

Designing a level playing field: The design politics of the baby box in Scotland
[Revised/Clean Copy] - By Dr Eleanor Herring

Abstract

This article explores the design politics of Scotland's baby box. Based on a similar government initiative from Finland, the baby box is essentially a large illustrated cardboard box containing around forty items for a baby and a new mother. Since 2017 every child born in Scotland has been entitled to receive a free baby box from the Scottish Government and the box allegedly uses 'the power of design' to give every child an equal start in life. By examining the design decisions that underpin the baby box, this article seeks to provide a more nuanced picture of the political uses of design, and to reflect on the changing role, responsibilities and meaning of government when expressed through both design policy and design artefact.

Keywords: Baby box, Design, Scotland, Government, Social justice, Finland.

Introduction

In August 2017, surrounded by flash photographers, smiling midwives and new mothers cradling infants, Scotland's former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon officially launched the baby box – see figure 1. Modelled on a similar government initiative from Finland, the baby box is essentially a large illustrated cardboard box containing around forty items for a baby and a new mother, such as baby clothes, hygiene items, toys and books, nursing pads and advice on breast-feeding. It also contains a mattress and bedding so the baby can safely sleep inside the box. Much like the Finnish scheme, every child born in Scotland is entitled to receive a free baby box from the Scottish Government, irrespective of means.
(1)

The devolved government's aspirations in 2017 were ambitious: Scotland needed to address its deep social, economic and geographic inequalities (Cairney and McGarvey 2013: 3). According to Scottish Government figures cited in the design brief for the baby box, there are approximately 56,000 births in Scotland each year, and a large number of these pregnancies are unplanned and therefore unbudgeted (V&A Dundee 2016b). At its simplest then, the baby box was a deliberate effort by the Scottish Government to alleviate the financial constraints placed on families by the arrival of their babies. But it was also presented as having far broader aims. By providing help at the beginning of *all* its citizens' lives, the baby box would be a universal benefit to tackle deprivation and child poverty, support parents, change unhealthy patterns of behaviour, promote social cohesion and ultimately improve lives. The infant recipients of the boxes – referred to by Sturgeon as 'Scotland's baby box generation' (Sturgeon 2016) – were expected to live a more sustainable, equal and prosperous life than their parents, and she repeatedly described the initiative as symbolic of her government's belief in a 'level playing field' (Scottish Government 2017b). Design was a key part of this symbolism because, according to the original design brief, the box uses 'the power of design to give every child born in Scotland an equal start in life' (V&A Dundee 2016b).

Yet what does this vague reference to 'the power of design' mean exactly? How is the Scottish Government using the baby box to 'level the playing field', and why has a Finnish design artefact been adopted to tackle inequality in Scotland?

In 2024 Scottish Government statements continue to position the baby box as a catalyst for meaningful and transformative change, to address social injustice and unfairness. However, while the box has been interpreted and criticized from political, public health, colonial and economic perspectives (Blair et al. 2018; Hunter Blackburn 2019; Reid and Swann 2019) this article explores an overlooked aspect of the scheme - its design politics. At first sight, the baby box is an example of benign social engineering with regards to family policy, and where design has been considered, it is only in relation to its graphic surface. However, this limited view echoes what Tony Fry calls a dominant approach 'to reduce the presentation of design to aesthetic concerns, with a focus on taste and style' (Fry 2011: 76. See also Keshavarz 2019: 5). This article expands such a limited understanding of what design can mean, to consider not only the graphic surface of the baby box, but also the contents of the box and the organisation of the scheme itself. The fullness of the box then, is used as a prism to better understand how design is invoked in state politics. Much like the passport in Mahmoud Keshavarz's study into the material practices of power, the baby box can be considered a design 'articulation' made by the state (Keshavarz 2015: 97). In this respect the design of the baby box can be understood as material evidence of the different political forces operating in Scottish society, giving form and shape to a political policy in practice (Fry 2011; Bason 2014). Though less obvious than direct political statements, state-led designed artefacts are expressions of political power, 'capable of negotiating and manipulating powerful ideological messages' (Floré and McAtee 2017: 4). This article adopts the view that to think in design terms means to configure, and the baby box is an effort to give material form to that configuration by government (Dilnot et al. 2015). The decisions that underpin that configuration are the broad focus of this paper.

The contributions that this article makes are two-fold: firstly to provide a more nuanced picture of the political uses of design, beyond the rhetoric embodied in phrases like the 'power of design' to achieve social justice for all; and secondly, to reflect on the changing role, responsibilities and meaning of government when expressed through both design policy and design artefact. This is important because, while shrinking the role of the government continues to be evident in democracies across the globe, the Scottish baby box appears to move in the opposite direction (Mazzucato 2013). Improving people's lives through design is no less important than it ever was, and the baby box continues to be an object which thousands of people engage with physically and emotionally. However, government design decisions are made on behalf of its citizens and therefore require scrutiny - even those with outwardly benevolent intentions. Design as an instrument of the state is, at least insofar as the baby box is concerned, arguably insufficient to deal with the scale of social injustice and unfairness in Scotland, and risks being perceived as a stand-in for genuine long-term support. The article proposes that the Scottish baby box represents a superficial use of design in a political project, which undermines design's transformative potential. Building on existing research about the baby box, government design policies and artefacts (Sarah Teasley 2018, Keshavarz 2015) as well as interviews, and official documentation produced by government and other associated bodies, this article critically analyses the design politics of the baby box as an artefact, the discourse which frames its political and cultural capital in Scotland, and the limits of the policy to transform behaviour through design.

The design of the Scottish baby box

The baby box's official presence in Scotland was first reported in April 2016, when the Scottish National Party (SNP) announced its election manifesto. In line with the party's centre-left and social democratic political agenda, the SNP pledged that, if re-elected to the Scottish Parliament later that year, every baby born in Scotland would be entitled to receive a free baby box from the Scottish Government (SNP 2016). The former SNP leader

Nicola Sturgeon positioned the box as a universal benefit that would help tackle infant poverty rates in Scotland and support poorer mothers, thus moving the political narrative of the SNP beyond ethnic nationalism and the campaign for Scottish independence, and towards an understanding that this was a party committed to eradicating social inequality. Adopting a tried-and-tested scheme from a Nordic country helped in this regard, since it further contributed to the reinvention of Scotland by the SNP as a Nordic or Scandinavian nation, sharing progressive policies and aspirations towards greater equality. The SNP has repeatedly and consistently looked to the Nordic countries for inspiration and potential post-independence allies. The Nordic Office based in Copenhagen (Denmark) is the latest initiative by the Scottish Government to improve cultural and economic connections with the region (Scottish Government 2024).

The SNP won that election - though it is unclear how much recognition of the baby box scheme there was among voters - and in October 2016 a design competition was launched. The task of preparing the design brief was awarded to V&A Dundee, and entries were invited from registered art and design students in Scotland. V&A Dundee was selected as a named partner in the delivery of the project because it was in development to be Scotland's new design museum, which tied in with the Year of Innovation, Architecture and Design. According to the current Press Officer at V&A Dundee, Jennie Patterson, the project model was closely based on the Finnish Baby Box, which typically run a nationwide design competition for each new graphic iteration of the box. The brief extended to the print that covered the surface of the box, but did not include the items inside - see figure 2. Applicants were encouraged to consider the look and feel of the design, and the brief stated that 'the graphic concept should evoke a feeling of playfulness, fun and excitement reflecting the multicultural nature of 21st Century Scotland', without containing 'any religious or political references' (V&A Dundee 2016b). The judging panel were comprised of government officials and established designers.

Detailed information about the government's direct contribution to the design brief is scarce. Product designer Scott Jarvie, one of the judges, recalls that 'probably someone in V&A Dundee's marketing department had written it', between writing press releases (Jarvie 2023). The tone of the wording, according to Jarvie, reflected a marketing perspective instead of any particular ideology or standpoint. When asked about the wording - in particular, that the 'initiative uses the power of design to give every child born in Scotland an equal start in life' (V&A Dundee 2016b) - Jarvie acknowledged that with hindsight it 'was perhaps too strong' given that the baby box is 'just a box... there is a limit to that power' (Jarvie 2023). However, he thought that since the project was directed at pre-qualified designers, and had to excite them, the brief was 'pitched about right' (ibid.).

At the competition launch Jarvie and the other judges outlined the ambition underpinning the initiative to the assembled media. Minister for Childcare and Early Years Mark McDonald claimed the box had a 'proven track record in tackling deprivation, improving health and supporting parents' (Scottish Government 2016; V&A Dundee 2016a). V&A Dundee Director Philip Long echoed McDonald's remarks and described the initiative as recognizing 'the essential role good design has in helping everybody's lives from the very beginning' (ibid). Jarvie praised the box's potential to effect 'transformative change on people's lives', and he noted the importance of the project as providing an 'opportunity to creatively shape something that may very well be the first designed object in which a child comes into contact' (Jarvie 2019). And womenswear designer Holly Fulton added: 'I love the fact Scotland is becoming a design-led country, beginning to look seriously at the way in which design can be used to improve lives, as opposed to it being perceived as a discipline that purely focuses on aesthetic [sic]' (Scottish Government 2016).

The winner of that competition was Leanne Young, a graphic designer studying at Edinburgh Napier University. Young's winning design – see figure 4 - was selected out of seventy entries to the competition, and made use of typical motifs associated with Scotland, including unicorns, castles, thistles and the ubiquitous Loch Ness Monster. According to Young, 'Scotland has a rich heritage of many myths and legends that can provide a narrative for young families to explore storytelling' (Young 2019). Young's design also considered its eventual users: 'I wanted the box to be accessible to as many families as possible and decided to design it as an outline without colour as this would not only cut printing costs, but also provide families with an opportunity to colour in the box and really make it their own'. Young's winning design was, according to Jarvie 'conceptually clever, distinctively Scottish and pragmatic from the point of view of printing cost' (Jarvie 2019). It was also 'measurably better than others submitted' (Jarvie 2023).

It is telling that at this point, insofar as it was understood and treated at the competition, design was only considered in terms of the print on the outside of the box and not the items inside. Yet the language surrounding the initiative, as well as the judges' comments, suggest that the contents of the box (and the recommended use of the box as a bed) were just as important to realise the ambitions of the scheme – if not more so. Many of the decisions on what to include and exclude in the box were political. They were informed by three pieces of research commissioned by the Scottish Government during the development and early implementation stage, conducted between late 2016 and early 2017 (APS 2018: 4). One of these was a three-month trial of the box in two local authority areas - Orkney and Clackmannanshire (APS 2017b: 2). This helped the Scottish Government obtain detailed information from families and health professionals about their views on the registration and delivery of the box, their use of the box and its contents, as well as their understanding about the initiative's concept and aims. The feedback from this research broadly welcomed items that are also present in the Finnish baby box, such as clothing for the baby, bath and ear thermometers, playmat, books, muslin cloths and blankets. However, many participants were also conscious that the box and its contents reflected values about what constituted good types of behaviour, particularly in promoting safe sleeping practices, environmental awareness and breastfeeding. As one respondent noted, 'by only including reusable nappies rather than disposables (or "normal" nappies) the Baby Box, as with the absence of bottles, could be interpreted as being designed by people who do not fully understand the reality of being a parent' (APS 2017a: 3). While some changes were made to the box's contents following this research – for instance, a voucher for reusable nappies was included instead (APS 2017b: iii) - nonetheless, it is clear from the outset of the scheme, that the real political work was not achieved through the decoration on the outside of the cardboard box. So where did these ideas about social justice and the power of design come from, and what evidence is there to support the judges' claim that the baby box design has a 'proven track record in tackling deprivation'?

Finnish origins of the baby box policy

The ideas, ambitions, contents and form of the Scottish baby box borrow heavily from its Finnish model. The concept of a care package for new mothers and infants originated during the early 20th Century when many of Finland's citizens lived in poverty, standards of living were low and there were frequent outbreaks of tuberculosis and other epidemics. According to Anita Haataja and Karoliina Koskenvuo, senior researchers at Kansaneläkelaitos (Kela) - Finland's Social Insurance Institution which has administered and distributed Maternity Grants since 1994 - particular concerns were expressed about high infant mortality and declining birth rates, and among the poorest families, clean children's clothes and bed linens were scarce (Haataja and Koskenvuo 2017; Näsi and

Koskenvuo 2022). Charities tried to alleviate the worst of the suffering by providing new mothers with baskets, known as *kiertokori*, containing basic necessities for their babies. An exhibition produced by the Helsinki University Museum and Kela on the history of the Baby Box between 2017 and 2018 explained to visitors that when the mother no longer needed the basket, the contents would be washed and the basket would be passed on to another new mother in need (Kujala 2017a). Faced with these growing concerns and piecemeal remedies, the Finnish government enacted the Maternity Grants Act in 1937 and the following year, the first official *äitiyspakkaus*, or maternity package, was distributed by the state – see figure 5. Provided by the National Board of Social Welfare and the Government Purchasing Centre, the Maternity Package was a state instrument to replace the baskets previously provided by these innovative volunteers (Näsi and Koskenvuo 2022). (2)

Reclassified as a universal benefit for all mothers resident in Finland in 1949, the maternity package was specifically intended to encourage participation in the healthcare system, particularly pre-natal care (Smirnova 2018). According to Haataja and Koskenvuo at Kela, the success of the scheme was immediate. Encouraging good parenting and better hygiene practices has remained a fundamental element of the policy, which is expressed through the design and contents of the box (Kujala 2017a). From the beginning of the initiative families have been encouraged to use the maternity package itself as a cot, since some households could not guarantee a clean, safe place for the baby to sleep, and co-sleeping was discouraged (Lee 2013). Recent research shows that over a third of Finnish recipients continue to use the maternity package as a bed for their babies (Smirnova 2018).

According to Annika Saarikko, Finland's former Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services, the maternity package is the jewel in the crown of the Finnish welfare society, and a reminder that Finland 'is a very good country for children and families. It is a sign that we have a social safety net and a society that cares for its members' (Saarikko in Kujala 2017b). Used alongside pre-natal care, the box is sent to 35,000 recipients every year, and 95% of all first-time mothers choose the maternity package instead of a one-off cash payment from the state (Haataja and Koskenvuo 2017; Scottish Government. 2018b). Indeed, in correspondence published by the Scottish Government, a Kela staff member admitted that 'no politician has questioned the value of the baby box and there have been no proposals to abolish it (which would be more or less a political suicide for anyone)' (Scottish Government 2018b). The scheme is positioned in Finland as a leveller, in which all babies – rich or poor – receive the same box and wear the same clothes. One recipient described it as like 'Christmas for becoming mothers'. Another explained that, since this was her first child, the inclusion of so many different things she did not yet know she needed left her with a 'nice feeling that somebody thinks for us' (Smirnova 2018).

For Kela to acknowledge that abandoning the scheme would be considered political suicide indicates not just the trust that Finns place in their government, but also a recognition that material artefacts play an important role in communicating government policy and promoting social cohesion and equality. Interestingly, while the baby box was not originally considered a design object and is mostly absent from design histories of Finland – notably *Finnish Design* by Pekka Korvenmaa – recent versions of the box have highlighted its design qualities and capitalize on the country's design contributions (and therefore export value). According to Näsi and Koskenvuo, the box is part of Finland's brand identity. The scheme itself has recently celebrated its 80-year anniversary, and baby boxes have been promoted on an international stage through a number of high profile exhibitions. (3) As a consequence, knowledge of the scheme has spread and today several countries worldwide have implemented their own variations. Unlike in Finland, where the Maternity Package is a state-led social benefit, many international schemes

finance their programmes using a combination of public and private funds, often working with private firms such as the Baby Box Company, Finnish Baby Box, My First Baby Box Ltd, and Finnbin. These companies provide consumers with the opportunity to purchase a box, some with standard, deluxe and super deluxe options (Baby Box Company 2019). That a Finnish initiative has moved from social benefit to a global consumer product – albeit appropriated by private bodies for their own financial gain rather than sold or exported by the Finnish state – suggests that even state expressions of social equality can be refined and commodified in the global marketplace.

Design as a ‘leveller’

Positioning the baby box as a leveller is a powerful claim, both in Finland and in Scotland. When understood in the broader context of Finland – a country that now has high levels of equality within the education and welfare system, between the sexes, with very low levels of child poverty and infant mortality, and even consistently ranked as the happiest place to live on the planet since 2017 – the claims made about the baby box appear reasonably qualified (Helliwell 2024: 5). Nordic and Scandinavian countries have comparatively high levels of social service provision, often linked to the principle of universalism – a multi-dimensional concept that refers to the availability of benefits and services to all citizens (Sipilä et al. 2009: 182). Such countries are broadly understood as valuing equality and social responsibility, which is reflected in their social, political and economic policies. While the tropes of social responsibility within Scandinavian design may be carefully constructed (Fallan 2012: 4), nonetheless the positive outcomes occurring from the Finnish baby box cannot be understood in isolation. The social, economic and political context surrounding the box is vital to understanding its success in Finland.

By contrast, according to evidence published in 2018 using the Gini coefficient – one of the most common methods of measuring inequality across different countries – Scotland is a deeply *unequal* society (Pryce and Zhang 2018). While both countries are located in northern Europe, have similar population sizes and a harsh climate; there the comparisons end. Their histories, geography, demography, the organization of their societies, economies, cultural composition and political landscape, are very different. Scotland may be a relatively high income country, but recent data on poverty and income inequality in Scotland estimates that 24% of children are living in relative poverty after meeting housing costs (Scottish Government National Statistics 2023). In Glasgow, Scotland’s biggest city, that figure rises to 29% (ibid). While there is no evidence that Scotland is currently understood to be in the same state that Finland was in 1938, nonetheless the figures are disturbing. Therefore can a policy that is successful in one country merely be imported to another?

If the baby boxes are compared in isolation, then they are in fact relatively similar. Both the Finnish and the Scottish baby boxes contain many of the same items – such as infant clothing, personal care items, toys and books. Gender neutral clothing is standard across both schemes. Similarly, both boxes promote breastfeeding by including breast pads, and condoms to remind new parents of the need for contraception and protection against sexually transmitted infections. Where the contents differ tends to be due to climate – snowsuits and insulated mittens are more needed in Finland than in Scotland – and expectations surrounding access to culture and literacy. The Scottish baby box includes three books, a poem and a music app to download, while the Finnish box only includes one book (Parent Club 2024; Kela 2024). However, it is also possible to compare the organisation of the scheme. In Finland, the baby box was specifically intended to encourage participation in the healthcare system. The Scottish box has replicated that approach, in that to be eligible for the box, pregnant mothers must be registered with a

midwife and living permanently in Scotland. In order to receive the box, the mother must complete a baby box registration card with their midwife at the 18-20 or 28 week appointment (Parent club 2024). According to Alan Sinclair, former Senior Director for Skills at Scottish Enterprise, in the Finnish system there are rights and responsibilities: 'The box itself has a novelty value. But the substantive bit is how you use it to capitalize on "the golden moment" – the point in a pregnancy where women are desperate to make a change in their lives' (Sinclair quoted in Garavelli 2017). In Scotland a range of state-led maternity healthcare services are provided for free by the National Health Service (NHS), alongside other systems of support for parents and infants in the months following the birth (NHS Inform 2024). Yet is the baby box - together with maternity and early years healthcare provision - sufficient to address poverty in Scotland?

Arguably, where the Scottish system fails to ensure a fair start for all children – and where the baby box as a leveller rings somewhat hollow – is through the lack of consistent support after the birth of a child, poor maternity and paternity pay and the exorbitant cost of childcare that prevents parents from returning to work and out of poverty (Poverty and Inequality Commission 2019). Seen in this light, the box can be considered to have a 'novelty value', since without fundamentally addressing the political and economic systems that negatively affect families, there is a risk that the baby box acts as a stand-in for meaningful support. So why did the SNP decide to adopt the baby box as a cornerstone of their policy framework, and where does design figure in the process?

The design politics of the baby box

In 1989 Frederique Huygen observed that government institutions in Britain seemed only open to 'design' as an image-builder (Huygen 1989: 175), and certainly in a Scottish context, one explanation for the baby box's adoption is because it presents the right image. Aligning Scotland with a country like Finland has several advantages, not least in terms of cultural capital. The baby box embodies a strong cultural image of what Scotland's ruling political party wishes to project. While the graphic design of the box may be superficially Scottish, the policy is a deliberate political effort to align Scotland with Nordic and Scandinavian countries, which have levels of equality and social solidarity that some actors in Scotland would like to emulate. The baby box is a carefully constructed reference to those aspirations and alliances (Scottish Government 2017b; Jack 2021). Early research conducted for the Scottish Government acknowledged the inspirational aspect to the scheme, and encouraged 'tapping into the potential "halo effect" from Scandinavia' (APS 2017a: 4). Curiously, the fact that Finland is not technically considered part of the Scandinavian archipelago is overlooked; after all, vague references can be politically helpful sometimes.

There is also political capital embodied in the box as a state intervention to 'level up' and help the poorest in society. This can be understood against a backdrop of Scottish political history, and the complex constitutional arrangement of the United Kingdom. Fractures in the union have intensified in recent years, and since 2007 the SNP has been Scotland's largest political party with the greatest political representation. Besides the party's primary agenda, namely the goal of Scottish independence, the SNP has regularly sought to persuade voters that its civic nationalist approach rests on the values of social justice, enterprise and democracy, rather than the historically grounded and identity-based narratives from other ethnic nationalist discourses that have resurged across Europe (Keating 2009; Mooney and Scott 2016; Manley 2022; Mycock 2012). Rather than ethnic belonging then, equality, fairness and prosperity for all are the party's routinely stated social goals. Investing in childhood and introducing levelling-up policies like the baby box have been a means to achieve these goals and make a better society, or what Gerry

Mooney and Gill Scott describe as 'for want of a better term, a "kinder" place' (Mooney and Scott 2016: 242).

The baby box, as a design artefact targeting mothers and infants, further strengthens this narrative of Scotland as a kinder place, partly because of a dominant SNP myth around what are said to be inherently Scottish values. According to Cairney and McGarvey, 'from 1979, notions of social democracy, egalitarianism and being collectivist in outlook were invoked as Scottish traits that were opposite to the dominant ideology of the then Thatcher Government' (Cairney and McGarvey 2013: 31). Perhaps as a consequence, there is a long line of myths that feature in accounts of Scottish society, in which Scotland is somehow better than the rest of the UK, with a different set of priorities, debates and policies (Mooney and Scott 2005: 2-5). While these notions have been contested, there remains a perception that the central UK government in London - and the Conservative and Unionist Party in particular - remains committed to dismantling the post-war welfare state, while Scotland - and the SNP in particular - remains committed to reinforcing it, insofar as its devolved (and monetary) powers allow. For instance, in direct contrast with England, the Scottish Government has kept access to university education free of tuition fees for Scottish domiciled and EU students, and everyone living in Scotland is entitled to free NHS prescriptions. It may be the case that both political parties - and some would argue, England and Scotland - have different conceptions of what the frontiers of government ought to be. However, as Cairney and McGarvey observe, the ideology of the welfare state and state intervention are British creations and cannot be divorced from one part of the union to another (Cairney and McGarvey 2013: 32).

Design represents an important means by which these cultural and political values are expressed. Besides its cardboard construction - which as Davide Turrini notes, has a frugality which aligns well with democratic (and thus symbolic) goals (Turrini 2017) - the design of the baby box is used to express these allegedly Scottish traits. Following Young's original design for the outside of the box, a new competition was launched to coincide with Scotland's Year of Young People in 2018. The winning baby box entry was designed by school pupils, and like Young's original design, it represent visual elements and ciphers associated with Scotland, and marks significant moments in Scottish history - see figure 7. Both designs for the Scottish baby box can therefore be understood as reproducing images that serve ideological ends since they directly reference and represent populist conversations about national identity. In Finland, the design is updated every year and is always themed around nature. Both schemes therefore embody 'symbolic representations of place and nationhood' (Reid and Swan 2018: 5). It may be parochial, but there is political capital in these designs. The outer design of the boxes means that, even if unintentionally, they reproduce Michael Billig's description of 'banal nationalism' since 'the world of nations is the everyday world, the familiar terrain of contemporary times' (Billig 1995: 6).

Recent literature on design and national identity and national histories indicates this is a growing issue within design scholarship (Lees-Maffei and Fallan 2016; Andersson and Smith 2021; Godard and Plesske 2023). Everyday designed objects like the baby box are tangible things that help us express and experience the nuances of national identity. As Tim Edensor noted, 'by their physical presence in the world, and in specific times and places, things sustain identity by constituting part of a matrix of relational cultural elements including practices, representations, and spaces' (Edensor 2002: 103). While the design of Scotland's baby box is not necessarily intended to recreate a feeling of patriotism among families - or what Benedict Anderson calls a 'deep, horizontal comradeship' (Anderson 1983: 7) - the baby box does nonetheless rely on an established and codified expression of nationhood. The imagery of tourist scenes of Scotland and the inclusion of a poem written in Scots dialect, point towards an assertion of national

identity, which when brought to the public by the SNP, underline the links between government design and national[ist] identities. As Javier Gimeno-Martínez states, design plays a role in top-down processes of nation building (Gimeno-Martínez 2012: 2) Passports and the imagery contained within them achieve a similar effect (Keshavarz 2015).

A box full of nudges

Yet while the Scottish baby box might appear to some as an example of nationalist propaganda (Carlaw 2017), its stated goals are fundamentally about addressing social injustice and unfairness. From the beginning of the scheme, the SNP has deliberately distributed the boxes as ‘gifts without conditions’ (APS 2017a: 7; APS 2021; Parent Club 2024). Much as the Finnish mother described the box as Christmas for becoming mothers, the gift aspect of the Scottish policy can be understood in the context of the SNP’s attachment to ‘progressive universalism’ as a way of fostering a communal bond. According to Mark McDonald, ‘universalism is important to create a cohesive society. Children don’t choose the circumstances they are born into’ (Garavelli 2017). Design is thus aligned with social justice and cohesion. Some have questioned the evidence that justifies universal provision as opposed to a more targeted approach (Poverty and Inequality Commission 2019: 13). Others have questioned the wording of the policy as a ‘free’ gift since it is largely paid for through taxation (Carlaw 2017). According to Freedom of Information requests, the baby box costs the government approximately £8.8 million per year, or approximately £160 each (Scottish Government 2021). Thus the baby box is neither ‘free’ and nor is it wholly gifted by the state. Despite the rhetoric of the Scottish Government, a private company APS Group (Scotland) manages the scheme on its behalf; taking responsibility for sourcing the contents of the box, storage, picking, packing and distribution (ibid). The outward benevolence of the baby box as a gift is underpinned by an increasingly common alignment between the state and the private sector, in which profit (alongside social justice) is the motivating factor. Yet when the state presents public services and entitlements as gifts, the responsibilities of the state appear to be informed by goodwill and generosity rather than social and economic necessity. This has a somewhat neo-liberal ring to it, in which the state itself is optional. Gift giving also implies an exchange, so what is being exchanged by the parent or infant in Scotland?

Arguably, the real exchange between government and parent concerns behaviour, and it is in this respect that the design politics of the baby box becomes particularly apparent. As already noted, access to the Scottish box (like its Finnish model) is dependent upon participation in the healthcare system, and the contents of the box have been deliberately selected to encourage healthy patterns of behaviour. Implicit within these design decisions however, is an acknowledgment that unhealthy patterns of behaviour are discouraged - namely bottle-feeding, co-sleeping and the use of disposable nappies. There is a fundamental power dynamic at play within public services and government healthcare (see Coveney 2010; Lupton 1995), which was not lost on early users of the baby box, as already noted. Designed artefacts like the baby box can be understood as material expressions of power, which inform the way people interact or behave (Floré and McAtee 2017: 4). In Britain the link between design and behaviour change has a long historical lineage (Herring 2016). This understanding of design has never quite disappeared, and one of the most well-known recent examples is the economic concept behind Nudge, in which paternalism was re-packaged as the science of ‘choice architecture’ (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). Nudge theory presented a scientific approach that justified hands-off governance, that would help people make the right choices for themselves rather than imposing decisions from above (Halpern 2016).

Sometimes described as a box full of nudges, the Scottish baby box reflects a continuation of this approach at a devolved level (Näsi and Koskenvuo 2022: 418). The Scottish Government has from the beginning claimed the box encourages safe sleeping practices, attachment and parent-child interaction (Scottish Government 2017a; Scottish Government 2018a/e). Yet what evidence is there that these nudges work? Many experts have argued that the government's claims about the box are overstated, particularly its safety benefits (ISPID 2018; Johnson 2018; Scottish Government 2022). Despite the government's claims about the box's proven track record in tackling deprivation, a Finnish spokesperson from Kela noted, 'good to hear you are evaluating your Baby Box. As you may know the Finnish one has never been evaluated' (Scottish Government 2018b), furthering the myth of evidence underpinning the power of design. Encouraging and supporting breastfeeding is a further public health 'nudge' designed into the baby box. Research evaluating breastfeeding rates in Scotland suggest that between 2021-22 65% of babies born in Scotland were breastfed for at least some time after their birth (Public Health Scotland 2022). Up-to-date Finnish data is difficult to obtain, and in any case, the variables between each country mean it is impossible to know for certain what effect the boxes have had (Laantera 2010). Certainly the latest parent survey in Scotland showed 100% satisfaction with the box and its contents (APS 2021). While these evaluations do not constitute an evidence-based measure of success, the ideals underpinning the baby box remain as valid as ever, and the policy is popular (Mackay 2019).

While nudges can be effective state-led instruments of change, the economist Mariana Mazzucato argues that the hand of the state can be active and visible, and it can push rather than just nudge (Mazzucato 2013: 209). The state and the public sector is an active compulsory force in our lives, but there is a global trend of anti-statism in political discourse, reflecting a lack of confidence in what governments and states can do. Despite the state support that was temporarily available in some countries during the early period of the Covid-19 pandemic, a pattern of government shrinkage continues. For Mazzucato, we must address this problem by changing the way we talk about the state and the 'images and ideas we use to describe its role in our lives' (ibid. 213). American authors Robert Caro and Michael Lewis echo Mazzucato, calling for greater understanding of what government does, what taxation pays for and the processes by which decisions are made (Caro 2017; Lewis 2018). This article has tried to achieve just that, through the lens of the baby box. For if design continues to be framed as able to transform people's lives for the better, then it is vital that the decisions that government makes in this regard, are critically examined and better understood.

Conclusion

The phrase 'levelling up' has enjoyed particular political currency in Britain since 2016 (Newman 2021). A whole department in Westminster is now devoted to the term, and there is even a Minister for Levelling Up (4). Yet inequality has been decades in the making and levelling up will require considerable cooperation between the devolved countries, not to mention increased funding and investment. So where does the baby box figure in this process?

As a policy that sets out to achieve the best possible outcomes for all Scotland's children, the baby box is difficult to dislike. The benefits of a state looking after parents and taking a role in their lives cannot be overstated, particularly in light of a recent report that the UK is a hostile place to have a child (The Observer 2023). While the baby box clearly serves the political purposes of the SNP, it also remains an undeniable help to many mothers and their families. But is the baby box enough to reduce levels of inequality in Scotland to the levels of Finland and other Nordic countries? In 2019 the Poverty and

Inequality Commission reported that ‘if the Scottish Government is to have any chance of tackling poverty effectively and meeting its statutory targets on child poverty, it will need to take sustained action and invest considerably more than current levels’ (Poverty and Inequality Commission 2019: 16). Yet when we are once again moving through a period of global economic and political uncertainty, when most governments are withdrawing services rather than introducing new ones, who has the appetite or the funds to meet that challenge? And how does design inform this process?

Tangible design artefacts have the advantage of being handled and used by people in their homes. A box that is meant to contain the body of an infant and provide the necessary items to care for that infant, is an emotional object and ‘full of meaning’ (Näsi and Koskenvuo 2022). Social justice is also a rather elusive term that can be filled with different meanings, some contradictory. And it is in this respect that a design politics analysis of the box is meaningful. While the power of design was emphasized at the scheme’s launch, it is noticeable that this phrase is absent from discussions of the baby box today. The evolution of the baby box would suggest that governments use terms like the ‘power of design’ to achieve social justice superficially rather than meaningfully. Design, for the Scottish Government at least and the baby box in particular, is appropriated for its political and cultural kudos rather than as a political force to transform people’s lives. A more pertinent question might be, what does the design of the baby box tell us about the power of government to transform people’s lives for the better today?

The baby box is an imperfect example of government design, which represents both an ambition to meaningfully address social injustice and inequality, and to foster a shared understanding of a society that values and supports all children, as well as the limits of that ambition when realized through the framework of the state (APS 2021). For the Scottish Government to adopt only one part of the Finnish scheme – the maternity package alone, which also happens to be the cheapest – fails to appreciate the holistic approach taken by the Finns, and suggests a lack of commitment to address unfairness in society. The baby box is one very visible articulation of government intervention, but there is something contradictory about the policy. By giving parents the box, it then lays the responsibility on the parent for poor outcomes, and fails to recognize the power of experts and the structural and systemic support that are necessary to fuel change. To ensure a fair start for all children, the government should address the political and economic systems that negatively affect families, such as the cost of childcare, housing and parental leave. The superficial treatment of design within the baby box scheme not only undermines design’s transformative potential, but also risks design being perceived as a substitute for meaningful support. Material artefacts like the baby box can be powerful and meaningful but only when they are part of a wider system of support.

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Notes

1 The Scotland Act 1998 provided for the establishment of a Scottish Parliament and Administration. The term Scottish Government has broadly replaced the correct term, Scottish Executive – which remains its official title.

2 Baby Box in this context should not be confused with hatches designed for abandoned babies.

3 Such exhibitions include ‘Century of the Child: Nordic Design for Children 1900 to Today’ (2015) ‘Baby in a Box’ in Helsinki (2017) and ‘Bringing up Baby’ in Edinburgh (2018).

4 The Rt Hon Michael Gove was appointed Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations on 25 October 2022.

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