were pursing a moral imperative in removing the persecution of Milosevic and the Serbs from the people of Kosovo. But when you pursue a policy based on a moral imperative, the question must be asked: what was it that distinguished Kosovo and the Serbs from, for example, Chechnya and the Russians, or Tibet and the Chinese, or the many other examples of minority people oppressed by their larger neighbours? And if you seek to argue that your policy is based on principle and morality, then you will end up being seen to be at best hypocritical, and at worst totally ineffective.

**Morality and democracy**

So my argument is one that I respectfully suggest Hume would have had very little difficulty disagreeing with. It is not that there should not be an ethical dimension to foreign policy. Of course governments must be conscious of the ethical and moral implications of the policy they are pursuing. But that cannot be an end of the debate; that cannot be the sole basis on which decisions are taken, because governments are grossly irresponsible, and lacking their proper function.

The business of government policy and public policy is not an academic one. It is not one concerned with political theory. It must be one that is concerned with the practical consequences of the policy that is pursued, and I always get worried and nervous when politicians, whether they come from the right or from the left, adopt a sort of Manichean view of issues - that everything has to be right or wrong, black or white. Shades of grey are described as “wimpish” or “wet” or “damp”, or some other disagreeable term. The reality is that if you claim a moral monopoly in politics, not only is that unlikely to be justifiable, you are also acting in an antidemocratic fashion, because if you are claiming a moral monopoly you are implying that those who disagree with you have an amoral foundation to their alternative view. You are therefore denying choice to the electorate - you are saying only one choice is available to decent, reasonable people. The truth of the
matter is that no political philosophy, certainly in our country, has such a monopoly of wisdom. It was once said that: “Under capitalism man exploits his fellow man. And under socialism it is exactly the other way round!”

Debate on politics should not be about morality; the debate on public policy and politics should be about the policies that are needed to achieve what most sensible, sane people will agree is a common objective.

I promised not to speak too long; I will simply conclude by quoting a statement that was also made in this city - not by Hume but by Benjamin Disraeli. Disraeli, speaking in 1867, and I think his words were very relevant to this evening, said:

In a progressive country change is constant, and the great question is not whether you should resist change, which is inevitable, but whether that change should be carried out in deference to the manners, the customs, the laws, and traditions of the people, or whether it should be carried out in deference to abstract principles and arbitrary and general doctrine.

The one, he said, is a national system; the other, to give it an epigraph, a noble epigraph which it may perhaps deserve, is a philosophic system. So I think we have interesting, if unexpected alliance with David Hume and Disraeli. Perhaps not an axis of evil, but an axis of common sense and pragmatism, highly relevant to the issues that we are considering this evening.

Thank you very much.
**Discussion**

Audience member
Given the technology, given that we will soon be able to alter our own human nature, would Hume have reason to advise us for or against a particular fashion of human nature?

Response: Lord Sutherland
I think what Hume would offer is a means of tackling the question on, to some extent, a pragmatic basis. I suspect it would be the case that pictures of a modern version of Frankenstein (the doctor, not the monster) would generally cause responses of aversion in terms of how people reacted to this; as long as that is the case then, in terms of how our civilisation is developing, such alterations would be against the grain rather than with it. I think for Hume that would be immensely important. It is not as certain (as Sir Malcolm is implying) that there is a single principle you take from Hume and you drop into place; rather it is about how you go about making these decisions, and I think for him a critical part of that would be ensuring we see the issues plainly and clearly without the ideologies of scientism, or alternatively of those who are recidivists of one kind or another distorting our picture of what we see in front of us. I think Hume would suggest the need for clear exposition of what is empirically happening, what the consequences are, where we do not know, saying that we do not know what the consequences are, and looking for a common response in terms of sentiment – sentiment in the sense that Hume would understand it.

Professor Ray Langton, Professor of Moral Philosophy
A question for Sir Malcolm: I just want to put it to you that the contrast you were trying to make between theoretical approaches to politics and pragmatic approaches to politics is actually a contrast within different moral perspectives. It is basically a contrast between certain moral views and a distinctively consequentialist moral view. So we cannot avoid morality, whatever we try to do. That is the bottom line. I also suggest that in pursuing a singularly pragmatic approach you are just as likely to be ruling out of consideration a number of opinions that you would be if you were to adopt the moral approach, because people are motivated by moral considerations at least as much as by pragmatic ones.

Response: Rt. Hon. Sir Malcolm Rifkind QC
My argument is not that morality is totally irrelevant. We happen to live in a society where the vast majority of people share the same basic values. There are differences of degree and differences of emphasis, perhaps differences of judgment in particular cases. The fundamental values are not an issue that tears our society apart, as they are in some
societies. Therefore to argue, as some do in our own political debates, that somehow one side has the monopoly of political virtue because its views and policies are based on moral grounds (the inference being those who do not agree with them do not have such a position) is, I think, not only foolish but actually a diversion from the real choices that the electorate are going to make. In any event, I would take the view that government and administration, again, must not become too seduced by what are ultimately issues of theory. Their responsibility is the welfare of the people, and that is expressed in terms of safety from invasion or from crime, their material prosperity, and their ability to fulfill their own individual personality in dignity and in satisfaction. That is the business of government and these are essentially practical questions.

Professor Ray Langton
They are also essentially moral questions.

Response: Rt. Hon. Sir Malcolm Rifkind QC
Of course they are, and no one would question that; but what some people do argue is that in somehow deciding which policy to pursue, you are deciding where the moral argument points, and that can lead you in a very awkward direction. If it leads you in a very awkward direction, don’t go down that way! It is all very well being on the right train, but get off before it crashes into the buffers.

Alan Harding, Medievalist
I wonder if Hume’s science of man could be found in his history, because he was not just a philosopher, he was a rather good historian. One of the most illuminating things he has taught me about medieval society in his History of England (which of course included Scotland) is the importance of the county community. He works out the way in which people related to each other.

Response: Lord Sutherland
Yes, absolutely, on both points. He was a brilliant historian. In fact he eventually made his living as a historian. If he had any money to live off, that was where he got it. It was the exposition in one sense of his philosophical thinking, including, I think, some of the issues that I was trying to raise in the lecture, in the study of actual historical change and societies of which he had knowledge. There is a dimension of Hume there that we neglect at our peril.
Response: Rt. Hon. Sir Malcolm Rifkind QC
The only point I make here is: please don’t be too upset if he included Scotland in his History of England. I once cured a Canadian of that habit by calling him an American.

Janet Balfour
Lord Sutherland asked us to put our minds to the sort of education that would help to realise the approach, attitudes and principles David Hume represented, and presumably one of the most important things to teach is curiosity. Albert Camus’ father went along to have a look and was sickened by what he saw, and if we are able to ask questions and are interested in the world around us and our reactions to it, how other people behave, that presumably is one very good starting point. Spoon-feeding with idiotic television and radio programmes does not help. Please, both Lord Sutherland and Sir Malcolm, will you try to do something about that?

My question is this, and it is raised in my mind by the remark of the speaker who is a medieval historian. It is something to do with the size of community with which it is possible for individuals to identify. It is wonderful to think that we can all look to our common humanity, but it is sometimes quite difficult to identify with the common humanity of millions and millions of people. It is a bit easier if it is on a county community sort of level. On the other hand, if that community is too small – either geographically, or limited by shared enjoyment of certain television programmes, for example – it also can become insular and rigid. I wondered whether our speakers might have any views on the ideal size of the community with which we can even hope to start engaging and thinking about shared values.

Response: Rt. Hon. Sir Malcolm Rifkind QC
One could speak for hours on this issue. But I will make only one point, and that is that it is hugely relevant for the European Union. There is a real debate about Europe, which is not whether you are for or against, but concerns the kind of Europe that makes sense for the nature of the continent of which we are part. I am not a eurosceptic, but one of the things that disturbs me about the European Union is that it has become seduced by the view that harmonisation equals good. The reality is that Europe has already harmonised (ie become uniform) in a number of areas where even the USA, which is one state, leaves it to the individual states of the union to determine their own policy. I hope that the debate on Europe will be much more sensitive to that consideration, not just in rhetoric, but in substance.
Response: Lord Sutherland
Yes, curiosity and asking questions are fundamental. This includes asking questions of the pragmatists, the ideologists, especially of those who rely on opinion polls, focus groups and the like. It is an essential part of education. In terms of community, I don’t think Hume could recognise the question on an ideal size of community. He would say this is an empirical matter. There has been change over time and we all belong to a large number of communities.

I stress again the point about professions. I find that wherever I go in the world, if I am meeting fellow members of my profession, a natural conversation begins to emerge very quickly because we have shared values and shared responses to different kinds of situations. I know this because if you wander into a convention of lawyers or architects, and you are not part of the club, you notice they have something shared that you are not part of. These shared values and perceptions are a very important part of civil society. There are different communities for different purposes. I am delighted that we are not confined to an 18th-century village, because I think that is a diminution of the possibilities and the only possible way is to get out.

Alan O’Brien, Retired local government manager and student of philosophy
First of all, to Sir Malcolm Rifkind: I think the point made was pragmatism in favour of a rational approach. Does pragmatism not lead to further pragmatism, leading to further pragmatism and the run-down of reason? Should we not maintain rational standards, and aren’t rational standards beyond cultural divisions? So should we not, going back to Lord Sutherland’s view and the Humian view, examine the science of human and common human nature and therefore understand what true reason is?

Response: Rt. Hon. Sir Malcolm Rifkind QC
Of course you have to apply rational criteria. But don’t believe that is the beginning and end of the exercise. That is only one ingredient that is relevant.

Response: Lord Sutherland
If by pure pragmatism you mean you decide on the basis of some set of unspecified set of principles that you keep secret, clearly that is not acceptable. In terms of searching for true reason, again I quote Hume: “Reason is and only ought to be the slave of the passions.” He was very clear about keeping sentiment, passions and convictions that came from that source (that he believed were common across humanity) at the centre of the debate.
Donald Gorrie, Politician
I was wondering if the speakers would comment on the following point of view. I think that because ideology has got a bad name, political leaders abandoned ideology and really abandoned everything. They are led by the latest opinion poll and focus group, which reflect people’s often very ephemeral (and with all due respect, ill-informed) opinions formed by the press and the media. Do you think it is possible to have people with convictions, to have some really positive drive without having ideology, and thinking everyone else must be wrong?

Response: Rt. Hon. Sir Malcolm Rifkind QC
It is not that politicians have abandoned ideology. It is that there is now a common ideology effectively shared by all British political parties. That may change at some stage and it does not mean that you cannot have conviction politicians. The best kind of conviction politician is not the ideologue. It is where the politician sees a problem, sometimes a massive problem facing society as a whole, and determines to resolve that problem. I will just give two examples. Churchill was a very pragmatic politician. During the war he was a conviction politician, single-minded in the aim to defeat Hitler. The other example is Nelson Mandela. He is neither an ideologue nor theoretician. He does not have a particular political philosophy that is crucial to his achievement. He had a single political objective and in that sense was the best kind of conviction politician.

Response: Lord Sutherland
I don’t think the choice is between ideology and opinion polls and newspaper headlines (fortunately). Hume was a man with very considerable convictions, and he would tell you quite clearly what he approved of, but his point was he did not derive it from a political or ideological position.

Professor Alice Brown
I want to thank both our speakers for very stimulating presentations, and for bringing a sense of passion back into public policy, both in terms of international and domestic policy. One of my regrets is that Donald Dewar himself was not here to enter into the debate – he will be really cross if he is watching this just now because I am sure there are lots of things he would have wanted to say. As someone who believed in social justice he thought there was a lot to be passionate about in public policy. He used to ask why was it in his constituency that people’s life expectancy and all the things they might expect from life was so much dependent on the street they were born in, and their parents. That is something that is a challenge to all of us. In thoughts of Enlightenment at the moment,
one of the great imperatives is that we should think with others. We have been doing that this evening.

Before we finish, I want to extend my warm thanks to Pfizer for making this event possible, to my colleagues in the Smith Institute for collaborating in all this work, to you the audience for participating so effectively, but most of all I think to our first-class speakers this evening who brought Hume to life again for us.
Lecture 4

Adam Smith: Can both the left and right claim Adam Smith?

A lecture held on 25 April 2002
at the Playfair Library Hall, Old College, University of Edinburgh

Speakers:
Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer

Dr Emma Rothschild, Co-director of the Centre for History & Economics, University of Cambridge

Dr Irwin Stelzer, Director of Economic Studies, The Hudson Institute

Chair:
Lord Sutherland, Principal and Vice-chancellor, University of Edinburgh
Introduction
Lord Sutherland, Principal and Vice-chancellor, University of Edinburgh

We have looked at Adam Ferguson, Joseph Black, David Hume, and now, Adam Smith. A great, great figure of the Enlightenment who had the advantage of spanning Scotland, so he cannot just be transposed to Edinburgh and be called an Edinburgh man. He was from Kirkcaldy, he worked in Glasgow, but, as we like to think, came here for his intellectual stimulation in the evenings with the members of the Enlightenment.

I have to say, Chancellor – I don’t know if you recall – this is all your idea. We once sat in the back of your car and for want of better things to do – I think I was asking you for money and getting nowhere – for want of better things to do, you said: “Well, what about the Scottish Enlightenment?” And here we are with the series. There was a quid pro quo of course, and the quid pro quo was that you come and speak and take part in the series, and I am delighted to welcome you back to your university. Your shadow casts long in this place, you are well remembered for all sorts of reasons, and I think some of the folks you knew from then are here now. I am told you were a bit of a lad at the time, and you raised questions and made life difficult for principals and secretaries. I have also heard that you were actually right on practically everything, and we’ve done it, we’ve done it; so the response from your university to your insights as a student and as a student rector was, in the end, slowly but wisely, “Yes”. We are delighted to have you back.

Our other two speakers this evening include Dr Emma Rothschild. Emma Rothschild is a Fellow of King’s College, Cambridge, Co-director of the Centre for History & Economics at Cambridge University, and indeed a very distinguished leading academic figure in the sorts of areas that you will hear of this evening. There is no need for me to sing her praises. You will be well aware, by the end of this evening, of her talents, abilities and insights.

I will ask the Chancellor to introduce the theme, to talk a bit about Adam Smith, and then ask Emma Rothschild to give her lecture. That will be followed by a response from Dr Irwin Stelzer, a very distinguished US thinker, who is a senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute. You may well see his columns in the Sunday Times, where he is the US correspondent and columnist on financial and political matters. In fact, the Chancellor claims he invited Dr Stelzer to be one of the party to stop him commenting on last week’s budget in this weekend’s paper! Dr Stelzer has a wide range of academic links and contacts; he is a senior policy thinker and precisely the kind of person we want here on the platform. Welcome to Edinburgh to you and your wife.
The lectures are sponsored by Pfizer Incorporated, and we are deeply grateful to them for all that they have done. We will ask one or two of the representatives to say a word at the end of the session.
Address
Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer

Lord Sutherland, ladies and gentlemen: can I say I am delighted to be back home in Edinburgh University almost 35 years after I started as a student here, and I am delighted to be speaking in the presence of Lady Smith, John Smith’s widow, and to be under your chairmanship, Lord Sutherland. You have contributed so much and in so many different areas to both Edinburgh and to our whole country.

I am also very pleased to be in such distinguished company: Emma Rothschild, who has made a spirited and compelling attempt – can I put it this way – to rescue Adam Smith from the Adam Smith Institute! And Irwin Stelzer who, using his formidable academic and journalistic expertise in economics, will seek to show, I think, that new for his time Adam Smith certainly was; New Labour he certainly was not!

Adam Smith, fairness and taxation
Now, ladies and gentlemen, as I read in preparation for these remarks I was drawn, perhaps unsurprisingly, in The Wealth of Nations to Book 5, Chapter 2, Part II, a passage entitled “Of Taxes”. And Adam Smith sets out there the principles he regards as important for fair taxation, and it was most helpful to have this to hand when I was preparing the budget a few days ago!

All nations [Smith says] have endeavoured, to the best of their judgment, to render their taxes as equal as they could contrive; as certain, as convenient to the contributor, both in the time and in the mode of payment, and, in proportion to the revenue which they brought to the prince, as little burdensome to the people.

And for Smith, taxation has to meet four maxims: equality, certainty, convenience and efficiency. Unfortunately, he goes on to say: “The following short review of some of the principal taxes which have taken place in different ages and countries will show that the endeavours of all nations have not in this respect been equally successful.” And in his short review of taxes he doesn’t get round to supplementary corporation tax, nor does he the bingo tax, nor even national insurance contributions!

Now, his incisive use of taxes and what he says about fair taxes are complemented by his equally direct views on government. He puts the case for the importance of public goods - in his day: roads, bridges, canals, harbours; spending on foreign representation, but
especially on education and instruction, not just for the young but for all the population.

But the question we have to ask is: is Adam Smith, the author of the invisible hand, also the Adam Smith who believes in the helping hand? Will the Adam Smith whose name has been claimed by the Adam Smith Institute be equally at home today with the left-of-centre (John) Smith Institute? Is it possible, two centuries and more on from his time, to find a way of reconciling what were apparently two contradictory views: that social behaviour is influenced by what he calls sympathy, and that economic behaviour is motivated by self-interest?

And so, let me, in the spirit of local enquiry which has been such a feature of these lectures, ask some questions which I hope Emma and Irwin may address during the course of the evening and which can form part of our discussion.

**The Wealth of Nations and The Theory of Moral Sentiments**

Is it not the case that, writing in the 1770s, Smith’s priority target is mercantilism, so that instead of monopoly he favours free markets; instead of state protectionism he favours free trade; instead of the old corporations and guilds dominating the economy he favours open competition? And is not his essential aim to replace an old economy of the day directed by the state, then in the grip of vested interests, with a new economy, not run from above, but an economy that was animated from below?

For him the division of labour is seen to be the great engine of growth; and because – for him – the division of labour makes people more, not less, dependent upon each other, is he not attempting to rid the world of economic relations based on interest? Isn’t the subject of *The Wealth of Nations* economic relations in a world of social relations based on sympathy – the subject of the earlier *Theory of Moral Sentiments*?

Sympathy, for Smith, is not simply benevolence, but in its Greek definition it is a more general capacity to identify with others’ feelings and their situations, which we might today call empathy. And self-interest, I understand, for Smith, is not selfishness; it is what he calls “a uniform, constant, and uninterrupted” desire for betterment – not at the expense of others, as is sometimes implied, but in co-operation with others. So is there not a way to reconcile the Smith of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* with the Smith of *The Wealth of Nations*?

The society which he envisaged when he wrote in the 1770s is not the cold and
unforgiving world of ruthless competition, but a world of competitive markets and social improvement, underpinned by a desire for betterment, empathy, economical efficiency and social justice advancing together.

Now, when I was young growing up in Kirkcaldy, whenever you entered the town of Kirkcaldy where Adam Smith was born, there was a sign that said “Kirkcaldy, the birthplace of Adam Smith”, and over the years a decision was made to replace that sign; and as you go into Kirkcaldy now it is “Kirkcaldy, twinned with Ingolstadt, Germany”! There can be no better people, I think, to rescue Adam Smith from what some people would call the condescension of posterity. We have Irwin Stelzer, who will give us his strong views about the importance of Adam Smith to modern free market economics. But the first step is to listen to Emma Rothschild, who I invite to address this gathering this evening.

Thank you very much.
Address
Dr Emma Rothschild, Fellow of King’s College, Cambridge, and Co-director of the Centre for History & Economics, University of Cambridge

Thank you very much, Chancellor. Donald Dewar, like Adam Smith, collected books about Scottish history. In his remarks at the opening of the Scottish parliament on 1 July 1999, he talked about “the discourse of the Enlightenment”, and of a period when Scotland was “a light held to the intellectual life of Europe”. Like John Smith, in his radio talk on the bicentenary of Smith’s death, he was interested in the power of ideas in politics.

Of all the figures of the Enlightenment who have been celebrated here over the past several months, Smith was by far the most political. This is so in the sense, much commented upon in the generation following his death in 1790, that “the distinction between Political Economy and pure Politics” was not at the time generally observed. But Smith was also interested throughout his life in the pure (or impure) politics of Scotland, Europe and much of the rest of the world.

Politics in 18th-century Scotland
One of the questions suggested for discussion tonight was the following: how would Adam Smith have voted? Now, this is in one respect a very peculiar enquiry. Smith’s philosophy has “entered everywhere into the life of politics”, the future US president Woodrow Wilson said in 1893. But he was not himself one of the selected men in 18th-century Scotland who were entitled to a political life. There were only 187 electors in the county of Fifeshire, towards the end of Smith’s lifetime, and only 2,662 in all the counties of Scotland. Fifeshire was in fact better endowed with electors, in keeping with its reputation for a relatively equal distribution of property, than any county other than Ayrshire.

The small seaside town of Kirkcaldy, in which Smith was born, and in which he, a rector of Glasgow University – like a rector of this university, the Chancellor – was educated, was part of an even more arcane system of representation. It was one of the four small royal burghs which had been grouped together, in Westminster as in the Scottish parliament, as the constituency of the Dysart burghs. In a general election, each of the burghs sent one delegate to a meeting which chose the member of parliament; the delegate was chosen by the town council; the town council was chosen, in turn, by itself, on the basis of a “sett” or constitution, which designated 10 seafaring men, eight merchants, and three representatives of trades. When one of the most diligent political operatives of Smith’s
epoch summarised the political landscape of Scotland in the 1770s, he said of the Forfar royal burghs: “these boroughs are very open, venal, and expensive”. Of the Dysart burghs he said, concisely, “same again”.

Smith would have been disenfranchised, for part of his life, by yet different provisions of 18th-century election law. Holders of many political offices were forbidden to serve as members of parliament, and holders of certain offices – including commissioners of customs, like Smith – were forbidden to serve as electors. But it is likely, in any case, that his attitude to county politics would have been similar to that of David Hume, his closest friend, who was offered the opportunity to become a voter or “parchment baron” in the county of Renfrewshire, in advance of the general election of 1774. Hume declined, on the grounds that he disliked taking journeys, and living in other people’s houses, “at the most disagreeable time, that of an election”.

Let me turn, now, to the question which has been posed this evening: of how it is, and with what justification, that both the left and right have come to claim Adam Smith. This is a question, of course, about the evolution of the left and the right, over two centuries, as much as it is a question about Smith. But there are some circumstances which make his ideas particularly elusive, or particularly easy to claim, and I will start by saying something about these circumstances. I will then look at Smith’s views – which were characteristically ambivalent – about the relationships between politics and commerce, and about two ominous tendencies with which he was much concerned, to do with money and power, and with political exclusion. I will suggest, in conclusion, that Smith’s ideas might indeed help to illuminate the prospects, in our own, modern times, for what he described, in The Wealth of Nations, as a “great political society”.

**Interpreting Smith**

I begin with the vicissitudes in Smith’s political reputation, which have been dizzying. His renown as a hero of conservatism, for example, is to a great extent a phenomenon of the second half of the 20th century. Lord Acton concluded in 1881 that “government with the working class” was the irresistible consequence of Smith’s ideas. The 19th-century German economist Hermann Roesler said of Smith that he was the “immediate precursor, indeed the champion and pioneer of socialism ... socialism is the pure consequence of Smithianismus”. The French economist Saint-Chamans identified socialism in 1852 as the “consequence of the system of Adam Smith”, quoting the view of a contemporary Spanish statesman, Donoso Cortés, that “socialism is the son of political economy, as the viperet is the son of the viper”.

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This diversity persists today, and the “reception” of Smith is itself an intriguing political story. But there are a number of characteristics of Smith’s own writings which can help, at least, to explain this extraordinary multiplicity of understandings.

The first is that Smith was an exceptionally circumspect and artful writer. One of the very few essays he published in his lifetime is a long discussion of the word “but.” He wrote, I believe, in such a way that his writings could indeed mean different things to different people. The difference between his public and private personalities was commented on by his friends. The language of his lectures is strikingly different from the language of his writings. The language of his last additions both to The Theory of Moral Sentiments and to The Wealth of Nations is different from the language of the earlier editions. He believed that he was writing, at least in part, for a distant posterity. But he was prepared to confuse this posterity, just as he confused his own public.

A second explanation for Smith’s obscurity to subsequent readers is that so much of The Wealth of Nations is concerned with highly specific issues of policy, which are often excruciatingly unexciting in a different setting. One of Smith’s most assiduous popularisers, Jean-Baptiste Say – a great admirer of the Scottish Enlightenment, who said of the Edinburgh Review, in 1816, that it was “perhaps the best literary journal in the world; it is read from Philadelphia to Calcutta” – described The Wealth of Nations as a “vast chaos” of ideas and information, full of “long digressions”, and details “which are entirely without interest for anyone other than the English”.

The “additions and corrections” to The Wealth of Nations which Smith published in 1783 as a slim, separate volume, and which constitute his last writing on political economy, provide a good illustration. Smith is at his most political in this work. He speaks of animosity, avidity, jealousy; he refers 12 times to oppression or oppressive policies. But 80% of the text of the additions is concerned with the details of fisheries, wool and the constitutions of the East India and similar companies. He refers 44 times, in these few pages, to herrings, and 65 times to wool.

A third explanation for Smith’s multiple reputations has to do with the unprecedented changes in public and political opinion that took place in the decade following his death. He lived through turbulent times in Scotland itself; it is interesting, in fact, how little he said about the events of 1745. But the political turmoil which followed the French Revolution was of a quite different, and global, scope. “Everything, not this or that thing, but literally everything, was soaked in this one event,” Lord Cockburn wrote of political
discussions in Edinburgh in the 1790s, and Smith’s writings were “received” in a context which he could not possibly have imagined at the time of his death.

One curious illustration is the so-called 11th edition of The Wealth of Nations produced in 1805 by Smith’s own publishers, and edited by William Playfair, the unrespectable uncle of the great architect of this hall. Playfair’s intention was to prove that Smith was no friend of the French Revolution, that there was “no connection between political economy and free thinking in matters of religion”, and that the division of labour was an eternal bar to equality. The edition is augmented with several supplementary chapters, and some hundreds of mostly carping footnotes: “In this particular assertion, Mr Smith is certainly entirely wrong”, “This seems to be founded on wrong information, having no sort of foundation in reality”, and so forth. The world in which Smith was writing was strikingly different from the world in which he was (and is) read.

A fourth explanation has to do with a political change of a different sort. The Wealth of Nations was, in Smith’s own description, a very violent attack on the commercial system of Britain, and on the fiscal, regulatory and military policies of successive British governments. These policies were often determined, he showed, by the interests of a few individuals. It was the rich and the represented who influenced regulation. “Whenever the legislature attempts to regulate the differences between masters and their workmen, its counsellors are always the masters,” he wrote.

The effect of the political reforms of the 19th and 20th centuries was to change, at least in part, this political economy of influence. On the one hand, the power of the national state increased in relation to the power of such intermediate “governments” as the East India Company, or the Kirkcaldy town council. On the other hand, the power to determine the policies of the national state was distributed in an, at least somewhat, different way. The reform of the old rotten boroughs, the extension of the county franchise, the reform of administrative departments, the eventual advent of universal adult suffrage, had the consequence that many more individuals and groups were included in political life.

The state which Adam Smith denounced acted on behalf of the powerful, who were the rich and the legally privileged. The modern state also acted on behalf of the powerful. But they were, on occasion, the people, or even, from time to time, the “workmen”. The class basis of political influence had changed, and continues to change.

Smith was writing, in all these respects, about a different political world. But the
relationship which was his continuing concern – between commerce and politics – was as vexed in his world as it is in our own, and it is to this relationship that I would now like to turn.

The relationship between commerce and politics
Political institutions were, for Smith, the foundation of a successful commercial society. Civil freedom was the most important of Great Britain’s commercial advantages, as Smith lists them in The Wealth of Nations. Britain enjoyed a general liberty of trade. There was an unbounded liberty of domestic transport, which was perhaps “of still greater importance”. There was “above all, that equal and impartial administration of justice which renders the rights of the meanest British subject respectable to the greatest”. It was the security and equality of personal and property rights which was the explanation for economic success.

But political institutions, at the same time, constituted a threat to continuing economic improvement. For the individuals who were most successful in the new commercial society accumulated large fortunes. They were equal before the law, but more than equal in opulence. Even those whose fortunes were founded on industriousness, invention, or information about new markets, rather than on such feudal residues as entails, or such privileges as guild regulations, were tempted to use their wealth to buy power. They sought to induce government, by persuasion or intimidation, to pass regulations to protect their own industries or enterprises. Even if they had acquired their fortunes according to the rules of a relatively free trade, they sought to change these rules, in their own favour.

This tension, between a freedom of commerce under which individuals become rich, and the interest of rich individuals in influencing the rules of commerce, is the central drama of The Wealth of Nations. It is the drama, in particular, of the image of the invisible hand, in which every individual, in pursuing his own interest, is led to pursue the interests of the society. For the invisible hand is benevolent if individuals pursue these interests by innocuous, or competitive, or “economic” means. It is malign if individuals pursue their interests by “political” means, or by seeking to influence regulation, or by protecting their own monopolies and privileges. Smith indeed concedes, in the “invisible hand” chapter of The Wealth of Nations, that merchants and manufacturers “are always demanding a monopoly against their countrymen”: Their interest, he says, “is always in some respects different from, and even opposite to, that of the public”.

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Commerce and the public good

There is considerable evidence that Smith was concerned by this tension, or this continuing source of political and economic insecurity. The Additions & Corrections of 1783 begin with the following striking sentence: “Wealth, as Mr Hobbes says, is power.” This was a daring remark simply in that it is a reference to Hobbes, who was still, a century after his death, the emblem of political immorality. But it was daring, too, in that it drew attention to the most difficult intellectual problem of Smith’s own system.

Smith observes, against Hobbes, that the man who acquires “a great fortune, does not necessarily acquire or succeed to any political power”. His expectation, I believe, was that if individuals sought to use their power only to promote their own interests, as distinct from combining to promote the interests of a corporation, or an association, then they would only infrequently be able to intimidate the legislative process. If old regulations protecting guild and other privileges were abolished, then new fortunes would be less vast, and new regulations would be less easy to promote. If other countries increased in opulence, then British merchants would face competition from overseas, if not from their own co-citizens. If legislators and officials had a more capacious view of the public interest, then they would be better able to resist intimidation, or the temptation of being bought.

This was Smith’s prospect, characteristically unenthusiastic, of an enlightened political future in which commercial society would flourish. But he also described a different and far more dismal prospect, in which the continuing success of commerce would itself tend to inhibit the flourishing of political society.

Smith outlines this prospect in three different scenes, which recur throughout The Wealth of Nations, and which depict the characteristic political shortcomings of the three great orders of commercial society. The first order, of owners of land, is the one in whose judgment Smith has the greatest confidence. He is particularly attached to small proprietors. But his description of the political role of landowners is nonetheless quite dispiriting. They are indolent, in general, and ignorant. One of Smith’s most devastating set pieces is of the seduction of great landlords by the trinkets and baubles which became available for purchase in early modern societies. They bartered their power and authority for childish pleasures; they abandoned public life for tweezer cases and mechanical ear pickers. They devoted their time, and their money, to the vanities of consumption. These images are present in both The Wealth of Nations and The Theory of Moral Sentiments, and they form one of the many connections, to which Gordon Brown referred, between the two works.
The dire prospect for the second order – that of merchants and manufacturers, the owners of capital – is very different. They are far more adept at evaluating their own interests, in Smith’s description. They are less likely to be indolent. But their pursuit of their interests, as has been seen, is sometimes destructive of the commercial society in which they have themselves flourished. It is this order of men who use their money to buy power, and their power to buy regulations, privileges and protected monopolies. They “have become formidable to the government, and upon many occasions intimidate the legislature”, in Smith’s description. They are involved in public life. But their very success puts at risk the political institutions on which their success is founded.

The third order of individuals, those who own only their own labour, confront yet a different dire prospect. Adam Smith believed in the innate or natural equality of all individuals. The philosopher and the common street porter, he says at the outset of The Wealth of Nations, are by nature “very much alike”. His conception of public life and the public interest includes explicitly all individuals, without exception. “Servants, labourers, and workmen of different kinds, make up the far greater part of every great political society,” he wrote; and “no society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable”.

But Smith was, at the same time, profoundly pessimistic about the consequences of the rise of commercial society for the minds or mentalities of large numbers of people. The division of labour, in his description, led to a sort of mental mutilation, and this impoverishment was full of peril, in turn, for political liberty. It is remarkable, he said in his Glasgow lectures, that “in every commercial nation the low people are exceedingly stupid”. The Dutch “are eminently so, and the English are more so than the Scotch”. The consequence was that working people did not feel themselves to be respectable, or respected. They were swayed by “the poison of enthusiasm and superstition”. They were “observed and attended to by nobody”, and acquired “a degree of consideration” only by becoming members of religious sects. They did not play a part in public life. They did not have time to “receive the necessary information” to make judgments about the public interest. Their voices were “little heard and less regarded” in public deliberations.

**Universal education and the public interest**

Smith’s remedy for this epidemic of ignorance in commercial societies was an extensive system of universal public instruction, supported in part out of public funds, on the model of the parish or district schools in Scotland. Almost everyone in Scotland could read, Smith believed, and a large proportion could write and count. It was only in this sort of
society that government could itself be secure. For “in free countries, where the safety of
government depends very much upon the favourable judgement which the people may
form of its conduct, it must surely be of the highest importance that they should not be
disposed to judge rashly or capriciously concerning it”.

It is interesting that this prospect of universal participation or inclusion in public
discussion was one of the principal causes of Smith’s posthumous, subversive reputation. Alexander Carlyle, for example, accused Smith of “introducing that unrestrained and
universal commerce, which propagates opinions as well as commodities”. Dugald Stewart,
Smith’s first biographer, was obliged to repudiate any “wish to encourage political
discussions among the multitude”. William Playfair, the reprobate uncle, introduced a
supplementary chapter on education in his edition of The Wealth of Nations, in which he
argued, against Smith, that the only essential element in the education of the lower ranks
was to learn to be industrious and obedient to their duty; and that “reading frequently
leads to discontent, an ill-founded ambition, and a neglect of business” As Playfair
concluded elsewhere, “reading and writing, are, with the working classes, a very inferior
object”.

Let me turn, finally, to our own, modern prospects. Smith divided 18th-century society
into three great orders, each with its own characteristic incapacity. We may hope, after
two centuries of political reform, that the three orders are less exclusive. But the three
incapacities are also less exclusive. It is as though almost everyone, now, is subject to all
these political perils. It is not only the owners of landed property who live in a universe
of trinkets and baubles. It is not only the lower orders who are excluded from the great
political discussions of the times. It is not only merchants who seek to transform money
into power.

The political role of information
Smith and Hume were sceptical Whigs in the sense that they looked impartially at the
pretensions of British political exceptionalism; at the “boasted liberty” of the subject, or
the original contract, or the gloriousness of the revolution of 1689. It is in their sceptical
spirit, surely, to look with similar impartiality at the presumptions of our own established
democracies.

One presumption is about money and power. The venal boroughs of 18th-century politics
now seem to belong to a different world. But the period since the free enterprise
revolutions of the 1980s – revolutions which were undertaken, in Washington DC and
Prague and London, in the image, sometimes literally, of Smith – has been one in which money has come to play a new and larger political role. The cost of elections has increased; the cost of seeking to influence legislation has increased; the cost of policy development – “partly solid and partly sophistical”, in Smith’s description – has increased.

The political role of information has also increased, and become more expensive. One of the relatively few complimentary things Smith says about the English is to do with information: “the English nation think they have a right to information in political affairs”, he observed in 1763. But the new politics of information of the early 21st century is evocative of Smith’s concerns in a more insidious respect as well: as, for example, in the disputes over monopolistic power in the broadcast, print and internet industries, for example, in Rome or Warsaw or the Pacific North West.

**Political inclusion**
The other modern presumption is about political inclusion, and I would like, here, to respond to Gordon Brown’s question about sympathy and betterment, and identifying with the feelings of others. Smith outlined his prospect of a universal politics at a time when almost all individuals, and he himself, were excluded from electoral democracy. But his forebodings over the future of commercial society - that some individuals would choose to play no role in public deliberations, and that other individuals would feel themselves to be excluded from doing so - are of continuing importance in our own, more democratic societies.

One challenge is to find ways that very large numbers of individuals can be included in decisions that influence conditions of life in several different countries or continents. Another challenge is to include more individuals in the multiple decisions, for example over energy or the environment or telecommunications, which are now thought to require extensive technical expertise. Smith was fascinated by the prospect of multinational or oceanic political representation; he looked forward to a “states-general” of the British Empire, and to a seat of Atlantic government which would move over time; he was wistful about the circumstance that “independent and neighbouring nations” have “no common superior to decide their disputes”. But the incipient politics of globalisation is still underdeveloped, whether in respect of the voting rights of non-citizens, or of the relationship between local, national, European and eventually of global elections, or of the democratisation of international institutions.

The “oppressive inequality” of commercial society was mitigated, in Smith’s description, by
its promise of “universal opulence”; by economic inclusion, in Hume’s sense that “every person, if possible, ought to enjoy the fruits of his labour, in a full possession of all the necessaries, and many of the conveniences of life”. But commercial society was also founded on political inclusion, in the sense that all individuals were treated equally by public power, and that all or most individuals were involved, in some sense, in public life; that all or most individuals considered the society to be in some sense just or equitable. In the Chancellor’s recent terms, it was founded on fairness as well as enterprise.

These are questions, in effect, about the reality of political inclusion. They are not, to return to the enquiry posed at the outset, questions which are particular to the right or the left. Both the right and the left, over two centuries, have been concerned, from time to time, with the political uses of money. Both have also been concerned with political reform. The right has been associated, certainly, with a sort of authoritarianism, a respect for established wisdom, which is derogatory of the political opinions of the multitude. But the left has also been associated with a different (and perhaps related) authoritarianism of scientific understanding, a respect for technical expertise which is similarly derogatory.

One of the best and most enduring traditions of liberalism, in both the European and the North American senses, is indeed its relentless, sceptical uncertainty; its conviction that individuals are the best judges of their own interests, and that their judgments of the interests of society should be listened to, and respected. This conviction is an inheritance, in substantial part, of the Scottish Enlightenment.

But so is another conviction, that it is possible to imagine a different and more equal world. This other inheritance, which is an idyll or a utopia, is indeed associated with the left. It was in continuing tension, in Smith’s own thought, with his respect for individual judgments, including individual judgments about respect for established traditions. This is our tension, as well, in our own version of an always incomplete, and always incipiently great political society.

Thank you very much.
Address
Dr Irwin Stelzer, Director of Economic Studies, The Hudson Institute

I approach this assignment with considerable trepidation. For one thing, it takes a bit more courage than I have to comment on so formidable a bit of scholarship as the work by Emma Rothschild that is the subject of our seminar. For another, the Chancellor has warned me that if I am not duly respectful of the achievements of the Scottish Enlightenment, he will stealthily slip a variety of unpleasant details into his next tax scheme that will make me regret my inability to absorb the subtitle of one of his favourite books:

I was encouraged to overcome my fear of offering some few thoughts on Ms Rothschild's work and its implication for today's policy makers by her enthusiasm for what she calls “the unfrightened mind” that characterised the 50-year period, beginning in 1770, that is the subject of her work.

By way of preparation for this discussion, I have done my best to complete the reading list that the Chancellor assigned to me, and, with the assistance of my good wife, who summarised the materials that proved to be beyond the grasp of a mere economist, and an American economist at that, now know more about the Scottish Enlightenment than most people - with the unfortunate exception of those in this room! And I suppose it good strategy this evening to accept the contention that “the Scots are the true inventors of what we today call the social sciences: anthropology, ethnography, sociology [I agree with the American commentator George Will that one should avoid committing sociology, but in a spirit of goodwill, I will forgive the Scots its invention], psychology, history”, and, as the mention of the name Adam Smith makes us realise, economics.

In the course of completing the Chancellor's assigned reading, I learned three important lessons. The first is that what Herman calls “the stereotype of the grasping, tight-fisted Scot that still persists today” is probably, although not certainly, unfair, circa 2002, having had its origin some 400 years ago when the Scottish noblemen who flocked to the London court of James I (of England) “earned a reputation as needy and greedy spongers and parasites”.

The second is that Scots, from the days of David Hume and earlier, “grew up associating good food and drink with intellectual discussion”. So I am looking forward to whatever dinner may follow this seminar.
Third, and it is this on which I am relying heavily this evening, I learned from reading the journal of a young French aristocrat who visited Scotland in 1786: “The Scots receive all ... foreigners ... with the greatest courtesy.”

**An attempt to kidnap Adam Smith**

Perhaps in a quite sensible recognition of my very limited knowledge of much of the historical material with which Ms Rothschild treats, our hosts have asked me to offer “a contemporary, rather than an historical, view” of whether “both the left and the right can claim Adam Smith”. So I shall attempt to divine from Smith some guidance as to current policy issues – and will conclude that the left and centre left can take no substantial comfort in his teachings.

The sponsors have also called to my attention Edinburgh University's announcement of this event, which is worth quoting:

For a long time, it was thinkers on the Right who tended to claim him [Adam Smith] as their forebear. But he wrote The Theory of Moral Sentiments as well as The Wealth of Nations. There are many strands in the former work which feed into the current concerns of the centre left, while even The Wealth of Nations gives a greater role to public action than some have suggested.

I believe it is fair to summarise what is going on here – in Ms Rothschild's book, in the Chancellor's delight in its thesis, and in the university's citation of the anonymous “some” who have relied on Adam Smith to support a lesser role for government than the centre left deems proper – as a kidnapping. Ms Rothschild has kidnapped Adam Smith for the left, aided and abetted by the Chancellor, who attempts to distract us from this crime by setting fire to straw men by writing: “The Right believes we do best as competitors in a lonely struggle in an impersonal marketplace of buyers and sellers ... The Right’s view [is] that individuals are held back by the community and do best when left to their own devices.” Competitors, of course, would be less “lonely” if they were permitted to conspire, but I trust that is not the left’s preferred antidote to entrepreneurial loneliness! More important, I have few colleagues on the right who believe that a sense of community interferes with individual achievement.

I intend to use the few minutes allotted to me to free Mr Smith from the clutches of his centre left captors and return him to his rightful home in the pantheon of conservative heroes.
The role of the state

In order to do so, I must first dispose of one argument. Because Smith saw a proper role for government in establishing institutions that protect property rights, and in dealing with instances in which there is market failure, that does not make him a centre left interventionist. Economists of all stripes agree that where markets fail to work properly, and that failure cannot be corrected, for example, by restoring competition, government intervention is necessary. Thus, when Smith recognised that there are instances in which the presence of externalities make it impossible for private-sector players to earn a profit, even though the project “may frequently do much more than repay it [the cost] to a great society”, he was carving out a very carefully limited and well-defined role for the state – not writing a blank cheque to be used by leftish interventionists unhappy with the results of well-functioning markets. As James Buchanan has put it, Smith was clear that “check-reins must be placed on ... extensions of the public sector”.

Smith was also acutely aware that “government failure” is every bit as great a danger to the wealth of a nation as market failure. There are so many instances in which the government cure is far worse than the disease that Smith would have us think carefully before inviting government to correct some market failure.

I should also point out that while Ms Rothschild may be correct in contending that it was “the left” in the late 18th century from which cries for reform and criticisms of “the economic, political, and religious state” emanated, the reforms that Smith and others sought are more in line with those advocated by today’s “right” than by modern-day left-of-centre intellectuals. It is the right, not the left, that seeks solutions that maximise individual freedom and minimise the role of the state; it is the right that calls for tax cuts rather than tax increases; it is the right that is considering flat taxes to reduce the intrusion of the tax collector, while the left adds complexities that require an ever more intrusive tax collection system; it is the right that would keep state expenditures to a Smithian minimum, while the left increases outlays in the government sector that Smith deemed so wasteful.

In short, Smith as modern reformer would come at problems from the right; he cannot easily be conscripted into the ranks of a left that sees greater activity by the state as the proper instrument of reform, with little regard for the effect of its policies on individual freedom.

I can understand the left’s desire to argue that Adam Smith provides support for the
welfare state and massive intervention by the state in economic affairs. They can no longer look for intellectual support to their one-time idols, from Karl Marx to Keir Hardie, and to the pre-New Labour thinkers who dominated the Labour Party before it learned to keep its statist leanings to itself during election campaigns. The left has been mugged by history, if I may borrow and modify a phrase from Irving Kristol, in a process best described by a one-time colleague of mine, Joshua Muravchik:

Once empowered, socialism refused to yield its promised rewards. The more dogged the effort to achieve it, the more the outcome mocked the humane ideals it proclaimed. Yet for a century and a half, no amount of failure dampened socialism’s appeal. Then suddenly, like a rocket crashing back to earth, it all collapsed.

No surprise, at least to dispassionate observers who could not help noticing that the country in which Adam Smith is looked to as a thinker with ideas worth implementing seems to provide more of the material things of life to its citizens, as well as a more decent society, than did and do those who embrace men of thought and men of action on the left. The poverty and misery into which left and centre-left policies plunged Eastern Europe, Africa and pre-Thatcher Britain so obviously contrast with the affluence and benevolence prevailing in America as to doom the former as a model to which free people might repair. It is Adam Smith and Milton Friedman, not Karl Marx and Harold Laski, to whom today’s policy makers look, or should look, for guidance.

Shorn of its own heroes, the centre left must claim Smith – significantly, Adam more than John, at least until last week – for its own. Which would be fine, if the left did more than pretend to discover in his work some heretofore unnoticed repudiation of what the university authorities call “the Right”, and some heretofore unnoticed support for centre-left interventionist polices.

**Smith on competitiveness and competition**

With that rather over-long introduction, let me turn to a few contemporary issues, and compare centre-left policies with what Smith had to teach. One area – and perhaps the only area – in which the left can claim to be the heirs of Smith is competition policy. Smith famously noted that businessmen have a liking for cartels, and prefer to agree on the terms at which they will offer their product, rather than compete for consumer favour. He knew that competition stimulates “good management”, or what we would today call productivity, and forces producers to respond to consumers’ preferences. And he knew, too, that monopoly profits, earned with little effort, were less likely to produce various
virtues (among them thrift) in employers, which would in turn create less beneficial “role models”, if I may use a contemporary term, for employees.

So it is not unreasonable for the government, and more particularly the Chancellor, to claim the mantle of Adam Smith when he pushes the Enterprise Bill through the parliament, even though the anticompetitive forces at work in modern economies may be very different from those that troubled Smith.

Smith may have been silent on the question of whether price fixers should serve a term as guests of Her Majesty, but it is not unfair to suppose that, faced with the inability of existing law to cope with a widespread attitude that good chaps just don’t compete vigorously with other good chaps, he would have supported something akin to the Chancellor’s Enterprise Bill; a guess that finds support in Buchanan’s view, “Smith was not a doctrinaire libertarian, and he would have supported legislation for anti-monopoly action”.

I take it as agreement by Ms Rothschild when she says, “Once it [the invisible hand] is seen as a guide to policy ... policy must be concerned ... to restrict monopoly ... The pursuit of the public interest must consist not only in desisting from regulation, but also in establishing (and maintaining) an environment of free competition.” Which, I should add, is precisely the position taken by free market conservatives, whose abhorrence of direct government regulation of prices leads them to favour a vigorous antitrust policy, the invisible hand being far preferable to the long arm of government as a determinant of prices and of the allocation of resources; but who also recognise that regulation is required in the diminishing number of instances in which competition is not feasible.

**Smith on free trade**
The government can also contend that it is on the side of Smith when it comes to trade policy - its espousal of free trade and the consequent internationalisation of the specialisation of labour would, by and large, have met with Smith’s approval. But free trade is not generally a policy favoured by left-of-centre governments or parties. French socialists oppose it and, in my country, it is the trade union dominated Democratic Party that generally opposes trade-opening measures. Since the attitude of the left varies widely from country to country, and since free trade is a policy supported by most conservatives, the left has no exclusive claim on Smith’s approbation.

But I fear that competition policy and trade may well be where the left’s ability to
share the great economist’s mantle with the right comes to a screeching halt. In other important areas of public policy, with the possible exception of the postal service, the policies of the left must be causing a bit of grave spinning here in Edinburgh.

Smith on education

“Education, education, education” did not begin with New Labour. In Scotland, most towns of any significance had a grammar school by 1500; as early as 1696 Scotland’s parliament ordered each parish to supply a “commodious house for a school” and a salary for a teacher, and, as Ms Rothschild points out, Smith’s concern to offset the mind-deadening effect of the repetitive work that comes with a finer and finer division of labour caused him to carry forward the long-standing Scottish emphasis on the values – economic and social – of a good, universally available education.

Where the left parts company with Smith is in the policies needed to realise these values. Smith has two important lessons applicable to education policy, lessons that the centre left has failed to absorb. The first is that it is important not to infringe the liberty of individuals; the second is that competition is an important stimulus to good performance. In the case of education those lessons would dictate the use of vouchers so that parents, rather than the state, can decide which schools most suit their children, and so that schools would be compelled to compete for students.

Indeed, Smith preferred a system of financing such as the one on which he relied in part: fees to be paid by pupils, directly to their teachers, so that instructors will be dependent on “the affection, gratitude and favourable report” of students, and prompted to be diligent in the discharge of their duties. Such competition for students (the money followed the student, to use current jargon) would, Smith argued, avoid the situation prevailing where teachers relied on salaries or endowments - universities such as Oxford, where “the greater part of the publick professors have, for these many years, given up altogether even the pretence of teaching”. As one commentator aptly puts it:

Smith ... suggested the manner in which public goods should be provided. In providing education, for example, the government should not involve itself in running the schools, paying the teachers, and directing students to particular schools and particular teachers ... Smith’s preference is for public goods to be provided through the market, even when government provides its citizens with the means to purchase such goods in the marketplace.

Healthcare policy makers please take note.
So if the left is looking to Adam Smith for support for its education policy, it is looking in the wrong place. Smith knew that education is important, but he also knew that it is too important a function to be left to an overweening state.

Which quite naturally brings us to the question of healthcare. At this point I must make an exception to my earlier statement that politicians of the centre left have little to learn from the one-time idols of the left. They have clearly taken on board the guidance offered by Nye Bevan at their Blackpool conference in June of 1949. The father of the NHS suggested a method of coping with mistakes that still guides the government’s policy: “We must be able to improve on what we have done, without at the same time having to say what we did was wrong; otherwise all reform would begin at the penitential form.”

Is there anyone who would seriously argue that the decision to rely on a state-run monopoly to provide healthcare would have been Adam Smith’s chosen policy? Or that he would have supported a policy so contrary to his view of “natural liberty” – a policy that precludes patient choice unless you have a severe heart condition and have been waiting more than six months for treatment? Or that he would have believed that a system of audits and targets can replace competition as an effective goad to an efficient and consumer-driven healthcare system?

The centre left may favour a state-run monopoly, managing 1.3 million employees and deciding which targets to impose on what hospitals in light of a politician’s guess as to the acceptable length of patient queues, but its adherents are hard pressed indeed to find support from Smith for such a “profusion of government”, to borrow a phrase from The Wealth of Nations.

There is more and, from the point of view of the centre left, worse. Smith knew that institutions that are serviceable at one point in a nation’s history must often be discarded when times and circumstances change. He was well aware of the interplay between past, present, and future, and often pointed out that institutions frequently outlast their usefulness and that they may thus become constraints on the present. It is unlikely that Smith would have genuflected before a statue of Bevan, no matter how great the Labour leader’s contribution to British life half a century ago. He was, quite simply, more radical than that, and would have been far more likely to accept the proof of his eyes and scrap an institution that, whatever its one-time claim to greatness, no longer meets the needs of the consumers it is intended to serve.
Adam Smith on taxation

Let me conclude this “lessons from Adam Smith for present-day policy” with a discussion of taxation, a subject of interest to at least one member of this audience.

Smith’s four principles of taxation may be summarised as follows: (1) contributions should be in proportion to the taxpayers’ revenue; (2) the timing, manner of payment, and amount of a tax should “be clear and plain to the contributor, and to every other person”; (3) the manner of collection should be convenient for the taxpayer; and (4) every tax should “take out and keep out of the pockets of the people as little as possible”.

As important as these oft cited and equally often ignored principles are, they should not obscure other points made by Smith. A tax should not, he argued, “require a great number of officers” to enforce and collect it; it should not “obstruct the industry of the people” and discourage them from creating jobs; it should not create an incentive for smuggling; and it should not require frequent and “the odious examination of the tax-gatherers”.

Fortunately, I do not have the time, and therefore need not discover whether I have the courage, to discuss in detail the recent budget in light of Adam Smith’s rules of fiscal behaviour. I might offer one observation: Smith suggested (here I take a bit of liberty in summarising) that since whisky has a “supposed tendency to ruin the health and corrupt the morals of the common people”, taxes on it should not be lowered lest the price fall and consumption increase. But he did recommend tax relief for “the wholesome and invigorating liquors of beer and ale”, so as to reduce whingeing and, if prices fell sufficiently, actually increase revenues. Whether Smith would have discriminated by the size of breweries I cannot guess.

Still, it is difficult to resist a brief comparison of the policies of Adam Smith and Gordon Brown. After all, we are dealing with two men from Kirkcaldy, both of whom were university lecturers, both of whom chose careers as tax collectors.

I leave to the armies of accountants and lawyers, and the 66,920 employees of Inland Revenue (surely this number qualifies for Smith’s designation as “a great number of officers”) the question of whether the tax system is “clear and plain ... to every person”. The very existence of this horde of experts, and their prosperity, would suggest that the system is sufficiently complex to require what might charitably be called expert interpretation – so complex that £100 million of benefits aimed at small business go uncollected each year, and 25% of those eligible for various child credits do not apply.
I am reminded of Fiddler on the Roof, in which Tevye described a problem as so complicated that “it would cross a rabbi’s eyes”.

I also leave to a future debate between supply-side economists and Treasury tax experts the question of whether the new taxes “obstruct the industry of the people”. If one considers both current tax rates and the loss of child credit for those whose incomes move above £58,000, these so-called high earners face a marginal tax rate of somewhere around 70% – closing in on the Old Labour rate that caused the talented and mobile to seek more benign jurisdictions in which to deploy their skills. If a 70% marginal rate doesn’t create a disincentive to work and dare, I can’t imagine what will.

This leaves open the question of whether the various special incentives built into the tax code to encourage research, new businesses, small businesses, entrepreneurial activity and a host of other desirable objectives will prove more likely to create an enterprise society than would across-the-board lower taxes. We shall see. But it seems quite safe at this juncture to say that only those who reject the teachings of Adam Smith can believe that this bevy of breaks will work. We have Ms Rothschild as an authority for that view. She points out that: “It was Smith’s opponents … who had faith in the wisdom of authority, including the ability to harness individual exertions.”

If not Adam Smith, then who?
Let me close on a more collegial note, and offer a bit of hope to left-of-centre politicians in search of a guru. They might, if they are sufficiently “inclusive”, turn to Milton Friedman for at least some support. The idol of free market advocates includes in his proposals for sound fiscal policy this suggestion: “A decision to undertake additional public expenditures should be accompanied by a revenue measure increasing taxes.” There are many things in Friedman that the left undoubtedly finds difficult to accept, but a reason for raising taxes is not among them.

More to the point of this evening’s discussion, the Chancellor and those on the left of the political spectrum who crave the blessing of Adam Smith can turn to the very opening sentences of his great Theory of Moral Sentiments:

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others ... The greatest ruffian ... is not altogether without it.
My friends on the left are far from being great ruffians, and one can only hope that their policies, many of which I believe to be counterproductive, do achieve their noble goal of a better, fairer, more prosperous society.
Discussion

Lord Sutherland
Well, you must admit we let it all hang out here; there is nothing held back. Now there is still time for some questions and interchange. Is there a first question? Well, I've got one! And I am going to put one to the three speakers, not least in the light of points just made by Dr Stelzer.

A few years ago I was involved, in London, in the changes of the provision of healthcare there that were going on under the Tomlinson review that took place, and the Secretary of State was then Virginia Bottomley, and I was involved because it affected medical education. I was quite fascinated because she had become Secretary of State for Health and she was thinking through what the theories were, and she had taken over from Ken Clarke, which was quite something. I had several conversations with her through this process and in the first conversation she used the word constantly “the market, the market, the market”, and I thought: well, that lays out the principles on which she thinks she can revise the provision of healthcare in London.

A little time later, one or two meetings later, there was an interesting change in the phrase used, and I am going to ask you whether you approve of this change; she started talking about “the managed market”, and that was an interesting shift taking place. Is that an oxymoron? And a third expression, some months later: by then she was using the expression “the caring market”. Now, is that an oxymoron? I do not know where you draw the line in these expressions, I suspect Dr Stelzer just simply says it's the market, but I don’t know if he wants to use the other two expressions. And I would be interested in the reactions, clearly, of our other two panellists, while all of you are thinking of very sharp questions.

Response: Dr Irwin Stelzer
Well, first of all I don’t want to be responsible for Virginia Bottomley's terminology or anything else. Those phrases are just mush; I mean they are designed to try to come to grips with the fact that the healthcare system in Britain is a system of which the country is extraordinarily proud, which is designed on egalitarian rather than ability-to-pay principles, and that therefore “the market” as economists understand it – free market – cannot be used. What they are groping for is some way to combine what Smith would talk about – which would be natural liberty, the ability to choose, and competition – with the desire to make healthcare provision which is free at the point of delivery. Healthcare has
to be rationed, and it seems that queueing is preferred to the price system as a method of rationing in Britain. I mean it has to be rationed. It is either you get in line or you bid, and queueing is preferred – I have no moral judgment against queueing as opposed to the price system for healthcare. And so those phrases that you heard were a kind of obfuscation, because “the market” sounded harsh. Conservatives have a problem that they sound harsh; now when you put it around healthcare it is harsher still, so they try to find things like “the caring market”. Good luck to Miss Bottomley.

Response: Dr Emma Rothschild
When I was teaching at an American university I was queuing up in a non-profit hospital to get my insurance card renewed, and there was no privacy in those days, and there was a very young couple just in front of me. They were about 20 years old, a married couple, the girl was just pregnant and she was not very well. Their insurance had expired and they were talking to each other about this interview ahead of them, about whether they were going to have coverage. As it turned out the hospital – this was all in front of me – agreed to let them be covered for her pregnancy.

But the system of free market healthcare in the United States, where I think now 40 million people are without health insurance, is a serious impediment to the working of the free market system. There is a sense of insecurity and social exclusion associated with great inequalities in access to health that I do not think are compatible with the kind of commercial society of universal opulence that Smith imagined. He would of course have had to rethink any number of issues in the light of changing political and social and economic circumstances. I don’t know how he would have come down on this, but I feel absolutely confident that he would have hated a society in which very large numbers of people were excluded by continuing daily insecurity.

Response: Dr Irwin Stelzer
Can I just raise a factual mistake that is often made in this country? Forty million people in America have no health insurance. That does not mean they have no healthcare. Ninety-five percent of the hospitals in America are not for profit and are obliged by law to treat everyone who comes, whether they can pay or not, so that there is nobody who is excluded from healthcare, and if you go into the emergency room of any major hospital – Hopkins or Bellevue or any hospital in America, Chicago, Los Angeles – you will see that that is the primary care unit for people without insurance.

Now, how is it paid for? It is paid for by charging people like me, who can afford it, more.
It is a cross-subsidy system, which I do not think is any less efficient than using the tax system, a progressive tax system. It is a progressive charge system. But I would urge anyone to go and see for themselves – not that you would want to spend a Saturday night in the emergency room of a major downtown hospital in America, but you will see children who have a stomach ache; you will see all sorts of things. That is the primary care unit. It does not matter whether you can pay, it does not matter whether you have insurance - you get healthcare. So please do not confuse the lack of insurance with a lack of healthcare; those are two very different things.

Response: Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown MP
But the fact of the matter is: in America, your capacity to get healthcare does not depend initially on your need, it normally depends on the wealth that you have, and those people who get the best care will be those people that have the most wealth. I don’t think that is deniable. And the problem with markets and healthcare is that the consumer is not sovereign in the market when you are dealing with healthcare. And the problem that every health system has had to come to terms with is that you do need – whatever you call it – a regulated market. And that is as true now of the United States of America as it is of many other countries; that the market for healthcare has had to be regulated, because a free market in healthcare just does not work. And I think it does come back to this issue in relation to Adam Smith.

The complaint that is made against the left and the centre left, in politics in Britain and elsewhere, is that we are against markets and against competition. That is not the case. We believe in markets and we believe in competition and that they are both in the public interest. But we do not equate markets and public interest as being automatically the same. In other words, there are elements of markets that have to be dealt with, and one market that fails is the market in healthcare. Before we made our decisions on healthcare last week, we looked at all the healthcare systems around the world. The fact of the matter is that in America the typical family will pay around £100 per week for their healthcare insurance, but their policy may contain any number of ifs, buts and exemptions, and it may not be a policy that guarantees all healthcare.

What we are trying to do in the UK is create a comprehensive insurance policy where people have a guarantee of healthcare. We want to introduce a far greater degree of patient choice and, yes, a far greater degree of audit and inspection so that we have the highest standards. I don’t think it is any good starting the debate in healthcare by saying that a pure market in healthcare is either possible or exists anywhere. Once you recognise
this you will see that every system is an attempt to regulate and manage the market, because the consumer is not sovereign.

And we have found in the UK, I think, a way in which you can provide comprehensive healthcare insurance for people, particularly in a situation where the costs of medical treatment are rising and rising, and the unpredictability of whether you will have to call on that service. You do want as comprehensive health insurance as possible, and we have got a more comprehensive insurance policy for people than America, Ireland, France or Germany as a result of the investment we are putting in, and we are trying to introduce far greater choice into that system. So I do not know where Adam Smith would come down on this, but I think it is a mistake to say that the left are against markets and competition. That may have been true of a brand of left ideology, but we do not automatically equate markets or competition with the public interest. There are many other elements that are part of the public interest, including the pursuit of social justice.

Abraham Shu, Taiwan Office in Scotland
I am the representative from the Taiwan Office in Scotland. My minister is a true believer of Adam Smith and said that I must pay respect to this man. Finally I found his graveyard and asked my secretary to contact the minister of that church. She came back to me and said that she found the minister's number but could not find Adam Smith's number!

I care very much about China's future, and despite the lack of freedom of speech and limited human rights, many social scientists predict that China has a very bright economic future. But that seems very contradictory to Adam Smith's theory. Can you make any suggestion to that country?

Response: Dr Irwin Stelzer
China has a fantastic growth rate. The more it introduces market economies, as it has done with the oil industry, the faster the growth rate. The problem is that although economists are very good at telling you where you should be, they are terrible at telling you how to get there. The transition costs for China will be horrendous because of all the inefficient industries that will have to be closed down as they introduce market forces and the country urbanises. The question is whether there will be social upheaval in response to these huge economic transition costs. When they get there it will be one of the richest countries in the world, but getting there is going to be hellish.
Ray Donnelly, Social Enterprise Institute
One of the great problems all great writers face is interpretation by their followers. We have a religion in our country called Christianity which, if you analyse it, probably should be called Paulianity, because St Paul wrote most of it in his own vision. The same thing happened to John Maynard Keynes. When I studied economics I was taught by people who called themselves Keynesian, who assured me what Keynes said meant such-and-such. However, I found out at a later date that Keynes said nothing of the kind, but the Keynesians had taken it a lot further forward. I wonder if to some extent this is what is happening to Adam Smith. His work is very interesting. For me the most interesting bit is his analysis of where markets fail to work; where there is a need for intervention. For many of our fellow citizens living at the margin of society (the excluded), markets stopped working in many areas a long time ago. Although Smith preached against the idea of large government, if he had lived in our society with its manifold problems of so many of our citizens, perhaps he would have to rethink his view in the light of providing services which society now has to provide. I wonder to what extent we are making a mountain out of a molehill.

Response: Dr Emma Rothschild
I can say one thing about which I feel fairly certain. It is that Smith would have very much liked this discussion of his ideas. He said he dreaded his name appearing in the newspapers. But he certainly liked confusing the public, and he certainly liked stimulating public discussion. So in that sense he would have been very pleased that we are here in this hall, trying to imagine what he would have thought.

If I can make one point about the politics of education? One country which has recently experienced an education reform which will involve millions of children paying (very small) fees is India, led by the communist government of West Bengal. Therefore these issues about competition in education do not map very well onto an old idea of the left and the right, where there is Marx battling it out with Milton Friedman. I think that is good. My own view is that it is rather a good aspect of modern politics that the left and the right are a bit jumbled up, and that the libertarian right is having a few problems with the conservative right.

Response: Dr Irwin Stelzer
Don’t you think it is a fair comment that one can reasonably presume from reading Adam Smith that his leaning would be toward individual freedom of choice and against a state monopoly?
Audience member
I am sure we can all discuss at some length what Adam Smith would think of the world today, but one of the things I am certain we could all agree is that Adam Smith would have cared deeply that governments are careful with people’s money. I am not sure how this would sit with those who have given us a very nice diatribe this evening on the subject of fiscal responsibility, and economics belonging to the right. Most right-wing governments across Western Europe and the USA have been responsible for increasing state debt, have been responsible for massive state deficits, responsible for the type of economics that have caused massive pain to society and the economy as a whole. If you look at the legacy of Reagan’s debt, and Bush’s debts, and then indeed the debts being run up by “Dubya”, then who are they then being paid back by? They are not paid back by Republican or conservative governments, but by central left governments. This government is paying them back. Then these debts are run up once again. Fiscal responsibility no longer lies with the right – it clearly lies with the left, and if Adam Smith were alive today he would have acknowledged that by now.

Response: Dr Irwin Stelzer
You are wrong. While Reagan ran up huge debts to win the Cold War, we then had something called the peace dividend, which was a series of surpluses which enabled a reduction in defence expenditure. This was investment in winning the Cold War that paid off the dividend for the world in bringing down a terribly threatening regime. We are doing that again. One of the huge differences between America and Europe at the moment is that we are at war, and Europe doesn’t think it is. Your Prime Minister does, but appears rather lonely in that regard. We are investing now in winning another war. I know that is not what people are thinking.

Response: Dr Emma Rothschild
On taxes, the one thing Smith was notorious for being very critical about was military expenditure, and even the great conservative Nobel Prize winner James Buchanan has pointed out the awkwardness of this. He was a biting critic of the military establishment. The most important point is about individual freedom of choice, because we all agree that was important to Smith and is important to all of us. What is difficult is to judge the extent to which the individual’s freedom is itself curtailed if that individual does not have access to public services, including health and education, which enable the individual to choose freely the sort of life she wants to live and whether to be enterprising, among other things. So in that sense I certainly would not disagree about the centrality of individual freedom.
Janet Morgan
Going back to the last lecture in the series, Lord Sutherland was talking about David Hume's view that we share a common humanity that ultimately, whatever our other differences and distinctions, gives us a common sympathy when we see other human beings in a mess. We were reminded of that in the last words of today about the ruffians and the fact that sometimes, whatever their own self-interest, human beings take pleasure in just looking at other human beings and seeing them happy and content. How do you measure that? Does it matter that one cannot measure it, especially when (and health is one example) decisions have to be made between good things that other human beings can enjoy and there has to be rationing, however much abundance there is? Sometimes one has to take one good course of action or another good cause of action. Isaiah Berlin talked about that for years. Is one difficulty that things that are not easily quantified (and therefore not susceptible to market measurements) are always going to be matters of urgent and important public debate? What would Adam Smith and his friend David Hume have said to this?

Response: Dr Irwin Stelzer
Man does not live by GDP alone – there is no question of that. There are lots of non-quantifiable things that are part of a decent society. This is why we have to rely on electing decent people to make those horrible decisions on allocating scarce resources, because every decision to do something is a decision not to do something else. This is why I have always been a great fan of the Chancellor (although I have minor disagreements on a few things) – because his groping for a decent solution to human problems absorbs him, and I do not think there is any left/right difference in that area.

Audience member
I would like to know what the panel thinks about the gap between rich and poor at the present day and what Adam Smith would have thought about the gap in his day.

Response: Dr Irwin Stelzer
The differences between rich and poor depend on whether you are looking at relative or absolute. There is no question that there are periods when the difference has widened, but what is happening is that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting richer but at a slower rate. There is no question that poor people today live much better than poor people 50 years ago. I am for progressive tax systems and redistribution (much more so than most conservative economists, I might add – I am for 100% inheritance tax for example, which even the Chancellor dare not propose) so I agree with you that society has
some obligation to redistribute income so that we provide a decent standard of living for, dare I say it, the deserving poor. But I am encouraged that the condition of the poor is increasing so rapidly in most parts of the world, certainly in capitalist economies.

Response: Dr Emma Rothschild
Hume thought that people basically do not like too much inequality in a society. He was by no means an egalitarian, but he thought that there was a certain level of inequality that made people uneasy. He also thought that an agreeable society would be one where people would sit around having a lot of conversations for a lot of the time, including conversations with women, which he singled out for note several times. I think that conversations and political discussion are the answer to how one can evaluate difficult-to-measure social conditions. It seems to me that in today’s society people are made to feel uneasy by extremes of health inequality. The statistics showing very great disparity in health outcomes, whether across different regions or across different income groups, are things that people simply do not like in public discussion of big policy choices. I think that is the sort of discussion Smith had in mind when he talked about the role of the people in public judgments.

Response: Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown MP
I think the fascinating thing about this discussion is that while we have ranged from the 18th century to the 21st century, and some people have tried to ask what Smith would have said about a particular issue, the interesting thing is whether he provided a framework in which we can judge a whole series of issues, rather than have a view on the individual issue of the moment.

I think the first thing I have always found fascinating about Smith is his assault on vested interest. In the 18th century he was assaulting the vested interest of the mercantilists. He was demanding competition and trade and the opening up of markets. He was against an apprenticeship system that was holding people back. He was against a whole series of vested interests that were denying people the opportunity to move ahead, and I think there is probably common ground in this panel that where vested interests hold people back and deny opportunity, they have to be dealt with. Whether that is through a competition policy or whether it is through changes in law to increase opportunity, that is something that ought to be done.

On the issue of economic policy, there was a very interesting interchange about debts and deficits and who was responsible for running up deficits. I think the interesting thing is
that it has been left-of-centre parties that have been able to introduce a rules-based approach to economic and fiscal policy. The truth is that the fine tuning and the way that public spending has been managed by left-wing parties between the 1940s and the 1970s got us into difficulties, but equally the rigid adherence to monetarist targets got us into difficulties in the 1980s and 1990s.

What we are doing – and, I think, what governments around the world are trying to do – is introduce a rules-based approach to economic policy, with clear policy objectives and clear procedures set down. This means you have a greater certainty about what you will do in fiscal and monetary policy, and that seems to be what is working better than the Reaganite approach to monetarism or the Keynesian fine tuning of the past. Once you have clear rules that are understood, people will allow you the discretion to make interest rate cuts or changes that are in the public interest. So again, I think there is a new approach to economic policy. I wouldn’t say it is entirely due to Adam Smith, but it is recognition that you need rules in the running of the economy.

I think the third question that really interests me is the attack from the right against the left that we are against markets and competition. It has always been the position of those people on the left that we are in favour of markets and competition, but that markets and competition are not enough. That is really where the debate should lie: markets and competition being in the public interest but not wholly equated with the public interest, or to be automatically the public interest and defined as such. That leads you to all the issues of social justice that we have been getting to this evening. And it seems to me that you have to face up to many of these questions of inequality, about the absence of provision of educational opportunity, the absence of healthcare, not just in our country but right round the developing world.

I see the future – if I were to talk not just about Britain at the moment, but the future in the global economy – as a compact between the developing countries and ourselves. In return for pursuing corruption-free policies where there is monetary and fiscal stability and opening up to trade and opening up to investment (the sort of things that Adam Smith would have approved of), there has to be some contribution made by the developed economies to the developing economies in development itself, and that must be in the form of help for education, health and antipoverty programmes that can give people the opportunity by themselves over time to release themselves from poverty. Markets and competition, yes, but there is more that needs to be done. And I think that when I read Adam Smith and his discussion of public works and his discussion of what is fair, he would
have been prepared to enter into that argument.

As far as inequality is concerned, it is true that inequalities are rising in the global economy. Right around the world that is a problem that every government has to deal with. If in the end this leads to glaring inequalities, then you have a great deal of dissatisfaction amongst your population about outcomes. I think that what we are doing in the UK is probably the best way forward. That is, we are helping those people with families, those people who are pensioners, and those people who are working to release themselves from poverty, to have decent wages and conditions and proper provision in terms of public services and benefits when children are growing up, when they retire and when they are in work and not paid decent wages.

That is happening in Britain, although what is not really understood is that if you look at our taxes (which used to be 40% to 0%, but because of tax credits is now in practice 40% to –200%) and tax credit system, they enable the exchequer to pay money to people through taxes, as well as take money from people. It is through that means that we are able to give money to families who need it for the costs of bringing up their children.

Equally we can give money to people who are in low-paid employment, who should know that if they work, work will pay. Equally, of course, to pensioners, who should not only know that they can be released from poverty, but will not be penalised for savings or occupational pensions that they have. So one of the ways we are addressing those problems in equality is helping people on low and middle incomes better their position, and I think increasingly that will be the way of governments around the world.

This has been a fascinating discussion, raising so many different issues. They are not just academic but quite political, and I think the blend of academic analysis, historical information and political polemic has been fascinating. You probably think I should have listened to this debate before I had my budget last week, but it will certainly influence future ones.

Lord Sutherland
I would like to invite Miranda Kavanagh from Pfizer to say just a very few words, and then we will conclude the evening.

Miranda Kavanagh, Pfizer
I must say, as a mere capitalist it is daunting to follow such eminent speakers, but at least
I have learnt one thing and that is I am not indolent.

We are one of the world’s most successful companies of any kind. We are the leading pharmaceutical company in the world and the biggest private-sector spender on research and development. Against that background of success, we do not share the view that the interests of the industry are at odds with those of the public. I must say that capitalists of industry have come in for their share of knocking this evening. Instead, we believe that commercial success (and I believe that all enlightened companies believe this) should go hand-in-glove with a sense of corporate responsibility.

We would like to be valued not just by our shareholders, but also by the communities in which we live and serve and society at large, and we believe we make a contribution to the prosperity of society as a whole. I think that is probably something that both left and right can agree with. Supporting this series of lectures is in line with that vision and I must say that it has been an honour to do so, to partner the Smith Institute and the University of Edinburgh, and perhaps to make a contribution to the new Scottish Enlightenment.

I would like to conclude by giving my thanks to the university, to the Smith Institute (for all the hard work that has gone into this series of lectures), to the speakers, and lastly to all of you, the audience, for making this such a success.