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Sinister society? It's all wild speculation

Robbie the Pict insists that an Edinburgh debating club exercises sinister influence on the nation's affairs. Speculative Society member Allan Massie begs to differ

The hare was started by the gentleman who calls himself Robbie the Pict. It was then chased by George Monbiot of The Guardian and Alan Crawford of The Sunday Herald. The novelist Ross Leckie tried in vain to head off the hunt. Then the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Charles Kennedy set off in hot pursuit.

It's a classic silly-season story, which links the Skye Road Bridge with what is, according to Mr Crawford, "a secretive all-male club . . . which meets in candlelit vaults below Edinburgh University's Old College during the winter". And worse, "large swathes of the Scottish legal establishment are listed as members".

It does sound sinister.

Where does the Skye Road Bridge come into it, you may ask. Well, it was set up as a Private Finance Initiative (PFI), and tolls which many think excessive have to be paid to the Skye Bridge Company. This company's chairman at the time of the bridge's opening was Sir Iain Noble.

A fair number of Skye residents have refused at various times to pay the toll and have been prosecuted successfully. Appeals of the sentences passed down in the Sheriff Court have been rejected by our law lords. The appeal case rests on the claim that the paperwork legalising the demand for a toll has never been published.

However, Robbie the Pict has made his discovery, leaped on the enthusiastically by Messrs Monbiot, Crawford and Kennedy. It's all because of the sinister machinations of this secret society, which meets in those candlelit vaults in the dead of winter. Robbie reveals that a number of the judges involved in the various cases — not to mention Sir Iain Noble and Lord James Douglas Hamilton, the minister at the time, and Mr Niall Campbell, a top civil servant in the Scottish Office who was responsible for getting the PFI scheme under way — are members of the Speculative Society (or the Spec, as it is commonly known).

Here I should declare an interest. I myself am an honorary member of this mafia, along with such denizens of the dark as HRH Prince Philip; Lord Mackay of Clashfern (the former Lord Chancellor); and Professor Sir Stewart Sutherland, of Edinburgh University. And it is in the dungeons — sorry, vaults — of Edinburgh University that the Society holds its secret conclaves at which the affairs of Scotland are

Curiously, on the three or four occasions that I have attended the society's meetings since I was, as the rule book has it, "admitted to Honorary Privileges", I never noticed any of this going on. Must have been blind. Or deaf. Or both.

They seemed light-hearted, even frivolous, evenings at which someone read an essay, there was a debate on some topic chosen for its amusement value, claret and some very bad coffee were drunk, and many cigars and cigarettes smoked.

It's worth saying something about the history and composition of the society. It dates from the 18th century, a time when Edinburgh was rich in dining and discussion clubs. It was founded by six students of Edinburgh University for "the purpose of improvement in Literary Composition and Public Speaking".

This is still, if perhaps less seriously, its reasons for existing. Its hall — these sinister candlelit vaults — was built in 1769 on a vacant plot within the area of Old College, and remains the society's property, to the irritation, some say, of the university. Sir Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson were members. That pillar of the Scottish establishment, the poet Hugh MacDiarmid, was an honorary member.

It has between 20 and 30 ordinary members, who are recent graduates of the university or still students. (Many are, admittedly, lawyers or intending to become lawyers.) There are just under 200 extraordinary members. These are people who have been members and have chosen to maintain some association with the society.

Only a few extraordinary members ever attend. Many haven't attended for years. I would guess that a good many of them never think of the society from one year to the next. If they do, they remember it, probably affectionately, as something which provided them with innocent pleasure in their youth.

A good many Scots judges are, or have been, members. This should surprise nobody. Many attended Edinburgh University and a student with a taste for debating such as befits an aspiring lawyer has always been likely to wish to be elected to the Spec. It's the same in every old university. The Dialectic Society in Glasgow has been the nursery of many Labour politicians, including John Smith, Donald Dewar and Lord Irvine of Lairg. Is that sinister? Only if you are a sucker for conspiracy theories.

Again, it has to be admitted that in a small country like Scotland, people who rise to positions of eminence are likely to have various links with each other, common experiences in their past. They will often have attended the same schools or university, and belonged to the same clubs, or even served in the same regiments. This is almost unavoidable. In fact I think you could remove that "almost".

So we get, for instance, the accusations of cronyism directed at the Labour party establishment which governs Scotland, and now Robbie the Pict has identified the same things among the legal establishment, thus leading Charles Kennedy to make, I'm sorry to

say, a right Charlie of himself.

"Some of my constituents," he has pompously said, "have sent me information that several of the key figures in the establishment and maintenance of the Skye Bridge tolls are apparently members of the Speculative Society of Edinburgh. The fear is that because these people belong to the society a perception of partiality has been created. I believe that this is clearly a matter for consideration by the Lord Advocate".

So he has sent him a list of the society's members — a list described as "secret", which it isn't.

Well, Mr Kennedy should dig deeper, for then he might unearth still more "sinister" secrets. I will point him in the right direction.

Every law lord in Scotland has been a member of that other sinister club, the Faculty of Advocates. Though solicitors can now be elevated to the judicial bench, the normal way to promotion is still by way of the faculty. How tightly does that bind them together? Second, a great many of them and our politicians and senior civil servants are members of Edinburgh's New Club, where they meet in a private diningroom for lunch. The New Club is entered by a secretive-looking door.

Many are members of the same golf clubs, exclusive bodies such as the Honourable Company of Golfers at Muirfield and the R&A at St Andrews. Who knows what plots are hatched on these windswept links or in the seclusion of the clubhouse? It scarcely bears thinking on. Many of them have been seen shopping in Jenners and — most sinister of all — it is rumoured that senior judges have even been known to dine in each other's houses.

There's a good Scots word — "havers" — which I would apply to Messrs Monbiot (who is, however, English and writes for The Guardian and may therefore be forgiven for indulging in absurd conspiracy theories), Crawford and Kennedy.

But, lest that seem rude, let me suggest a test. Let Mr Kennedy put one of his young researchers on to the job of finding out how often in the last few years senior judges have overthrown or dismissed a judgement given by another judge or sheriff who is himself a member of the Speculative Society. If he can't find such examples, I'll be very surprised.

Of course, I realise that to conspiracy theorists this would prove nothing. It would merely be a case of a shoot-out in the mafia clan.

Meanwhile I'm flattered. I never thought when I happily agreed to accept the offer of honorary membership that I was joining such a powerful and secret society, one which, according to Mr Monbiot, "raises questions about the entire system of Scottish law".

Golly!