

Finally! Real Partnering Around Scots Heritage

Under Way on Both Sides of the Pond

by John King Bellasai*

On her two recent trips to the States, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon went out of her way, on several occasions during each visit, to point out that there are more persons of Scottish descent living in America than there are Scots back home in Scotland. Wisely, she and her Government appreciate the strong and enduring bonds that tie the Ancestral Diaspora in America to the mother country, even after many generations apart. Though by all accounts, American Scots are pretty evenly divided about the wisdom of Scottish independence, all here agree that it's a decision for the Scottish People to make and that the enormous good will which Scotland enjoys in America will endure, regardless of that decision, and will not be diminished by distance or time. The challenge now for Scotland and for its government is how to harness this overseas energy for Scotland's benefit in this new century.

Apropos to this, there is a new spirit of partnering making itself noticed on both sides of the pond – due equally to the tightening of programmatic resources in both the public and the private sectors and to generational change, as Baby Boomers in leadership positions make way for millennials, who are much more naturally internationalist in their outlook.

Certainly diminishing budgets for government agencies and nonprofits alike is part of what is driving the very noticeable move toward partnering across organizations in event planning and messaging campaigns promoting Scotland and things Scottish. But another driver is the changing nature of communications as we progress into the 21st Century. What it means to participate and “belong” to an organization is shifting, as younger people who are not traditional “joiners” come into leadership roles in Scottish heritage organizations, both here in the States and in Scotland. The question for us who are active promoters of Scots heritage “on the ground” is how to keep our organizations alive and vibrant in the Age of Facebook and other engines of the new online reality.

Membership roles in Scottish-American organizations are decreasing and the staffing of clan tents at highland games and festivals is becoming harder as Baby Boomers leave the scene in increasing numbers and the younger generation opt for a new style of participating that does not rely as much on physical engagement. The challenge is how to stay connected and keep the flame alive for Scottish heritage organizations in this new environment. One way is for like-minded heritage organizations to come together and actively partner on projects and events, rather than keep running on parallel tracks, duplicating their efforts and competing for scarce resources. This is now becoming much more commonplace.

In the face of these changes, it is interesting, and fortunate I think, that a new Scottish Government Counsellor for North America has just arrived at the Scottish Affairs Office here in Washington – Joni Smith – and she is a breath of fresh air. Her field is communications, and she is a listener. And her mandate includes more closely synchronizing the messaging of her Government’s Scottish Affairs Office in the USA with that of *VisitScotland*, *EventScotland*, and the various economic development groups promoting Scotland stateside. She tells us she is also much more open to working with Diaspora organizations to partner on projects of interest and utility for Scotland—a message America Scots have waited years to hear.

So the old “silos” on both sides of the Atlantic are giving way to new, more serious partnering efforts. This article will site just a few of the more noticeable ones—both in Scotland and in America:

On the Scotland side, there is the smashing success of the annual Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo (REMT) for 2017, with its month-long program, now just ended. Themed *A Splash of Tartan*, it featured 60 clans and families parading onto the field over the course of the month of August, 2 or 3 different groups each night, all with their respective chiefs leading groups of kilted clansfolk. REMT’s organizational partner for 2017, the Standing Council of Scottish Chiefs (SCSC), has shown this past month that the chiefs can still raise their clans—but this time in support of one of modern Scotland’s most financially successful events, the Tattoo. With thousands of clansfolk on the field and in the stands, a great many of them in from the States just for the event, the enduring power of the tartan, clanship, and bagpipes as essential parts of the Scottish “brand” were on full display in modern 21st century Scotland, for all to see. The word is that the Scottish Government and *VisitScotland* both took note—which bodes well for future partnering efforts of this sort with the SCSC and other heritage-related nonprofits. The involvement of the SCSC in the event also showcased the talents of a new, younger generation of chiefs involved in the group’s Executive—all technologically skilled and media savvy. They have transformed the SCSC into a much more open, transparent, and outward-looking organization. With REMIT, the chiefs have shown the power of a heritage nonprofit partnering with a for-profit entertainment venture to bring increased tourist revenues to Scotland. With the growing success of the TV mini-series, *Outlander*, and the subsequent demand for its leading actors to appear at Scottish Games and festivals here in the States and worldwide, we can expect more of this sort of partnering in the years to come.

The new partnering impulse here in America is typified by the reenergized Scottish North American Leadership Conference (SNALC), an annual event which now features a broadened steering committee, to include not only the two founding groups--the American Scottish Foundation and the St. Andrew’s Society of Chicago (Chicago Scots)--but also my organization, the Council of Scottish Clans & Associations (COSCA), and our sister society up north, Clans & Scottish Societies of Canada (CASSOC). Though SNALC has been around for 20 years, it has really taken off as a major event in the past few years by pulling in more U.S.-based heritage groups, moving the conference around the country, and featuring top presenters brought in

from Scotland. In the past three years, these have been former FM Henry Mcleish, John, Lord Thurso, the new Chairman of *VisitScotland*, and most recently, *Visit Scotland's* Director of Marketing, Richard Knight. A very successful SNALC 2017 just concluded in Guelph, Ontario, which was widely attended by Scottish-American groups from the USA.

Also on this side of the pond, the 20th anniversary of Tartan Day is right around the corner – celebrating the passage of Senate Resolution 155, which proclaimed 6th April of each year as a national holiday to celebrate the many contributions of Scots, and Scottish-Americans, to the founding and development of the United States, in all fields of endeavor. The 20th Anniversary celebrations being planned for Washington, DC, New York City, and elsewhere across our land will be major and very high profile. They will serve to energize the ongoing partnering impulse in the Scottish-American Ancestral Diaspora—not only partnering with other like-minded groups stateside, but with public and private sector groups in Scotland, too. Already a large number of Scottish notables have signed on to come over and help us celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Tartan Day holiday.

Working together in partnership, much can be achieved going forward.

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