

SPEECH BY THE MACLAREN OF MACLAREN TO THE CLAN
CONVENTION IN THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT: 24 JULY, 2009

Presiding Officer, Convenor, Kinsmen

'S e fìor onair a th'ann dhomh labhairt as leth nan ceann-cinnidh a-nochd. It is an honour to speak on behalf of the chiefs.

A hundred chiefs probably means a hundred different opinions. Mine is but one point of view. I hope I do not offend. If I do, I will join you in the rush to retrieve our dirks at the door.

Some words in English are over-used, or wrongly used. Such as: unique, historic, unprecedented. From the ridiculous – think of the adulation poured on the latest media idol, whether the winner of X Factor, or Celebrity Come Dancing or....Big Brother – to the sublime: the 2005 Bordeaux vintage. Or somewhere in between. England beating Australia at Lord's. I apologise to our Australian kinsmen for bringing this up. You will know how popular an English victory is in this hall. Sadly, it does only come round about as often as Halley's Comet.

But to apply those words – unique, historic, unprecedented – to a gathering such as this is not, I believe, an exaggeration. Except, possibly, “unprecedented”. There was in fact an earlier, historic meeting supposedly to discuss the role of kinship. It was not one of the recent International Gatherings of the Clans – which, I think you will agree, Jamie Sempill's organisation of this Gathering 2009 completely dwarfs; nor anything that happened in Victorian times, the period of the great romantic revival of interest in Scotland. It took place nearly twelve hundred years ago.

In his bid to unite Dalriada and Pictland, Kenneth MacAlpine invited all the Pictish princes and nobles with rival claims to the throne to a great meeting and banquet. Disarmed at the door, rather like us, they entered all unsuspecting. But pits had been dug beneath the benches on which they were seated and at a given signal the bolts securing the benches were drawn out. As one of the hapless nobles fell into the pit he looked up and cried out: “What is this treachery? You invited us for a discussion on kinship.” Kenneth MacAlpine moved cautiously to the edge and looked down slyly: *O a dhaoine bhochda! Feumaidh nach do thuig sibh an cuireadh.* “Oh dear, you must have misread the invitation. It clearly said a convention on Kingship.” And with that, they were all murdered and he was master of most of Scotland. Sadly, by the end of lunch, unlike in our case, there wasn't much of a group photo.

Well, after twelve centuries we have definitely managed to move on....haven't we? Do just check under your seats anyway. After all, you lowlanders, and

Hanoverians, may well find yourselves sitting next to a highlander, or, worse, a Jacobite. Do take care.

But, really, we need have no worries. It was not our ancestors but this generation that was responsible for inventing health and safety. Mercifully, we have other responsibilities too. And that is what today is all about. Our responsibilities. The chief and head of family to their kindred. And that kindred, whether at home or overseas, defining – together with their chief – how the clan and family express their identity in the 21st century.

We have a range of options. Some years ago, Henry Kissinger, at a pivotal point in East/West relations, called for an options paper. His staff produced one. He rejected it. They came back with another. He rejected it again. They turned round and said: “What more do you want? We’ve given you the full range of options.” He replied: “No. You haven’t given me all the options. The first option is missing.” They asked what that could be. “The first option. Always. Simple. Do nothing.”

I wouldn’t wish to contradict the good doctor. Doing nothing is certainly an option. And in some contexts, for example if it comes to pressing the wrong button, it may well be better than doing something. But it is not, I suggest, an option for us. A minority of chiefs think it is, for them. And this is a great disappointment for those who look on them as the head of the family.

It is like an old-fashioned paterfamilias, content when his children are away but when they return and join him at the table he sits there glumly, in silence, refusing to contribute. Not a case of: “Children” – as in our own language, *clann* – “should be seen but not heard.” Worse than that. Preferably, they shouldn’t be seen at all.

I am not saying that all chiefs of clans or heads of families who are not represented here fall into that category. It is certainly not a question of: the hundred here, good; the forty who are not, bad. Some, overcome by shyness, would really rather not be chief at all. Some are very active, choosing their own way but eschewing the razzamatazz of large gatherings. One chief I know, and respect, channels his considerable energies not into societies or gatherings; but into helping the infrastructure of the community where his family has lived, and which his clan has built up, over hundreds of years.

Others, however, are very content to have a title but dismiss the responsibilities that go with it. They profoundly believe that clanship stopped conveniently somewhere around the middle of the 18th century, and that’s it. End of story. I profoundly disagree. The story continues – as we are demonstrating today, and will do over the Gathering this weekend, and have been doing throughout this year of the Homecoming and will continue to do long after we have dispersed from Edinburgh.

It is, though, easier perhaps to believe in something than define it. How many of us when faced with a question – from a journalist, or a fellow clansman or member of family, aware of their name but not sure whether joining a Society or Association is for them – a question about what kinship really means, or what a chief is actually supposed to do – how many of us find a satisfactory answer? An explanation that is not trite, or a dry lecture, or something that sounds like a tape recording; but which, instead, to carry a sense of truth, and depth, comes from the heart. It is not always easy to put it into words.

One way is to buy a little time, just to collect your thoughts so that you don't descend into clichés:

“So, what's it really like being a chief? Do you have power?”

“Oh, plenty. The tax revenues are amazing. A penny in every pound – or dollar – from tens of thousands of clansmen all over the world. It really adds up. That new castle I've built? Super. None of this antiquated stuff. No leaks. No National Trust.” It might catch on, though, don't you think?

Or: “How much do you make out of McLaren Formula 1?”

“Buckets. Every time they win the royalties come rolling in. Er yes, and when the car finally waddles up in 15th place it's a tap on the shoulder for another ten million.”

But before we get to the serious answer there are obstacles to overcome: perceptions from the supposedly real world. Take this, for example – I am sorry, Presiding Officer. You are very reasonable and generous. You have brought us to the cockpit of the nation; you have allowed us the use of this great debating chamber. But on one condition: we can, I imagine, discuss anything we like....as long as it is not politics. In a place whose life-blood is politics is that really fair? And can you expect a highlander whose ancestors broke every rule, fair or unfair, himself to break with that fine tradition? Well, please take what follows not as harsh politics but just a gentle illustration – Some weeks ago there was a spin doctor who got himself into trouble for offering advice in a series of e-mails on how to try to hit the opposition below the belt. His name was also a “Mc”: though perhaps with the emphasis more on “muck” than “Mac”. At the height of the furore, an editorial in one of the Sunday newspapers chose to cite us. It read: “While the Prime Minister portrays himself as a man of principle, his actions resemble more those of a Scottish clan chief, demanding of his followers nothing more than blind loyalty and an appetite for bloodshed.”

Chiefs: Do we recognise that description (of ourselves, not the Prime Minister)?

Overseas representatives: “An appetite for bloodshed” – is that you? Oh well, perhaps two cheers for the Sunday papers.

Yes, we are aware of our history. And much of Scottish history is steeped in blood. Inevitably, it is the more dramatic moments that get remembered and get embellished as the stories are passed down through the generations; and – Scotland being what it was – those tend to be the gorier bits. How the “Good Sir James”, alias the Black Douglas, dealt with half an English garrison by falling on them at Sunday worship and cutting their heads off in the church. Then, returning to his own castle, burnt the whole lot down in order to deal with the rest of the garrison who were occupying it. Or, the great piobaireachd, *Cill Chriosd*, composed at the moment of victory of one clan over another. It is a fine tune and in the Thumb Variation has those High G notes in it, the ones that make the hair stand up on the back of your neck. Not knowing the story, I once remarked on this to another piper. “Oh yes, you see the defeated clan were driven inside a church, the doors were secured, it was set on fire and the piper of the victorious clan played as he marched around the outside. The High G notes? Why, they are to represent the shrieks of those inside.”

Mostly, our ancestors were busy cultivating potatoes, a little barley (various uses) and driving cattle (not always their own) to market. But that doesn't make such riveting history. What is remembered are the great battles – clan versus clan; reiver versus reiver; or, on a national level, the wars of independence, the campaigns of the Covenant, the Jacobite risings. The power of the chiefs to apportion land among family and followers, to dispense justice and, in some cases, to exercise power over life and death. Life itself: short and brutish; the clansman or borderer: hero or savage, take your pick.

Look at us today through some other people's eyes. Inheritors to all this passion, fire and turbulence; yet, somehow, strangely removed from it, even civilised. Prufrock with a kilt. No wonder that some liken us, two hundred and fifty years on from what they call “real history”, to the rim left around the inside of the bath when the water has run out.

More than that, chiefs and heads of family can easily – too easily – be caricatured as idle, comfortable landowners, often living in self-chosen “exile” far from their ancestral places: remote from their origins, remote from their history and – perhaps most tellingly – remote from the people that still look to them as the head of their family.

Take education. I happened to be educated in Scotland: my sons in England. A farmer in the glen stopped me one day, looked at me straight and said: “Oh, Donald. What a pity that you've chosen to educate your children abroad.” And then there's the dreaded English accent. One of my children, taking an interest in this Convention, asked me: “Daddy, apart from you, how many of the other chiefs speak with the wrong accent?” Well, how many? Perhaps 80, 90 %? I don't think it

greatly matters. I once knew someone who could speak eleven different languages and dialects; and had nothing sensible to say in any of them.

Caricatures are fun. Sometimes they can be deadly accurate. But when it comes to this generation of chiefs, in most cases, I think the picture is overdrawn. We are sometimes portrayed as out of date. I think that perception is itself out of date. We are no longer warriors. As chiefs, we have no material powers. As farmers, politicians, doctors, businessmen, artists, crown servants, lawyers, musicians, teachers we are much like anyone else. But there is a difference. We have a duty, and we are expected, to exercise leadership. This is the thread that runs right through our individual and collective histories: from the middle ages, and before, to 21st century Scotland.

Our predecessors may have wielded military and economic power. But their primary duty was care of their own clan or family. The clearest expression of this, in celtic times, was that land was not individually owned but husbanded and provided for the next generation. A chief that did not respect his people quickly lost respect himself. And however changed our context is today that is the vital link that should not be broken between us and our forbears. Nor is that link a prerogative of the chiefs. Our kinsmen have that link; and we to each other. As one sixth generation Canadian of Scots descent put it: “Loyalty to fellow clansman and chief – these kinds of connection are universal and not restricted to a specific time or place.”

Some societies in other countries are characterised by ancestor worship. Some, by ancestor neglect or indifference. In Scotland, I would describe it as ancestor respect. This is sometimes hi-jacked by Walter Scott or Mel Gibson-style romance. But that is not what I am talking about. Why is it that of all the countries across Europe, including notably those settled by Celts, and that once had clan systems, it is essentially Scotland where an identifiable structure still survives? Accident of geography is not a sufficient answer. It is because of an intense and enduring pride in name and family and kinship. Probably, the strongest pride. Whatever hellish things were done, including, in later centuries, betrayals by chiefs of their own people, those people held family and kinship to override all else. Scotland is a changed place. And, still, the story continues.

How we play our part and re-define our role is up to us. We have already discounted the first option of doing nothing. Each chief and head of family has their own style, their own ideas and – if they are lucky – a Society or Association also with ideas and individual personalities continuing to breathe life into this shared concept of kinship. And that is why we are fortunate today to have so many overseas representatives as part of this debate. You could just as easily be out there playing golf. You are all considerably younger than Tom Watson. But you have chosen to be here, supporting and, I hope, inspiring your chiefs.

The clan and family societies, and their representatives – at home and overseas – provide a structure long after those clans have dispersed that is vital. Vital: another over-used word but not in this case. Because what I am referring to is something human and living.

We are rather more than a collection of dining clubs, reminiscing about the past. When we dwell on the past it is to learn lessons from it. We certainly work to preserve this country's heritage: conducting historical and genealogical research, helping restore ancient monuments, preserving family and national artefacts. And we contribute to its present day culture: sponsoring events and competitions – piping, dancing, singing and our local Games. But also through development and educational trusts, helping local schools and charities and providing scholarships, we are contributing to this country's future. And those who decide this country's future should think of using us.

Our working groups this afternoon will add sharper focus to what we are already doing; and provide stimulus for new ideas, such as those offered by Bob McWilliam. Just two thoughts: there will be much discussion of the internet. Let it be a tool, among other things, for responsible research and information, not recycled fiction. And on tourism: tartan tat will successfully bring in short term money. But if Scotland loses its dignity it will become a place that less people want to visit.

The Standing Council of Scottish Chiefs will be one of the main beneficiaries of today. Not financially. All the rich chiefs will have to be soaked to make up the shortfall. But mentally: you clan and family representatives will galvanise us to examine how we can exercise greater leadership and ensure that the better ideas exchanged today are taken forward with drive and imagination.

Jim Mather set out a vision of the new chapter in this country's development. If we as chiefs are to be part of that "new enlightenment", or Jim Hunter's "glittering future" – and I am confident we will be – we need to remember that we cannot just count on loyalty from our kinsmen. We have to earn it.

To quote the author of "The Prince" (not Charles Edward Stuart; much earlier than that), a great observer of what motivates people and what matters in the real world: "Titles are not to honour men. The man or woman is to honour the title."