



The Scotland-UN Committee

The Stone of Destiny at the United Nations

During the spring of 1981 it was brought to the Scotland-UN Committee's attention that the United Nations Educational Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) had set up a special committee to promote the return of objects of national cultural interest to their home countries. The moving spirit behind it was President Mobutu of Zaire, who in October 1973 had held an impassioned speech before the UN General Assembly in New York demanding the return of the works of art and objects of national importance that had been looted from Africa and other parts of the world during the colonial period.

The committee consisted of 20 members, nominated by their governments. Its chairman at the time was Salah Stétié, a cultured Lebanese diplomat and writer. The object of the committee was to overcome the legal and chauvinist hurdles that prevent the return of objects such as the famous Mask of Benim to their native lands, the condition being that they must be objects of fundamental cultural significance, and have been removed in the course of colonial or other foreign occupation, or as a result of illegal export.

The opportunity was too good to miss, and the Stone of Destiny was the obvious subject. The snag was that the committee was there to negotiate between governments, and not between governments and representatives of nations within composite states. It was perfectly clear from the start, therefore, that the chances of having the Westminster stone returned by this method were precisely nil, in a legal sense.

Politically, it was another matter. And as a means of having the Scottish case once again brought before the world authority it was simply unbeatable. And so the standard application forms were filled in, and submitted with the following covering letter. The effect that the operation created at home and abroad exceeded Scotland-UN's wildest expectations:

**To the Intergovernmental Committee for the Return of
Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its
Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation,**

UNESCO, UNESCO House, Paris.

From the Scotland-UN Committee

Your Committee has been set up to put right the wrongs committed in previous ages, especially during the colonial period, when considerable quantities of articles forming irreplaceable parts of the cultural heritage of many nations were simply looted while the people who owned them were unable to resist.

We in Scotland suffered this looting at a much earlier period than most of the countries whose cases you will be considering, despite which we are still attempting to obtain the return of one of the most precious objects belonging to Scotland's national heritage. We would therefore be grateful for the assistance of your Committee in having this situation put right with the return of the Stone of Destiny to the Nation of Scotland.

The Stone of Destiny is the Coronation Stone of the Kings of Scots. Right back to the dawn of history our monarchs, on succeeding to the throne, were ceremonially robed while sitting upon it. As the most precious object belonging to the Scottish Nation, it was guarded in the Monastery of Scone, near Perth, after having been preserved from prehistoric times. There is no more fundamental cultural object belonging to the Scottish Nation.

It was from the Monastery of Scone that an invading English army removed it on 8th August 1296. The English, after their arrival in South Britain from what is now Germany, were then attempting to conquer the surrounding nations, including Scotland, by military force. They succeeded elsewhere, but in Scotland they suffered the worst military defeat in their entire history at the hands of the Scots. The battle of Bannockburn, on 24th June 1314, finally ensured Scotland's independence from English domination, and the Declaration of Arbroath of 6th April 1320, issued in the name of the entire Scottish people, established in constitutional law that Scotland was under no circumstances to be brought under English rule.

The English had, however, previously plundered Scotland from one end to the other, burning, destroying and desecrating what they could not carry off as loot. Even after the Scottish victory the Stone of Destiny remained in far-off London, beyond the reach of any Scottish military expedition. The English King Edward I even had the effrontery to have it built into an English coronation chair as a symbol of England's domination over Scotland.

The English acknowledged Scotland's independence on 4th May 1328, when they ratified the Treaty of Northampton. A contract signed at the same time, with the force of a treaty under international law, stipulated that the Stone of Destiny was to be returned to Scotland, but the Abbot of Westminster, where it was being held, refused to allow it to be removed, and the English Government deliberately took no action against him, thus showing their approval of his

action. The Northampton agreement remains, however, the legal basis of the situation, and the Stone is therefore being held illegally in England.

Since then, attempts have been made periodically to have this irreplaceable national heirloom returned to Scotland. In 1950, one such attempt was actually successful. The Stone was retrieved from Westminster Abbey by a group of Scottish patriots, but was removed from the altar of Arbroath Abbey (where the Scottish Declaration of Independence had been signed in 1320), where it had been placed, and taken back to London on the order of the English authorities. It was expected that after a period of time, to allow English faces to be saved, the Stone of Destiny would be restored to its rightful place in Scotland, but more than 30 years later it still remains in Westminster Abbey, guarded by electronic devices, thus desecrating a major English church which is thereby being used to harbour stolen property, and a standing symbol of England's colonial rule over Scotland.

The Stone of Destiny, it must be emphasised, is and has always been the property of the Scottish Nation. It has never belonged to the Crown, the State, or any individual, and certainly none of these has any authority whatever to withhold its custody from the people to whom it has belonged since their tribal days in the mists of prehistory.

Since then, in recent times, Scotland has joined political unions within the British Isles and Europe, but this alters nothing in the situation. There are many such political unions in the world, but their existence does not give one nation within such a union the right to rob another nation within the same union of its cultural heritage. The Soviet Union has more than one hundred nations within its borders, while many of the new African states each contain several distinct nations. It goes without saying that they are all entitled to have their cultural integrity assured, irrespective of the state system, and Scotland is entitled to demand no less.

At the moment, Scotland is without a separate government of its own, although the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva is presently considering the submission placed before it by this organisation regarding the continued suppression of the clearly-expressed desire of the Scottish people to have their ancient national Parliament recalled. In the meantime, there is no authority other than this Committee that can represent the national interest.

We are therefore submitting this request to you, to ask you to come to our assistance in this matter, and apply pressure on the London regime to have the Stone of Destiny, that priceless part of Scotland's history and cultural riches, returned to the Nation to whom it belongs, thus putting an end to one of the most blatant remaining symbols of colonial domination that exists in this day and age.

For and on behalf of the Scotland-UN Committee,

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It would be putting it mildly to state that the application was a bombshell. The chairman of the United Nations special committee read it out in full at the next meeting in Paris, and the attitudes and comments of the committee members left no doubt that they were unanimously on Scotland's side. However, as expected, there was no doubt about their remit with regard to negotiating between sovereign states, and so they had to decide – with considerable regret, as they made it clear – that they could not intervene in a UK internal matter.

The action was a total success as regards its main objective of having the Scottish case brought up at the highest international diplomatic level. The British authorities were naturally acquainted with the matter, and according to informed sources there was someone in 10 Downing Street who were not amused, to put it very mildly indeed! But the sequel put the crowning touch to the whole operation, the results of which were far more spectacular than had been expected.

The Glasgow Herald got wind of the action, and gave it banner headlines at the top of its front page. The political correspondent William Clark quoted from the Scotland-UN letter, and followed the matter up right to the United Nations, where the accuracy of the Scotland-UN report was confirmed. He quoted the secretary of the United Nations committee as saying: "Our hearts bleed for Scotland, but according to the rules there is no action we can take in the matter." The ensuing uproar led to a correspondence on the Herald's letters page that went on for weeks thereafter.

The most significant was a contribution by the historian A.C. McKerracher of Dunblane, who wrote that the stone stolen by Edward I bore no resemblance to the early illustrations of the historic Stone, that it was certainly a fake planted by the monks of Scone Abbey, who had had at least six weeks warning of the English army's approach, and that Edward I, when he realised that he had been duped, had sent a raiding party of knights back to Scone to look for the real Stone. They never found it, because the monks had hidden it on the site of King Macbeth's castle at Dunsinnan in Perthshire. There a shepherd boy found it at the beginning of the 19th century, and according to a contemporary newspaper report it was taken to London for examination, since when nothing has been heard of it.

Edward I meanwhile had cancelled the order for a bronze coronation chair to hold the sacred Stone of the Kings of Scots, which was no longer available to him. Instead, to save face, he had the fake built into the wooden chair he had originally had made for the coronation celebrant, presumably the Archbishop. To this day, the guides in Westminster Abbey know nothing of this story, and are apparently unaware that the piece of masonry formerly kept under Edward I's "ersatz" coronation chair was allegedly not the original Stone. Mr. McKerracher mentioned Scotland-UN in the foreword to an article he wrote for the Scots Magazine on the subject.

According to this theory, only one of the innumerable legends that have surrounded the Stone, the one then kept under the English coronation chair in Westminster Abbey (Fake No. 1) is the original Westminster stone that the English were duped into looting in the late 13th century, and was then retrieved and re-stolen in 1950. A copy made in 1922 by the sculptor John Gray (Fake No. 2) was formerly under lock and key in St. Columba's Church in Dundee and is now in Perthshire. And we are still looking for the original ceremonial Stone of the Kings of Scots.

The important factor for Scotland-UN, which has never entered into such controversies, was that its diplomatic offensive aroused a flood of international interest in and awareness of Scotland's political situation and abused rights, and that the international community now knew that much more about Scotland and its problems, which was the whole object of the exercise.

The spin-off from the action was nevertheless a stimulation of rising pressure at home and abroad, which finally made the retention of the stone in Westminster untenable. After several years, on 3 July 1996 Conservative Prime Minister John Major made a short statement to the House of Commons, right out of the blue, that the Westminster Stone was to be returned to Scotland permanently, but would still be used for coronation services. Secretary of State Michael Forsyth made the relevant arrangements for it to be returned to Scotland in November 1996, and it is now displayed with the Honours of Scotland in Edinburgh Castle.

Fuller details will have to await the opening of the relevant government archives, but there is every indication that the prime factor governing the decision was the Scotland-UN action at the Council of Europe in 1993. As a direct result of the Scotland-UN Memorandum to the CoE in September of that year the Council had instituted a system of detailed scrutiny of the governmental systems of all the European states in order to enforce their adherence to the international norms of pluralist democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

It was no coincidence that, a few weeks earlier, when the Council's monitoring committee started its examination of the UK in June 1996, its scrutiny immediately resulted in a damning condemnation of the British democratic system, which was declared to be one of the six worst and most primitive in Europe. The UK has never released the details of that report, for good reason, but John Major was well aware of what was going to follow and would in the end result in the restoration of democratic government in Scotland and Wales under threat of international sanctions.

He was also well aware of the extensive English mythology surrounding the Coronation Stone in the Abbey of Westminster, which English opinion had long regarded as "the most precious emblem of the greatest empire the world has ever known" and similar. He was up against implacable English opposition to its restoration to Scotland, but he had little option. To the Scots, and to foreign observers, the Stone of Destiny in Westminster was the most blatantly persistent echo of imperialism imaginable in the late 20th century, as well as being an outstanding affront to Scotland's internationally guaranteed cultural integrity.

And so, a few weeks after the first reports of the CoE monitoring began to trickle out of Strasbourg, this inflammatory potential had to be removed from the political arena before it could result in any kind of stronger reaction and damaging international publicity. The return of the Stone to Scotland was a daring act on Major's part, but it was an act of a government under pressure, as was devolution itself under Tony Blair. It was certainly not an act of generosity, but a political move to avert even greater humiliation than was about to occur very shortly over the restoration of democratic government in Scotland.