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## **The 2011 Scottish Conservative Party Leadership Election: Dilemmas for Statewide Parties in Regional Contexts**

**Abstract:** The 2011 Scottish Conservative leadership election presented the party with two radically different visions for the future. The Scottish Conservatives rejected Murdo Fraser's plan to create a new independent Scottish party of the centre-right and elected Ruth Davidson, who promised to reform the party within the UK Conservative Party. The Conservatives' rejection of a radical break with the past suggests they will continue along a path of incremental change and supports an institutionalist analysis of party adaptation to devolution. This article explores why Davidson won and examines some of the implications for the Scottish and UK Conservative parties. The centre-periphery tension played out during the campaign is a dilemma for all territorial branches of statewide parties but poses especially difficult problems for the Conservatives because of the tension between unionist and centre-right agendas.

The territorial branches of statewide parties face an acute dilemma in deciding how far to accommodate regional demands for autonomy. There is a tension between their belief in maintaining the integrity of the state and their desire to be seen as champions for regional issues. This tension is played out not only in terms of policy and candidate selection, but also in terms of the structure of regional parties themselves (Hopkin, 2009; Thorlakson, 2009). Roller and Van Houten (2003) have summed up the challenges facing the regional branches of statewide parties as the 'regional/national dilemma'. In this regard the 2011 Scottish Conservative Party leadership election unexpectedly turned into one of the most interesting contests in post-devolution Scotland.

Having failed for years to unite around a coherent response to the challenge of devolution, the Scottish Conservatives were presented in September 2011 with two radically different visions for the future of their party. They could either remain a part of the UK Conservative Party or break away to form a new Scottish party of the centre-right under the leadership of Murdo Fraser. His plan generated interest from across the UK and set the agenda for most of the campaign. This article seeks to explain why in the end this plan was narrowly rejected, resulting in the relatively inexperienced Ruth Davidson winning the contest. In so doing it explores how the

‘regional/national dilemma’ came to the fore during the campaign and presents the Scottish Conservatives as an interesting case of a party wrestling with the challenges of being a statewide and regional actor.

It begins by sketching an analytical framework for viewing the behaviour of statewide parties in regional contexts. It then analyses the autonomy and organisational structure of the Scottish Conservative Party and its electoral and political context in 2011. An examination of the candidates and their platforms notes the deep split over the issue of the constitution: both of the party and the United Kingdom. Analysis of the campaign itself emphasises these tensions and notes how the constitutional question came to the fore in the absence of major policy differences or ideological splits. The closeness of the result and irreconcilable constitutional views suggest that this leadership election did not draw a line under fundamental debates about the future direction of the Scottish Conservative Party. This leadership election had the potential to be a ‘critical juncture’ in which radical change could have been adopted, but instead the Scottish Conservatives have opted to continue with the incremental institutional change which has characterised most UK parties’ adaptation to regional devolution (Fabre, 2008; Bratberg, 2009).

This case highlights wider problems of party management and identity for regional branch parties in dealing with the tension between regional identity and commitment to the central state. Does a more flexible and autonomous regional structure suggest a dilution of commitment to territorial integrity or does it represent a pragmatic approach to the challenges of multi-level politics?

### **Adapting to the regional/national dilemma**

The strategy and behaviour of the regional branches of statewide parties is the subject of increasing academic interest (Hopkin and Van Houten, 2009). Regional branches of statewide parties often have difficult choices to make when it comes to their policies and organisation in a multi-level context. They need to strike a balance between overall coherence and regional identity. The extent of their adaptation to the sub-national environment is affected by a number of factors.

Firstly, party strategy may be affected by the nature of party competition at the regional level. If a region has a strong sense of identity, this may affect the regional party system and play a part in determining how much it diverges from the statewide one. The presence of strong regionalist parties and a divergent sub-national party

system require parties to more explicitly consider issues of regional and party autonomy and identity, although it may not automatically lead to more autonomous regional parties (Roller and Van Houten, 2003: 5). However, where regional elections are more strongly affected by the statewide context this may also affect the strategy adopted. For instance, Fabre (2008: 325) finds that the Spanish statewide parties tend to organise all of their regional branches in the same manner, regardless of whether particular regions have strong nationalist identities and movements. In contrast, in the UK, where regional elections are not considered to have a great effect on the statewide political system, greater regional autonomy is more likely.

Secondly, parties' adaptation to regional distinctiveness may be influenced by the constitution of the state. Generally we might expect that regions with greater powers will have more autonomous branches of statewide parties. Swenden and Maddens (2009: 257) conclude that for the most part this is the case, but note that 'the effect of decentralisation does not play out uniformly across all statewide party organizations and may not manifest itself immediately.' The effect of regional power distribution will also depend on how a federal or quasi-federal state is organised (Deschouwer, 2003: 221-222; Thorlakson 2009: 158).

Thirdly, strategies of adaptation may be affected not only by practical considerations, but also by a party's history, ideology and internal dynamics (Panebianco, 1988; Hopkin and Bradbury, 2006). Institutional 'stickiness' and inertia often prevent parties from responding to new electoral arenas in an optimal way. What to a political scientist may appear to be a 'rational' response to new electoral circumstances may be ignored in favour of the status quo simply because internal change is too difficult (Hopkin, 2003: 228). Similarly, a party's ideological outlook may affect how it perceives the need to adapt to regional variations. Fabre (2008: 326) notes that the more centralised structures of the Partido Popular in Spain are a product of its history and views about devolution to the autonomous communities. Similarly, the unique history of the Scottish Conservative Party as the highly autonomous Scottish Unionist Party before 1965 has affected its present situation.

Finally, regional parties may be affected by being in government in one or more territorial levels (Hopkin 2003: 234). Being in opposition seems to make parties tend towards supporting more regional autonomy. Statewide parties may wish to use greater regional autonomy as a means to gain the support needed to return to power at national level. Whilst in opposition statewide parties may also be less concerned if

their regional branches decline to support statewide party policies (Roller and Van Houten, 2003: 8; Fabre, 2008: 325).

The eventual party strategy shaped by these factors is expressed through a party's attitude towards its regional organisation, autonomy and policy. Parties must decide how much autonomy to give their regional branches over issues like candidate selection, leadership selection, finance and policy-making (Laffin *et al.*, 2007: 90-92). This involves a delicate process of managing factions and interests to achieve a workable, and politically successful, relationship.

In terms of policy, the most important question is the constitution and attitudes towards further regional autonomy. The party's policy on this question may have to be decided as a result of negotiation between the regional and statewide party. However, policy on domestic issues is just as important. For instance, whilst a measure of policy-making autonomy over areas of regional competence is desirable for sub-national parties, statewide parties tend to be mindful of the potential party programme incoherence that can occur as a result. There is a tension between tailoring policies to suit local needs and party competition on the one hand, and maintaining a strong national party identity on the other (van Houten, 2009; Carty, 2004). Policy divergence poses awkward questions for the both the party's core and its regions.

In terms of organisational autonomy, statewide parties must decide how far to allow regional parties to select their own candidates and leader. The UK Labour Party's attempts to interfere in leadership selection in Wales are widely held to have been counter-productive (Hopkin and Bradbury 2006: 141). The statewide party must also decide upon appropriate funding arrangements. If the regional party is financially self sufficient, then we might expect it to have more of a say on other matters. If, however, it relies on the statewide party for funding, then we might expect that the statewide party will demand something in return and exert more influence over policy.

In terms of party organisation for regional branches of statewide parties, Roller and Van Houten (2003: 6) suggest four potential 'ideal type' approaches: firstly, breaking away completely from the statewide party to form a regional party; secondly, adopting decentralising reforms of the statewide party to cope with the regional challenge; thirdly, ploughing on with the existing structures despite regional devolution; or, fourthly, further centralising party structures to pursue a more coordinated approach to regionalist party competition. UK political parties have in the

main opted for the second approach and have decentralised their existing structures to mirror the devolved parts of the country.

However, Bratberg (2009) finds that the nature of this change in the UK does not follow strictly functional pressures. Rather it might better be explained by an institutionalist approach which emphasises the importance of party legacies, organisations and incremental change. Similarly, in her study of the UK and Spain, Fabre (2008: 326) notes that ‘parties and their leaders remain crucial actors in processes of party change and that parties do not simply react to environmental changes.’

For Bratberg (2009), the UK’s devolution reforms do not represent a ‘critical juncture’ which forces a substantial break with the past. However, he does suggest that more radical reform ‘is typically preconditioned by a window of opportunity which may open in the wake of electoral failure’ (Bratberg 2009: 77). The Scottish Conservatives’ consistently poor electoral performance had the potential to make the 2011 leadership election such a focus for a more substantial reform of party structures. In Murdo Fraser’s words, the party was ‘fed up of losing’ (Fraser, 2011).

### **Territorial organisation in the Conservative Party**

In 2011 the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party was a territorial branch of the statewide UK Conservative Party (Deschouwer, 2003: 220). However, until 1965 the Scottish Conservatives were a distinct political party, the Scottish Unionist Party, which had a link to the UK Conservative Party more akin to that between the statewide CDU and Bavarian CSU in Germany. The Scottish Unionist Party itself was a coalition of different groups. In local government, for instance, many Scottish Unionists stood as Progressives in the 1950s (Seawright, 2002: 80). At the 1955 general election, in which the Unionists won 50.1% of the vote in Scotland, many of its candidates stood as National Liberals.

At the beginning of 2011 the organisational structure of the Scottish Conservatives reflected the changes recommended in the report of the Strathclyde Commission (1998), chaired by Lord Strathclyde (now leader of the House of Lords). This united the professional and voluntary wings of the party under a single Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, and provided for the new post of leader of the group of Members of the Scottish Parliament. Links with the UK party were maintained through the deputy chairman (elected by Scottish members) sitting on the statewide

Conservative Party board. Existing structures were thus adjusted and further decentralised to cope with the new devolved governance arrangements.

Despite being formally a part of the UK Conservative Party, the Scottish Conservatives enjoy considerable autonomy. Firstly, in terms of elite recruitment, the party selects its own candidates and leader. Unlike in the territorial Labour Party there have been no major instances of the statewide party explicitly attempting to influence leadership selection (Hopkin, 2009: 186-187). From 1998 until 2011 the only decision on personnel in the gift of the UK party leader was the appointment of the Scottish Conservative Party Chairman. Under reforms adopted in 2011, the Chairman will be appointed by the Scottish leader in consultation with the UK leader. In practice this has not been a controversial appointment; nor is there any evidence it has been used by the UK party to influence Scottish party decisions.

Policies for devolved areas are formulated by the Scottish party without central interference. Where the Scottish Conservatives have taken a different policy position to their UK counterparts (for instance, over free personal care for the elderly in 2002) this has not tended to cause bitter arguments. As Fabre and Méndez-Lago (2009: 117) point out, much like the Partido Popular in Spain, the statewide Conservative Party ‘has not exerted the same degree of pressure on its regional branches, yet its regional branches have remained close to the party line.’ This may in part be explained by the fact that for most of the period of devolution the Conservatives were not in power in the UK or Scotland. Significant freedom to decide on candidate selection and policy also reflects the previously quasi-detached history of the Scottish Conservatives.

However, although the statewide Conservative Party has for the most part left the Scottish Conservatives to their own devices in terms of personnel and policy, the Scottish Party has come to rely heavily on financial support from London. This situation has changed since 2007 when the party in Scotland had enough money to finance itself (Bratberg, 2009: 70). In particular, Lord Laidlaw, a major funder of the party in Scotland, has withdrawn his support. The proposals of the Sanderson Commission (see below) can only be fully implemented with UK Conservative resources. The Commission concedes that ‘the UK Party will be required to meet all costs until the Scottish Conservatives achieve financial self-sufficiency’ (Sanderson, 2010: 40).

It is not yet clear how this financial dependence will affect other indicators of autonomy. However, it is not difficult to imagine circumstances where the UK Party could start to become frustrated if it is funding a Scottish branch which continues to struggle electorally and which may in future use its autonomy to support policies which place the UK party in an awkward position. In a situation of financial dependence there is the potential for subtle pressure to be applied behind the scenes. As Van Houten (2009: 149) suggests, the true extent of autonomy may only become apparent during moments of crisis. The statewide Conservative Party thus finds itself in the unhappy position of funding a territorial branch which neither contributes significantly to its aspiration of a majority in the statewide legislature (there is just one Scottish Conservative Member of the UK Parliament), nor acts as a major influence on territorial politics.

**Table 1** Indicators of autonomy for the Scottish Conservatives

	<b>2007</b>	<b>2011</b>
<b>Leadership selection</b>	Decentralised	Decentralised
<b>Candidate selection</b>	Decentralised	Decentralised
<b>Policy-making</b>	Decentralised	Decentralised
<b>Finance</b>	Decentralised	Reliant on statewide party

Following the disappointing results of the 2010 UK general election in which the Scottish Conservatives managed only to retain their one MP, a commission was established under the chairmanship of Lord Sanderson, a former Conservative minister and Scottish party chairman. It identified serious problems with the structure of the party and its final report recommended significant organisational changes, including for the first time the creation of the role of leader of the Scottish Conservative Party instead of simply leader of the group of MSPs.

The Sanderson Commission considered but ruled out a change of name or a change in the relationship with the UK Conservative Party. It noted that the Scottish Conservatives ‘obtain numerous benefits from being part of the UK party, including opportunity to access resources, training and expertise and for members to vote for the UK leader’ (Sanderson, 2010: 14). Therefore ‘given the Conservative commitment to Scotland remaining within the United Kingdom, it is both appropriate



and beneficial that there should be an integrated relationship between the Scottish Conservatives and the UK party' (Sanderson, 2010: 15).

A new Scottish Conservative Party constitution was drawn up to reflect Sanderson's conclusions and was adopted (with minor amendments relating to reviews for sitting candidates) at a special meeting of the party in Perth on 10 September 2011. The leadership election of 2011 took place under the new rules recommended by Sanderson (2010: 16). Thus leadership candidates need not have been MSPs. This move towards a more explicitly separate Scottish Conservative Party with its own leader reflects another incremental institutional change. The Conservatives were still in 2011 adapting to the devolution reforms of 1999.

### **Electoral context**

Since the high point of the 1950s the decline of the Conservatives in Scotland has been striking (Seawright, 1999). Its vote share has declined steadily and at the 1997 general election the Conservatives lost all of their seats in Scotland. At the 2010 general election, despite spending considerable sums of money on key target seats, the Conservatives returned only one MP to Westminster from Scotland. In elections to the Scottish Parliament, the Conservative vote has also been in decline since 1999. The Conservatives' regional list vote share in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election was 12.4%, down from 15.4% in 1999. This is the lowest share of the vote the Scottish Conservatives have received at a national parliamentary election. They have 15 MSPs, down from 18 in 1999.

This dismal performance has prompted unflattering comparisons with the Welsh Conservative Party. It, too, has had to deal with the Thatcher legacy and lost all of its seats in 1997 (Wyn Jones *et al.*, 2002). However, it has since rebounded. It returned 8 MPs to Westminster in 2010 and has had a steadily increasing vote share and number of AMs in the Welsh Assembly. Although it must be remembered that the Welsh and Scottish party systems are very different, the comparison with Wales poses awkward questions for the Scottish Conservatives.

**Table 2** Scottish and Welsh Conservatives' performance at Westminster elections

**Scottish Conservatives**

**Welsh Conservatives**

	<b>Number of MPs</b>	<b>% share of vote</b>	<b>Number of MPs</b>	<b>% share of vote</b>
<b>1992</b>	11	25.6	6	28.6
<b>1997</b>	0	17.5	0	19.6
<b>2001</b>	1	15.6	0	21
<b>2005</b>	1	15.8	3	21.4
<b>2010</b>	1	16.7	8	26.1

Sources: UK Parliament (1992); BBC News (1997; 2001; 2005; 2010)

**Table 3** Conservative performance at Scottish Parliament elections

	<b>% Regional vote</b>	<b>Regional seats</b>	<b>% Constituency vote</b>	<b>Constituency seats</b>	<b>Total seats</b>
<b>1999</b>	15.4	18	15.6	0	18
<b>2003</b>	15.5	15	16.6	3	18
<b>2007</b>	13.9	13	16.6	4	17
<b>2011</b>	12.4	12	13.9	3	15

Source: BBC News (1999; 2003; 2007; 2011)

The 2010 general election performance was particularly humiliating for the Conservatives in Scotland. The Party spent considerable sums of money targeting 11 key seats in Scotland. A high-profile new head of communications was recruited from Scottish Television to help with the campaign. Yet despite what they thought was an energetic and well-resourced effort, Conservative performance either stayed the same or, more worryingly, actually went into reverse. Indeed, in some of the top target seats in which the Conservatives spent a great deal of money, it did not seem to make any difference. David Cameron's final 24-hour road trip to key Conservative target seats included a visit to East Renfrewshire in Scotland, in which the sitting Labour MP actually increased his majority. It seemed that the more voters learned about the Scottish Conservative Party, the less they were inclined to vote for it. This was a sobering message for the party which could not easily be explained away.

The rejection of the Conservatives in Scotland in 2010 also highlighted deeper constitutional issues. A potentially awkward situation about the appointment of a Secretary of State for Scotland was only avoided due to the coalition with the Liberal Democrats. As in the 1990s some members of the party worried that the Scottish Conservative Party's failure to recover was running increasingly serious risks with the union it was seeking to preserve.

### **Political context**

In the 2007-2011 Scottish Parliament the Conservatives for the first time achieved some policy relevance by lending their support to the budgets of the minority SNP government. In return they received concessions from the government on police numbers and on a reduction in business rates. The party portrayed these as major achievements and they formed a significant part of its 2011 Scottish Parliament election campaign. A popular 'town centre regeneration fund' demanded by the Conservatives also generated some positive media interest and suggested some (limited) imaginative thinking about a new type of Scottish Conservatism beyond toughness on crime and tax cuts.

The Conservatives also played a useful role in setting the agenda for devolution under constrained public finances. In return for supporting the SNP's 2010 budget, they insisted on an independent review of future budget scenarios, taking into account the reduction in Scotland's block grant from Westminster. The subsequent report by Crawford Beveridge was welcomed by all parties in the Parliament and generated for a period a serious discussion of policies and priorities in light of the coming austerity (Independent Budget Review, 2010).

Nevertheless the overall political context for the Scottish Conservatives in 2011 was not favourable. Despite returning to government in Westminster, their performance in Scotland at both the 2010 general election and the 2011 Scottish Parliament election was deeply disappointing for the party. The electorate did not reward the Scottish Conservatives for the concessions they secured from the SNP minority government. The relentless decline of the Conservatives in Scotland seemed to be continuing. Against this background, Annabel Goldie announced her resignation

from the leadership in May 2011, triggering the Scottish Conservatives' first-ever leadership election<sup>1</sup>.

### **The candidates**

The campaign began with a low-key launch from Jackson Carlaw. Firmly rooted in the unionist right of the Party, he promised a more robustly unionist stance and distanced himself from both the Calman Commission and the approach taken towards the SNP under Annabel Goldie. Carlaw presented himself as 'experienced, assured and unionist' and promised to fight against 'separatists in all parties' (Carlaw, 2011).

However, it was Fraser's campaign launch the following week that captured the attention of the media and of Conservatives from across the UK. He boldly declared that 'there is no future for the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party in its current form' (Fraser, 2011). He proposed that the party be dissolved and reformed into a new Scottish party of the centre-right. This new entity would be entirely separate from the UK Conservative party but its MPs would take the Conservative whip at Westminster. Fraser insisted his idea attracted broad support, and he was able at his campaign launch to introduce businessmen who claimed they would donate to a new centre-right Scottish Party. Fraser received the backing of a (bare) majority of Tory MSPs<sup>2</sup> and of the party's only Member of the European Parliament, Struan Stevenson. The former Scottish Secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind also supported Fraser's proposal for a new party.

His idea had been widely floated before either he or the Sanderson Commission considered it. Seawright (2002: 80) suggested that reviving the 'Progressives' label which some Conservatives used in local government in the 1950s might be beneficial to the party. In 2007 *The Spectator* reported that the then UK Conservative Party Chairman, Francis Maude, and his team had been secretly drawing up plans for a 'velvet divorce' from the Scottish Conservatives, involving the creation of a new and separate party in Scotland (*The Spectator*, 2007, 7 April). This plan received the endorsement of the influential grassroots Conservative Home website (Conservative Home, 2007). However, nothing subsequently came of this and it was

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<sup>1</sup> The first leader of the Conservatives in the Scottish Parliament, David McLetchie, was elected in 1998 by an electoral college, not by the members of the Party. Annabel Goldie was elected unopposed in 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Smith MSP, David McLetchie MSP, Alex Fergusson MSP, Gavin Brown MSP, Jamie McGrigor MSP and Nanette Milne MSP, Alex Johnstone MSP.

unclear how serious the plans were or how far the party in Scotland had been consulted. Interestingly, after Fraser's announcement it also emerged that Nick Bourne, until 2011 the leader of the Conservatives in Wales, had briefly considered but rejected a change of name for the Welsh Conservative Party (Bourne, 2011). Welsh Conservative AM David Melding still supports this change (Melding, 2011). Nevertheless Fraser's intervention was the first time a senior Scottish party figure had discussed name change and separation publicly. Fraser was at pains to point out that his proposal merely returned the party to its original state before the 1965 reforms folded it more formally into the UK Conservative Party.

Ruth Davidson's campaign launch responded to Fraser's challenge. Davidson had entered the Scottish Parliament only two months previously. Described by the media as a lesbian who enjoys kick-boxing (see, for instance, *Holyrood Magazine*, 2011), she came to prominence as the Conservative candidate in the Glasgow North East by-election in 2009 and was widely perceived as being close to Cameron and his brand of Conservative modernisation and 'detoxification'. She spent the previous year running Annabel Goldie's office in the Scottish Parliament.

She declared her total opposition to Fraser's proposal which she felt was an unnecessary distraction from the real work at hand to rebuild the party from a grassroots level. Davidson's platform was based on a five-point plan to revitalise the party. This included a drive to attract new members and comprehensive party policy reviews (Davidson, 2011). Davidson was supported by two of the Scottish Conservatives' constituency MSPs, John Lamont and John Scott. She also had the support of former Scottish Secretary Lord Forsyth, who was highly critical of Fraser's plan.

Margaret Mitchell's unexpected entry into the race at the last moment added another strong unionist candidate. She announced that she was standing because none of the other candidates represented her views, particularly with regard to the Scotland Bill. Alone among the candidates she was totally opposed to the further powers for the Scottish Parliament proposed in the Scotland Bill. She called for a referendum in which she would campaign for a 'no' vote. Mitchell was also concerned that the party was looking inward when it should have been talking to ordinary voters.

Mitchell's last-minute campaign and her diffident public performances failed to set the race alight. She was not perceived as having a chance of winning. However, her candidacy did bring more sharply into focus the other candidates' views on the

constitution. Her total opposition to the Scotland Bill also represented a significant strand of unionist thinking within the Party.

**Table 4** The candidates and the constitution

<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Background</b>	<b>Constitutional view</b>
Murdo Fraser	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MSP since 2001</li> <li>• Shadow Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing</li> <li>• Deputy Leader since 2005</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporter of Scotland Bill and does not rule out future changes short of ‘full fiscal autonomy’</li> </ul>
Ruth Davidson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MSP since 2011</li> <li>• Candidate in Glasgow North East by-election, 2009</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scotland Bill and no further</li> </ul>
Jackson Carlaw	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MSP since 2007</li> <li>• Shadow Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (reluctantly) Scotland Bill and no further</li> </ul>
Margaret Mitchell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MSP since 2003</li> <li>• Convenor of Equal Opportunities Committee, 2007-2011</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Referendum on Scotland Bill in which she would campaign for a no vote.</li> </ul>

There were thus broadly two visions for the future of the party presented to Conservative members. They could continue with their present party and a new leader (presumably attempting to emulate the success of the Welsh Conservatives) or take a much more radical interpretation of the realities of devolution and try to form a new Scottish party of the centre-right. By electing Davidson, they have opted for the least radical of the two directions offered to them. Instead of opting for a radical break with the past, they have chosen to continue with the incremental change proposed by the Sanderson Commission.

## **The campaign**

Fraser's radical suggestion set the agenda for much of the campaign. The three other candidates were forced to define their plans in relation to rejecting his proposal to break away. Members had the chance to question the candidates at a series of hustings meetings across Scotland. A broad consensus emerged on the need to improve structures within the party and procedures for supporting, training and selecting candidates and the Sanderson proposals were universally endorsed. For Fraser, they were a good first step; for the rest of the candidates those reforms alongside a new leader were as far as the party needed to go in order to recover.

Fraser struggled to answer questions about what he would do if he won and then had his plan for a new party rejected by the special conference he planned to call. This was a strong line of attack for the other candidates. They also pointed out that the Scottish Conservative Party risked being engaged in internal wrangling during the 2012 local government elections and possibly at a future independence referendum. Both Davidson and Fraser found common ground on the idea of allowing the Church of Scotland to set up schools. However, in a moment which was perhaps symbolic of the public policy debate in Scotland and the Conservatives' place within it, the Church of Scotland appeared to reject the idea (*The Scotsman*, 2011, 20 September).

An influential Scottish Tory 'Party in the media' (Bale, 2010) does not exist to anything like the same extent as in England. Much of the support in the media for Fraser's plan elsewhere in the UK came from centre-right Scottish expats (for instance, Nelson, 2011). Conservative Home echoed its earlier support for a breakaway party (Montgomerie, 2011). Of Scotland's two quality daily newspapers, the centre-left *Herald* did not take a firm view. The more right-of-centre *Scotsman* was more sympathetic to the Fraser plan, but criticised him for not spelling out more clearly what a new party would entail (*The Scotsman*, 2011, 10 November). However, the Scottish edition of the *Daily Telegraph* was firmly opposed, describing Fraser's plan as 'suicidal for the Union' (*Daily Telegraph*, 2011, 4 September).

Allegations that the Scottish Party's central office was actively supporting Ruth Davidson caused acrimony and a lingering bitterness. The Party suspended its head of communications, Ramsay Jones, amid allegations that he was advising and helping the Davidson campaign, having attended a meeting at her home (*The Herald*, 2011, 6 October). Other candidates' campaign teams suspected that Central Office

had supplied Davidson's team with private Conservative member mailing lists. The Party was forced to reject calls from the other candidates for an independent inquiry into whether Central Office in Edinburgh was supporting Ruth Davidson (*The Scotsman*, 2011, 19 October). Jones was reinstated after Davidson's election.

Much of the debate also turned on the ability of the two frontrunners, Davidson and Fraser, to show that they had political and financial backing from significant figures associated with the party. When asked about the financial implications of a new Scottish Party, Fraser always insisted that it would be well funded. Potential new donors were introduced to members and the media at his campaign launch. However, one prominent donor, Jack Harvie, stood firmly behind Davidson and declared he would not fund a breakaway party. Such arguments among donors were a feature of the campaign and one prominent donor left as a result of Davidson's election.

Ultimately the choice for Conservative members concerned two central factors: constitution and personality. All of the candidates were understandably light on policy proposals and specific questions about public policy did not dominate the campaign. Moreover, unlike, for instance, the 2005 UK Conservative party leadership election, there was no obvious significant left-right split among the candidates (Denham and Dorey, 2006: 36). Rather, it was the question of the constitution, both of the Conservative Party and the United Kingdom, which split the candidates and caused the most heated arguments during the campaign. At one end of the spectrum, Fraser proposed complete separation from the UK Conservatives and was 'open minded' about further devolution to Scotland; at the other Mitchell wanted to maintain the link with the UK Conservatives and opposed even the Scotland Bill. Davidson and Carlaw both rejected the Fraser plan but viewed the Scotland Bill as a 'line in the sand'.

Thus in the absence of major ideological or policy differences beyond the constitutional split, issues of personality became more prominent. Who would most likely lead the Scottish Conservatives to electoral success? In this regard Davidson may have had an advantage as the 'counter-intuitive' candidate who associated herself publicly with Cameronism and the brand detoxification of the Conservatives.

## **The results**



The leadership election used the alternative vote system. The result was a close win for Ruth Davidson with Murdo Fraser behind. Carlaw and Mitchell did not come close to winning.

**Table 5** Leadership election results

**Total valid votes:** 5676                      **Turnout:** 63.4%

**Round 1**

<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Votes</b>
Ruth Davidson	2278 (40.1%)
Murdo Fraser	2096 (36.9%)
Jackson Carlaw	830 (14.6%)
Margaret Mitchell	472 (8.3%)

**Margaret Mitchell eliminated.**

**Round 2**

<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Votes</b>
Ruth Davidson	2469 (191 transferred from Margaret Mitchell)
Murdo Fraser	2180 (84 transferred from Margaret Mitchell)
Jackson Carlaw	980 (150 transferred from Margaret Mitchell)
Non transferable	47

**Jackson Carlaw eliminated.**

**Final Round**

<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Votes</b>
Ruth Davidson	2983 (514 transferred from Jackson Carlaw)
Murdo Fraser	2417 (237 transferred from Jackson Carlaw)
Non transferable	229

**Ruth Davidson wins.**

*Source:* Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party

It is apparent from the results that the majority of Carlaw and Mitchell's second preferences went to Davidson. Party members opposed to breaking away from the UK party used their other preferences to vote for candidates other than Fraser. This logic appears to have made it very hard for Fraser to win unless he won in the first round, or was sufficiently ahead of Davidson in the first round to counter-act the likely redistribution of second preferences.

Nevertheless Fraser's achievement in convincing so many members of the need for radical change is not insignificant. Fraser came within 200 votes of having the support from a majority of members to disband and reform the Scottish Conservative Party. The closeness of the result in this sense has wider future implications for the party.

Party elites were broadly happy with the way the leadership election was conducted. In particular, the clash of ideas contrasted favourably with the subsequent Scottish Labour Party leadership election which generated less interest. One leadership candidate reflected:

I think what was extremely interesting about it was that our leadership election received more coverage and, I think, thoughtful public interest than the subsequent Labour Party election did. I mean, our party produced four candidates who had a distinct message. Clearly, Murdo's particular view made the Conservative Party leadership election of national interest... So, yes, I think it was very good for us because I think it demonstrated to the wider public that actually there was a debate going on in the Scottish Conservative Party about its future and that it had candidates who were credible in a contest (interview with the author, 10/04/2012).

Similarly, commenting on debates about fiscal autonomy, another candidate noted that: 'There were, if you like, three different approaches put before the electorate, so it was well aired' (interview with the author, 28/03/2012). Excluding some concerns during the campaign about the neutrality of Central Office, the contest, hustings and results were in the main viewed favourably by party elites.

### **Implications for the Conservative Party**

Being a statewide party in a regional context presents everyday tactical and political tensions. A leadership contest in the wake of two disappointing elections and a

landslide victory for a nationalist party is likely to bring these tensions into sharp focus. For the Scottish Conservatives it provided a moment of flux in which very future of the party was openly discussed. This had the potential to be a 'critical juncture' in which the radical change of Murdo Fraser's plan could have been adopted. However, this proved to be a step too far for the party membership who opted instead to evolve incrementally under the changes proposed by the Sanderson Commission.

Davidson hinted at broad and sweeping changes but she has yet to articulate a radical plan to rejuvenate the party. One of her first moves as party leader was to appoint David Mundell, Scotland's only Tory MP, as interim chairman of the party. Since then, the 'line in the sand' she drew during the leadership election regarding the powers in the Scotland Bill appears to have become more flexible. She said that she agreed with the Prime Minister's statement that further powers for the Scottish Parliament could be considered after the independence referendum. This apparent shift in her position towards a new UK party line after an announcement from the UK party leader may signal the imposition of a statewide strategy for the forthcoming Scottish independence referendum.

In terms of the UK Conservative Party, David Cameron and his team must hope that this time the Scottish Conservatives have a strategy which will work. Winning a majority in 2015 without any increase in Tory seats in Scotland would put the Conservatives in a very awkward position. It is unclear how the relationship between London and Edinburgh will play out in this regard. However, given the continuing financial support from England which Sanderson (2011) notes will be required for some time to come, it is not certain that the statewide Conservative Party will continue with the mainly hands-off approach it has hitherto adopted towards Scotland. Can the statewide party leader continue to justify taking money from English associations and giving it to a regional branch which is failing to make progress? If the party's fortunes in Scotland continue to decline, then the temptation to intervene may become stronger. Some commentators have already attributed the shift in the Scottish Conservative Party's stance towards minimum alcohol pricing to pressure from the UK party (Monteith, 2012).

In general, the statewide Conservative party has not dealt well with territorial distinctiveness in the United Kingdom and has consistently been reactive when it comes to the constitution. The unique history of the Scottish Conservative Party has given it a high degree of autonomy across all areas. However, such freedom must now

be viewed alongside a lack of funds and consistently poor electoral performance. The embarrassing revelation in April 2012 that a Conservative Party treasurer had told an undercover reporter that the UK party was simply going through the motions in its commitment to unionism highlights a tension for the UK party (*Scotland on Sunday*, 2012, 1 April). The independence of Scotland would deny the Labour Party 41 seats in the UK Parliament; the Conservative Party has just one Scottish MP. Those UK Conservatives who wish to maintain the union but bristle at the cost and lack of progress must, like all statewide parties, weigh the risk of intervention further eroding the electorate's perception of the party's commitment to regional distinctiveness. The national/regional dilemma exists in the Conservative party at both levels.

### **The centre-right/unionist dilemma**

The Conservative Party faces the same challenges as any territorial branch of a statewide party in considering how far to adapt to the new circumstances without being seen to cede too much ground to the nationalists (Hopkin and Bradbury, 2006: 140). The Scottish Labour Party went through a similar process at the same time as the Conservatives, culminating in the report by Jim Murphy and Sarah Boyack whose recommendations were along the same lines as the Sanderson Commission (Scottish Labour Party, 2011).

However, the constitutional arguments within the Scottish Conservative Party run much deeper. A strong centre-right case can be made for supporting much greater devolution to the Scottish Parliament. Indeed, an influential right-wing think-tank in Scotland advocates a strong measure of fiscal autonomy, reaching a situation where Scotland raised most of the taxes it spends (see, for instance, Reform Scotland, 2011). In the Scottish Conservative Party, this thinking clashes with a deeply felt commitment to the Union which views every new power for the Scottish Parliament as a concession to the SNP. Moreover, as Lynch (2011: 11-12) notes, there are still sections of the party which would rather the Scottish Parliament did not exist. Such attitudes prompted Michael Russell (currently the SNP Government's Education Secretary) and Dennis MacLeod to observe that the 'Tories' problem is that their Unionist ideology is overcoming their free market common sense' (MacLeod and Russell, 2006: 130). These views are not fundamentally reconcilable and the closeness of the leadership election suggests this constitutional tension will continue into the future. The cloud that hangs over the leadership election in terms of the

allegations about the neutrality of Central Office in Edinburgh has not helped the Conservatives to heal divisions.

## **Conclusion**

In his recent study of the Dumfries and Galloway Conservative Association, Smith (2011) concludes that the post-devolution Scottish Tories have been burying themselves in ‘banal activism’ to avoid facing up to the deeper and more difficult questions about their future. At the very least the 2011 leadership election has allowed a reasonably frank and public airing of debates which were hitherto only conducted behind closed doors. Although the Scottish Tories have endured much disappointment and defeat, no senior Scottish Tory has until now taken the opportunity to spell out the challenges publicly. There has been no equivalent of Theresa May’s hard-hitting ‘nasty party’ conference speech; nor has there been evidence of a strong ‘Cameroon’ faction in Scotland promoting radical detoxification and modernisation. The post-devolution Conservatives have tended to avoid prolonged reflection on why they have performed so poorly. While the English and Welsh Conservatives have elected politicians who engage in public debates about the future of Conservatism (see, for instance, Evans, 2002; Vaizey *et al.*, 2005; Melding, 2009), such forward thinking has been conspicuously lacking in Scotland. The Scottish Conservatives have generally preferred to muddle through, regardless of election results and developments sparked by colleagues elsewhere in the UK.

However, having conducted a debate which many members and elites felt reflected well on the party, the Scottish Conservatives opted to continue along the path of adapting existing structures to better suit devolution and thereby presumably attributed their electoral problems to other factors. The ‘critical juncture’ created by two significant electoral embarrassments has not been used to engineer a radical break with the past. Instead the result of this leadership election appears to be an example of the continuation of what Bratberg (2009: 75) refers to as ‘late and incremental reform’. Conclusions about stability and gradual change in UK parties’ adaptation to devolution are therefore supported by the outcome of this election.

Unlike other post-devolution UK party leadership elections, this one had at its heart a clash of ideas about how to deal with being a statewide party in a regional context. The proposals the candidates put before the electorate mirrored two of the choices Roller and Van Houten (2003: 6) suggest face the branches of statewide

parties in deciding how structure regional branches: adaptation and separation. However, beyond that debate, this election highlighted fundamental philosophical divisions about the future of the party which are now out in the open as never before. For the Scottish Conservatives, the usual 'regional/national dilemma' faced by statewide parties is compounded by a clash between unionist and centre-right ideologies.

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