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**Citation for published version:**

Cameron, E 2013, 'The Political Histories of Modern Scotland', *Scottish Affairs*, vol. 85, no. 1, pp. 1-28.  
<https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2013.0040>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.3366/scot.2013.0040](https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2013.0040)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Scottish Affairs

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## THE POLITICAL HISTORIES OF MODERN SCOTLAND<sup>1</sup>

*Ewen A. Cameron*

The referendum on Scottish independence to be held in September 2014 presents the electors with a choice between two apparent absolutes: ‘independence’ and the ‘status quo’. In reality, however, the matter is not so simple. Neither of these options is on offer in quite the way that their advocates suggest. Indeed, both campaigns are engaged in efforts to convince the voters that their opponents’ case is much more extreme than it actually is (Hassan 2013, 26). More is known about what might happen if ‘Better Together’ achieves its aim but it will not be the *status quo ante*. The passage of the Scotland Act, 2012, means that the nature of devolution after the referendum will be strikingly different from that which has existed since 1999. This piece of legislation – which was debated at both Westminster and Holyrood – is based on the deliberations of the Calman Commission which sat in 2008 and 2009. The Act’s most important provision is to increase the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament for raising the money which it spends. The current dispensation, whereby the Parliament has extensive spending powers but very few tax-raising powers, is often held to be a serious flaw in the arrangements established by the Scotland Act, 1998. Currently, the Parliament raises only around 15 per cent of the money which it spends but the figure would rise to around 35 per cent

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised and expanded version of my inaugural lecture, delivered in May 2013. I am grateful to all who attended and asked questions and who have contributed to the development of this piece. Particular thanks to Tom Brown, John Gilmour, Alvin Jackson, Calum Aikman, John MacAskill and (for his trenchant views on ‘the Baroness’) Alan Dawson.

should the Act be implemented after a 'No' vote in the referendum (McLean et.al 2013, 48–69).

Should the outcome of the Referendum be a victory for the 'Yes' campaign, it will be the signal for the start of negotiations about the precise meaning of 'independence'. The divisions of the assets and liabilities of the United Kingdom will be a complex process and will involve decisions about oil revenues, the currency of an independent Scotland, the national debt, public sector pensions, defence and foreign affairs, membership of the European Union and other international organisations, and a host of other matters large and small. An interesting point, certainly a development since the debate over 'mere', devolution in the 1970s, is that there seems to be a consensus that independence can happen. This was the conclusion of a group which met under the auspices of the Ditchley Foundation (Gardham 2013). The climate of fear and negativity which pervaded the debate over the Scotland Act of 1978 seems to have dissolved to this extent: even 'Better Together' does not argue that independence cannot happen (Cameron 2010, 299–319). There have been some signs of the emergence of more substantial ideas about independence as the year 2013 has progressed. The interesting discussions around the progressive 'Commonweal' agenda, and its increasing interest to a range of activists, is encouraging (Budge 2013).

It is not the intention here to make predictions about the outcome of these negotiations if, indeed, they take place. The process will be challenging for the Scottish Government given the gulf in resources available to it compared to the UK government. The

objectives of the article are to review the ways in which historians have gone about the investigation of Scottish political history, the ways in which the practice of political history has changed over the past generation and to look at some of the different narratives of Scottish political history which are taken for granted and which inform the public debate on independence. The history of the Union over the past three centuries has been an evolving one (Devine 2006). The historians who have studied its operation have noted the ways and means by which different ideas of Scotland have remained alive within its arrangements and have used terms such as ‘semi-independence’ (Murdoch 1983), ‘unionist-nationalism’ (Morton 1999) and ‘Scottish autonomy’ (Paterson 1994) to convey this point. The notion of a ‘social union’ in a post-independence Scotland continues this theme of the malleability of the relationship between Scotland and England.

The referendum and the Scotland Act make this a moment of wide interest in Scottish politics. There has been a surge of publication (McLean et.al 2013; McCrone 2013; Scott 2012; Maxwell 2012; Hassan and Ilett 2011; Goudie 2013) as the possibilities and uncertainties generate speculation and argument in equal measure. Despite frequent repetition of the mantra that Scotland faces a ‘historic’ decision, it is striking that the debate – whether in print or hot air – has lacked much historical context. That is not very surprising; politicians live in the present, unlike historians. The current moment is a good time to think about Scottish political history in that there is a ready audience for discussion of its twists and turns. There is also a danger that the polarities of the debate will be projected back into the past and that the complexities, ambiguities and messiness

of Scottish politics will be elided as pro- and anti-independence campaigners seek historical justification for their points of view. Further, there is a risk that the political histories of Scotland will be interpreted in relation to the current debate about the Union in a way that distorts the fact that, with the exception of a small number of relatively short periods, this has not been a major issue in modern Scottish politics. The period since 1832, if that can be taken as the beginning of modern Scottish political history (Pentland 2008), has been characterised by a consensus in favour of the Union. That is not to say that there has not been discussion of how to make it work in Scotland's best interests; the debates on devolution in the 1970s and in the 1990s is evidence of this (Hutchison 2001). The current moment is no better a vantage point than many others and it might even be said that it has arisen through political circumstances leading to the surprising result of the Scottish election of 2011, rather than through a groundswell of opinion in favour of independence or even in favour of having a debate about independence. Another point of view is that ever since the establishment of the SNP as a political force in the 1960s, independence has been implicit in all discussion of Scottish politics. SNP advocacy of independence has meant that it is a potent and disturbing element in the compound of Scottish political debate. All discussion is characterised by the subtle – sometimes not so subtle – effect of the existence of a pro-independence party. Debate on a range of questions is affected by the idea that things could be better, or worse, in an independent Scotland. That is not to say, of course, that there would be no such thing as 'Scottish politics' without the SNP. There was a clearly identifiable Scottish politics prior to 1967, 1934 or 1928 – perhaps even an even more identifiable Scottish politics – as a later section of this article will discuss.

## **Renewing Political History**

Political history has undergone a recent revival. In the 1980s it was surrounded by gloom (Parry 1983, 469). The subject has been enlivened by what has come to be called 'the new political history' (Vernon 1993). This has broadened the way historians think about politics and elections (Lawrence 1998). Like all self consciously 'new' approaches it rests on a slight caricature of what went before. The new political historians have enjoined us not to use deterministic interpretations of political change based on social and economic evidence (Lawrence and Taylor 1997). They have encouraged us to extend our frame of reference beyond the private machinations of elite politicians accessed through their correspondence and to pay attention to a broader range of evidence, including the material culture of the political process (Nixon et. al. 2012). They have pointed out the value to be gained from an interest in the language used by politicians to communicate their ideas (Wahrman 1996; Black 2001; Fielding 2007). One does not have to accept everything about this approach to find it stimulating. Although later in this article attention will be directed outwards, to the political dimensions of Scotland's engagement with the Empire, this approach also helps us to understand local political cultures (Cameron 2000; Peters 2000). This is particularly valuable in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods when local newspapers were such an important means of communication with the voters. Those who could not vote but who participated in the

theatre of elections also contributed to outcomes and were very much part of the political process (O’Gorman 1992).

Investigate any locality in Scotland in the late Victorian period and evidence for the wider view of political history can be found. Occasionally, the riotousness that seemed to be at the heart of the political process was resented by those who felt that it introduced vulgarity to the proceedings. In 1868 the *Dunfermline Press* (31 Oct.) worried about ‘the rioting and turmoil; all the hatred anger and envy, all the unseemly scenes of intoxication and vice which generally attend a sharply contested election.’ In 1892 the staunchly Liberal *Dunfermline Journal* (9, 30 Jan.) was deeply worried by the corrosive effect of the polarised debate over Irish Home Rule and resented the likelihood of innovations such as the ‘political picnic, the fireworks and crackers, Punch and Judy shows and heaven knows what’ which would come in the wake of the establishment of a branch of the Primrose League, a Conservative organisation, in the town. The paper asserted that Liberals were attracted to the meetings by the prospect of effective oratory and did not have to be induced by the prospect of ‘fireworks or tea and cookies’.

### **Liberal Scotland**

The political cultures of small-town Scotland in the Victorian and Edwardian period are rich in their potential for understanding the key political history of the period before 1922 when Liberalism dominated Scottish politics. From 1832 until the outbreak of the Great War the Liberals won a majority of Scottish seats at every election except that of 1900, which was fought in the unusual conditions stimulated by the Boer War and was a



'defeat' from which the Liberals recovered in by-elections before the next general election in 1906 at which they returned to form. These victories were repeated in the two general elections of 1910 at which the Conservative recovery in England was nowhere to be seen in Scotland (Hutchison 1986, 33–58, 132–217). This was a phase of Scottish political history when the party structure was similar to that in England and Wales but it was clear that there was a Scottish politics: what was it based on? It was based, primarily, on the Liberal dominance of the Scottish political scene. This was virtually total and extended well beyond the ballot box. The institutions of Scottish public life in this period were dominated by the Liberals (Cameron 2010, 54–78). The Presbyterian churches – especially the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church – were solidly Liberal in their outlook. The leading figure of the Free Church, Principal Robert Rainy, went to enormous lengths to demonstrate that his family tree was linked to that of Gladstone (Simpson 1909, i, 4). The late Victorian period saw the Presbyterian churches developing progressive ideas about the development of society (Withrington 1977). The leading Presbyterian clergymen, such as James Begg and John Marshall Lang (father of a future Archbishop of Canterbury) wrote about the major social issues of the day – urban poverty, highland land reform, industrialisation and other questions (Begg 1873; Lang 1901).

Even more important than the churches was the role of the press in sustaining Liberal politics in nineteenth-century Scotland. Aside from the most prominent newspapers – *The Scotsman*, the *Glasgow Herald*, the *Aberdeen Free Press* – there were a host of local newspapers which advanced the cause of Liberalism. Often the editors of these titles were

important cultural figures. William McCombie and William Alexander were, successively, editors of the *Aberdeen Free Press* in the Victorian period (Fraser 2000). They both published a wide variety of local historical works as well as, in the case of Alexander, important novels, initially serialised in the *Free Press* (Donaldson 1986). The Conservatives recognised this as one of their principal weaknesses in Scotland. The newspapers which did have a Conservative editorial line – the *Scottish News*, the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* and the *Aberdeen Journal* – did not circulate so widely as their Liberal competitors, nor did they have the vitality of the Liberal press. During Disraeli's leadership the party attempted to take steps to improve their position in Scotland and their means of communicating with the electorate. This was done most obviously with the establishment of the *Northern Chronicle* (Cameron 2007). This was an extraordinarily vibrant, vituperative newspaper edited by a remarkable Victorian journalist called Duncan Campbell (Campbell 1910). No more excoriating attacks were made on Liberalism as a creed and on Gladstone as an individual than those which came from Campbell's pen. When he returned home from South Africa to take the editor's chair at the *Chronicle* he was an articulate, even fanatical, advocate of imperialism. He was not alone in articulating scorn for Gladstone's verbosity but his attacks on the Grand Old Man's imperial misadventures knew no boundaries and indicated the vacuous nature of Gladstone's oratory at Midlothian in 1879 and 1880. It was such feelings which created the market for Conservative chamber pots adorned with Gladstone's face (Matthew, plate 5c). Liberal dominance drove their opponents to fury.

The effect of the debate on Irish Home Rule, an important catalyst for stimulating discussion of *Scottish* home rule, had the contrary effect of eroding the Liberal domination of the Scottish press, even if it did not immediately threaten their domination of Scottish politics more generally. *The Scotsman*, under the distinguished editorship of Charles Cooper, came out in opposition to Gladstone's plans for Irish home rule. The *Glasgow Herald* moved in the same direction, as did some local newspapers (Cooper 1896).

The year 1886 was an important moment in the history of modern Scottish politics more generally – not only did it see the establishment of the Scottish Home Rule Association but it also introduced a new term to the lexicon of Scottish politics: unionism (Morton 2001). Until recently this was a neglected aspect of Scottish political history, despite the fact that it has been very successful (Kidd 2008). The Union which was at issue in the first instance was that with Ireland, rather than the older Anglo-Scottish union (Jackson 2012). The Liberal Unionists who voted against Irish Home Rule merged with the Conservative party in 1912 to form the body which was known from that date until 1965 as the Scottish Unionist Party (Burness 2003). The word 'Conservative' was absent from Scottish political nomenclature in the period of that party's greatest success north of the border, although the relationship is not necessarily causal (Seawright 1996).

Many of the principal issues relating to modern devolution were raised in the discussion over Irish home rule. For anyone immersed in that debate many of the current concerns are strikingly familiar. We are correct to recognise Tam Dalyell's contribution to the

debate in articulating the issue defined by Enoch Powell as the ‘West Lothian Question’ but the same issue was raised in 1886. At this point the worry was that by excluding Irish MPs from Westminster after the creation of a Dublin Parliament an additional danger to the cohesion of the union and Empire would be introduced. Further, the details of how to fund a devolved parliament and administration – whether by grant, by assignment of taxation minus a charge for Imperial contribution, or, thirdly, by devolution of powers of taxation – were fully considered by Gladstone. The biggest issue arising from devolution – how to accommodate a devolved parliament in a system based on parliamentary sovereignty – was rehearsed at length (Jackson 2004). This was the principal theme in the work of Albert Venn Dicey in a series of polemical works which enunciated deep veneration for the principle of parliamentary sovereignty and which inveighed against such weaknesses as home rule or federalism (Dicey 1886; Dicey and Rait 1920). The terms of the debate about devolution is one of the legacies from this period. The issue of sovereignty remains at the heart of the discussion of the different forms of enhanced devolution which might be considered in the aftermath of the referendum. The current form of devolution is based on the principle of the sovereignty of the Westminster parliament. At the other end of the spectrum are concepts of ‘devo-max’; these have not been well worked out but they are based on the creation of sovereign institutions in Scotland and a confederation with the United Kingdom (McLean et. al. 2013, 70–101). This discussion would have been well understood by Gladstone or Dicey.

## **Beyond Scotland**

One of the most significant recent developments in the writing of Scottish history has been the concerted effort to analyse it in an imperial and global context. This body of work has added great depth and sophistication to our understanding of the extent and pattern of Scottish emigration and the behaviour – mostly social and economic and military – of Scots abroad (Devine 2003, 2011; Fry 2001; MacKenzie 1998, 2007).

Despite recent advances this historiography does have a lineage longer and deeper than is sometimes apparent. (Hill Burton 1881; Dewar Gibb 1937; Notestein 1946; Donaldson 1966). The notion that ‘the Scots ... have offloaded all culpability for slavery and Empire onto the English’ has little substance (Alhibai-Brown 2013). The political dimensions of the ‘global turn’ in Scottish history, however, remain relatively unexplored. This is especially striking in comparison with studies of the global Irish community in which their contribution to the politics of Irish nationalism has been a central feature (Kenny 2006). There is, of course, a clear difference between Scottish and Irish nationalism, especially in the late nineteenth century. Although Scottish nationalists, such as they were in this period, made efforts to engage with the global community of Scots, especially in the USA, they were not very successful. Other manifestations of the international activities of Scottish nationalists included the bizarre effusions of Theodore Napier (Morton, 2012). More substantial were the attempts of highland land reformers, such as John Murdoch and Alexander MacKenzie, to take the grievances and demands of the crofters to the USA and Canada but an attempt to establish a Highland Land League of America came to little (Hunter 1975)

Imperial issues were central to Scottish politics from at least the middle of the nineteenth century. Liberal domination of Scottish politics was part of this process. The safety of Scottish seats attracted a wide range of leading politicians from Gladstone to Churchill – carpet baggers according to their critics – to Scottish seats (Harvie 1994, 82–90). This, in addition to the presence of leading Scots in the front rank, meant that Scottish politics were conducted under intense scrutiny and global issues were firmly on the agenda. The structure of the Scottish economy – with its heavy industry strongly geared towards exports, meant that international economic issues were also prominent. This was clear at the by-election in Dundee in 1908. Tomlinson (2010) has argued that Dundee, by virtue of the domination of the local economy by the jute industry, was very highly globalised and the local political culture reflected this. Churchill won the election with an aggressive appeal to Free Trade, despite the protectionist views of some of the leading figures in the jute industry and the concerns of his Labour opponent about conditions in the Calcutta mills that were becoming such significant competitors to Dundee. The debate over Free Trade and Protection – both of which (Howe 1997; Trentmann 2009) generated their own political cultures of publications, pressure groups, political meetings and even early political use of films – served to re-energise Liberalism in the aftermath of the Boer War. Although Joseph Chamberlain initiated his Tariff Reform Campaign – which he hoped would draw the Empire closer together through schemes of preference – in Greenock, he was soon trumped by leading Liberals. Asquith also began the Liberal fightback, which helped to reunite the party as the Unionists fractured over Tariff Reform, with speeches in Scotland (Asquith 1903; Chamberlain 1903).

The historiography of this question has emphasised the pro-imperial dimensions of Scottish political debate. This was fully reflected in the politics of empire that were played out in Scotland. The prominence of Scottish, or Scottish-based, Liberal imperialists such as Rosebery, Haldane, Asquith and Robert Munro-Ferguson, on the Liberal side, and Unionists such as John Buchan or Andrew Bonar Law (whose New Brunswick background provided him with a distinctive point of view on Tariff Reform) testify to this (Matthew 1973; Blake 1955).

Whilst not wishing to over-emphasise the importance of an anti-imperial strand, or even empire-reform, strand in Scottish politics it is worth extending the frame of reference a little to note some contrary voices. Despite the bravery of his ‘methods of barbarism’ speech at the height of the Boer War, and the opprobrium which was heaped on his head for delivering it, Henry Campbell Bannerman did not stand significantly outside the consensus on imperial policy (Wilson 1973, 349). It is certainly the case that Sir William Wedderburn, one of the founders of the Indian National Congress and biographer of Allan Octavian Hume, whom he described as the father of the Congress, was MP for Banffshire from 1893 to 1900. He also published widely in the journal of the Congress, *India* (Wedderburn 2002[1913]). A much more unambiguously anti-imperial figure was Gavin Brown Clark, the MP for Caithness from 1885 to 1900. He was one of the most radical figures to sit for a Scottish constituency in this period. His position became highly controversial during the Boer War when he was amongst the most vocal and visible of the ‘Pro-Boers’ and excoriated as unpatriotic (Cameron 2000, 205–15). Such were the extremity of his views on South Africa and other imperial questions that he was regarded

as a ‘bungler’ and an embarrassment to the cause by the very advanced *Edinburgh Evening News* (12 Oct. 1900). Clark’s position became even more difficult when British forces captured Bloemfontein and his correspondence with Paul Kruger was among the documents that they discovered (Davey 1978, 74–5). His advocacy of the cause of the Boer Republics pushed him further to the boundaries of political acceptability and he became the principal imperialist target at the general election of 1900. His opponent was Robert Leicester Harmsworth, brother of Lord Northcliffe, who threw all the considerable resources of his new tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mail* (see 3, 20, 21, 24, 26, 27 Sep. 1900), at Clark (Thompson 2000, 77–8). Caithness became the battleground in the debate about empire. Harmsworth, who charged around the narrow roads of the constituency in a powerful car, was triumphant (*Daily Mail* 12 Oct. 1900). Clark remained a notable figure in radical and Labour circles, including an appearance in the 1918 general election as a Labour candidate, until his death in 1930 (Johnston 1930). Thus, even in a very brief investigation of anti-imperialist strands in Scottish politics the evidence tends to point towards the power of the imperialist point of view. Perhaps Clark is an extreme example both in his own views and the intensity of the reaction which he induced from his opponents and the power of the forces which were arrayed against him.

The lives of the Scots abroad have been investigated thoroughly. We know a great deal about their social, economic, religious, botanical, engineering and administrative activities but surprisingly little has been written about political themes. While it is easy to construct a list of leading imperial politicians with Scottish connections – John A. MacDonald in Canada, Lachlan Macquarie in Australia, Peter Fraser in New Zealand – it



is possible to move beyond this elite. Historians of left-wing politics have made the biggest effort in this area. Sometimes this work, although often well-researched, descends into uncritical celebration of the export of a virtuous Scottish radical tradition (Kelly 2011). In more challenging works, however, it stimulates important questions about attitudes to society, race, industry and empire. The context in which this has been most fully developed is in the work of Jonathan Hyslop. In a book about the Scottish trade unionist, James Thompson Bain, and a series of articles about the context in which Bain operated, Hyslop has highlighted the extent to which Bain and his colleagues were, despite their radicalism, complicit in the defence of white labour rights based on racist attitudes to black workers (Hyslop 1999, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006). Bain was a troublesome individual: he was a member of the Scottish Land and Labour League – the name adopted by Edinburgh followers of William Morris’s Socialist League. He was a soldier in the British army and fought in South Africa in the late 1870s. During the Boer War he fought against British forces and was imprisoned. He later led a series of strikes in Johannesburg in 1913, for his part in which he was again imprisoned and then deported along with other leading trade unionists. The deportees were feted by the British Labour movement at a series of vast meetings across England and Scotland in 1914. Hyslop’s interpretation of the views of Bain and his colleagues has been criticised by Billy Kenefick (2010) who has argued that their views were broader and more racially inclusive than suggested by Hyslop. Although the weight of Hyslop’s evidence is compelling, Kenefick’s carefully argued piece helps to open up a series of very interesting questions about Scottish political culture in an imperial context that are ripe for further investigation.

Some of these questions can be followed up at the western edge of the Empire. In British Columbia issues of race and economic control were also present in the network of Scots who were active in the fishing industry in both the business side and in the trade unions. Periodically the provincial government attempted to organise assisted emigration schemes from Scotland in order to develop the industry. These plans had political objectives, as Mike Vance (2008) has reminded us in his important work on these topics. He points out that emigration schemes were ‘an attempt to undermine labour militancy in the industry’ and the government ‘hoped to replace militants in the industry with compliant workers ...’ (Vance 2008, 45). Scots were also involved in Communist activities to organise the fishermen and end segregation along ethnic and gender lines. Vance presents a different view to that of Hyslop and emphasises the role of Scots trade unionists in attempts to overcome racial prejudice and discrimination towards both native peoples and the Japanese, who had been such an important element in the west-coast fisheries since the late nineteenth century.

Scots also exported politics associated with the land question that raised questions about race and interactions with indigenous peoples. Given the shortage of land in Scotland and the power of the landowning class the vast open spaces of the Empire were particularly attractive to Scottish emigrants. The political implications of this process are particularly evident in New Zealand where the Minister for Lands in the Liberal governments of the late nineteenth century, John McKenzie, presented himself as a victim of the highland clearances. McKenzie drew on his experience of the pre-1886 insecurity of Scottish

crofters and sought to create forms of tenure based on virtually perpetual leases in New Zealand. He was successful in breaking up concentrations of landownership but at a considerable social cost. Although much of the land for the resettlement schemes came from private owners and from the Crown, substantial areas came from the 11 million acres still under Maori ownership. The Liberal government purchased vast territories for low prices. Tom Brooking points to the 'irony' of McKenzie presenting himself as a victim of the clearances while dispossessing the Maori from their land on a vast scale. McKenzie followed the Scottish debates on the land question. He was disappointed that Scottish land reform in the late Victorian and Edwardian period appeared to adopt nothing from the New Zealand example – particularly in the effective eradication of large-scale landownership through the 999-year lease (Brooking 1996, 272). Gaelic societies in New Zealand seemed to be more politically engaged with highland land grievances than those in other imperial locations. The Dunedin Gaelic Society supported the campaigns of the crofters and regretted the limited reforms of the 1880s. Money was sent from New Zealand to the highland land movement and for the relief of distress. There was also 'active promotion of emigration schemes ... as a possible solution to congestion in particular highland districts': a 'solution' which was, of course, intensely controversial in the Scottish highlands (Buelmann 2011, 186–97). The politics of the Scots in the empire raises a range of interesting questions, not least concerning the way in which so much Scottish activity in that context is nostalgic, imbued with romantic notions of the highlands and energetic in the realm of 'clan activities'. Stuart McIntyre has argued that 'image of the transgressive' Scot has been dissipated in this

process (Macintyre 1997). The work of Hyslop and the other scholars referenced here suggest that that image itself is far from clear.

### **Modern Narratives and Silences**

The end of the Liberal electoral domination can be dated to the election of 1922. In Glasgow such was the turnout that there was insufficient transport to bring all of the ballot boxes to the count. Carriages drawn by the black Belgian horses of funeral undertakers had to be pressed into service. The *Glasgow Herald* (16 Nov. 1922) remarked that the ‘superstitious might regard [this] as a bad omen’. This was correct and the Liberals were its victim. Despite signs of recovery in the later 1920s the funereal tone was evident again after the general election of 1935. The Liberals gained only 7 per cent of the vote and only three seats in Scotland; this amounted to a quarter of their best inter-war share of the vote – in 1923 when the Unionists attempted to play the protectionist card – and was far from the world of 1906. Sir Archibald Sinclair, the elegant and principled leader of the ‘Samuelite’, or independent, Liberal faction (and this factionalism was problematic) remarked: ‘Not only have we lost our trusted and influential leaders, but we could not make our free-trade case. Nobody would listen to it or think about it’ (Sinclair to James Scott 19 Nov. 1935). The decline of a once hegemonic party in Scotland continued in the early part of the post-war period. The problems are palpable from the records of the party. In December 1946 a thirty-seater coach was hired to take delegates from the east of Scotland to the meeting of the General Council of the party in Perth but the booking had to be cancelled as only eight seats were reserved! (Scottish Liberal Party, General Council, 7 Dec. 1946) The Liberal party was

kept alive by a small core of activists who demonstrated extraordinary commitment. Prominent among them were Lady Glen Coats, John MacCormick and John M. Bannerman. The latter, also famous for his exploits as a Rugby player in the 1920s and as a Gaelic singer, was a serial parliamentary candidate in Argyll, Inverness, Paisley and the Scottish Universities from 1945 to 1966 (Dyer 2003; Fowler 1972). The breakthrough made by Jo Grimond in Orkney and Shetland in 1950 gave the party a parliamentary foothold and some much needed visibility (McManus 2001, 77–82). Despite the indefatigable efforts of these figures, as well as those who achieved parliamentary success in the revival of the 1960s – David Steel and Russell Johnston proving the most enduring – both the Liberals and the SNP struggled against the two-party domination of Scottish politics in this period.

The 1920s also saw the ‘breakthrough’ of the Labour party with its strong performance in 1922 and in subsequent elections prior to difficulties in the early 1930s with the formation of the National Government and the disaffiliation of the Independent Labour Party before a recovery in 1935. This has been one of the very richest areas of Scottish historiography and it is not proposed to cover the ground again. In the context of the current debate about the Scottish constitutional question it is relevant, however, to note the very strong contribution of the Labour party to the politics of unionism in the post-1945 period. This is a subject which merits more investigation. The Labour leadership in London, especially in the most centralist period of the party’s history in the early post-war period, had no truck with nationalist ideas but expected the leading figures in the Scottish party to be sufficiently politically imaginative to deal with the threat of

nationalism. This was the context of the end of the cabinet career of Arthur Woodburn in 1951 and his replacement as Secretary of State for Scotland by the more subtle Hector MacNeil. (Woodburn) In the 1960s and 1970s Willie Ross had a closer relationship with Harold Wilson but it was probably not until the 1980s that the idea of Scottish devolution was seen as a form of positive politics by the Labour movement in the widest sense. Figures like Tam Dalyell and Brian Wilson remained opposed but there was a significant shift in tone during the Thatcher period (Dalyell 1977). That shift could not have taken place had there not been another tradition in the party which was more positive to Scottish home rule. This can be traced back to the short-lived Scottish Labour Party (a label that was revived by the pro-devolution MPs Jim Sillars and John Robertson who split from Labour in 1976) of the late 1880s and can be followed through some of the leading figures in the ILP in the 1920s but for much of the party's history before the 1980s those, such as Donald Dewar or John P. Mackintosh, with a strong interest in this topic stood out as unusual (Keating and Blieman 1979; Walker 2012). An important context for this position was the increasingly hostile political combat between Labour and the SNP from the late 1960s.

The period from 1945 to the late 1960s is under-researched, it does not fit the narratives that have emerged to explain Scottish political development (Harvie 2000). It is also a period in which divergence between Scottish and wider UK electoral patterns was low (Cameron 2010, 321). It is well known that the Unionist party gained a majority of seats and votes at the general election of 1955 but at elections of this period the two main parties often gained more than 95 per cent of the vote. This was partly a result of the

inability of the Liberals or the SNP to put up candidates (Cameron 263–88). While the theme of post-war political consensus has been subject of reappraisal at the UK level this has not figured so strongly in writing on Scottish politics (Toye 2013). Elements of a shared view can be detected. There was little appetite for reform of the Union until the SNP achieved better election results from the late 1960s. Both parties were centralist in their outlook on economic policy and the role of the state. There are problems with any overall narrative that points towards devolution and independence. Not the least of these is the history of Unionism and unionism in modern Scottish political history. Until quite recently this was a huge gap in our understanding and despite recent work by Colin Kidd (2008) and Alvin Jackson (2012) there is still much to do, particularly in terms of exploration of the period from the end of the Second World War to the mid 1960s.

The growth of parliamentary devolution as an outgrowth of administrative devolution is another potential starting point for a narrative of Scottish political history (Mitchell 2003). The appointment of the first Secretary for Scotland in 1885 was a bipartisan attempt to settle the demands for better treatment of Scotland within the Union that had been voiced intermittently since the 1850s. The early Scottish Secretaries had a difficult job: they lacked standing in government and they certainly lacked resources (Hanham 1965). Lord Salisbury was famously deprecating when trying to entice the duke of Richmond and Gordon to take up the post in 1885. Despite the earnest work of the marquis of Lothian or Lord Balfour of Burleigh, the record of achievement was not significant (Cameron 1996, 62–123). Part of the problem was that so much of the day-to-day work of Scottish administration was carried out by autonomous agencies that were

appointed by patronage: the Local Government Board, the Congested Districts Board, the Board of Control, the Board of Agriculture for Scotland, the Board of Health for Scotland. It was not until the inter-war period that these boards were brought into the structure overseen by the Secretary (of State, from 1926) and eventually as part of the Scottish Office, now comprised of departments entitled, Education, Health, Home, and Agriculture. The drive towards greater administrative devolution following the Gilmour Report of 1936 was part of a process of the reform of Scottish government in a period when UK governments were conscious of, although not particularly threatened by, the appearance of organised nationalist parties on the Scottish political scene (Mitchell 1989). In addition, the Scottish Office began to acquire a greater physical presence in Edinburgh, especially with the opening of St Andrews House, a controversial addition to the Edinburgh skyline, in 1939. Although the Scottish Office is staffed by civil servants who are part of the UK Civil Service it has developed a 'Scottish' identity (Cameron 2008). Many of its senior officials have been Scottish and educated at Scottish Universities (Hutchison 1996; Parry 1999). The existence of the Scottish Office, especially at times of stress in the union arrangements, prior to 1999, drew attention to the absence of a Parliament to scrutinise a department whose size and range of function grew steadily in the post-war period. A Scottish Development Department was added in a reorganisation in 1962 and a Scottish Economic Planning Department a decade later, for example (Levitt 1996; Phillips 2008, 13–51). The Scottishness of St Andrews House was seen by Mrs Thatcher as part of a wider Scottish establishment perceived as hostile to her policies and inclined to capture her ministers (Thatcher 1993, 620).



A further element in the established narrative of Scottish politics is the 'rise of nationalism'. The formation of the SNP in 1934, as a result of the merger of the National Party of Scotland and the Scottish Party and growing more broadly out of a host of small nationalist sects, was a significant moment (Finlay 1994). After all, it brought to an end one of the supposed conundrums of Scottish political history: the absence of a nineteenth-century nationalist party seeking separate Scottish statehood (Morton 1998). This has been explained away by the way in which the nineteenth-century union recognised Scottish autonomy in an age when there was a widely accepted aspiration to minimise the role of the state (Morton 1999). Scottish autonomy within the Union state was also a prominent feature of Scottish politics in the age of administrative devolution and has provided a foundation for both unionist and nationalist arguments (Paterson 1994). Nationalist electoral weakness was a feature of the history of the party from 1934 until the mid-1960s, with the exception of its flourishing in the unusual conditions during the Second World War. Nevertheless, it has been argued that to concentrate on its performance at the ballot box is to underestimate the effect of the SNP. There is evidence for this in the reactions to the various surges of SNP support (Finlay 1992). The victory of Winifred Ewing at Hamilton in 1967 induced panic in both main parties. The result came as a greater shock to Labour than to the Conservatives, who had at least conducted some research into their vulnerability to nationalists in Scotland and Wales after a series of poor results in 1966 (Opinion Research Centre 1967). The sudden announcement by Edward Heath of a new attitude to Scottish self government and the establishment of a commission under Lord Home to look into the subject indicated the capacity of the SNP to unsettle the main parties (Government of Scotland Policy Group; Heath to Tweedsmuir

22 Jul. 1968). The official archive records discussions at the highest levels of Wilson's administration and provides evidence that Labour were uncertain as to how to interpret the factors behind the result. Some ministers, led by Crossman, wanted to use it as justification for thinking about devolution (Tanner 2006). Others, led by the staunchly unionist Secretary of State for Scotland, William Ross, argued that the reverse at Hamilton was the result of short-term difficulties that could be allayed by more careful attention to the implementation of traditional policies. Above all, he was concerned not to provide any further ammunition for the SNP to exploit (TNA, CAB130/390; CAB151/45; CAB164/393, 658; CAB165/298, 299; T300/184, 185).

Although the SNP performance at the 1970 general election did not bear out optimistic post-Hamilton predictions, progress was made. The 1974 elections, on the other hand, brought the SNP to within striking distance of a realignment of Scottish politics away from its unionist centre of gravity, something of which the Labour party was keenly aware and deeply fearful (Political and Economic Situation in Scotland 1975). During the 1980s this aspect of SNP history was less evident. The performance of the party did not have the spectacular high points akin to Hamilton or 1974, although the Govan by-election of November 1988, at which former Labour MP Jim Sillars overturned a big Labour majority against a weak Labour candidate, provided an echo of former days. The principal development in the party's history in this period was an increasingly professional organisation and media operation, although it was still based on slender resources compared to Labour or the Conservatives (Mitchell 1996). Contrary to the predictions of George Robertson it was really devolution which gave the SNP a boost,

although it was slightly delayed and the performance at the 2003 election was a particular disappointment to the party.

Another narrative of modern Scottish politics has been the decline of Conservatism. This is closely tied to assumptions about the effect of Thatcherism in Scotland. The position is more complicated in reality (Mitchell 1990; Seawright and Curtice 1992). The Conservative decline began to be evident in 1959. It is true that the Labour share of the vote also declined, in its case from a high point in 1966, but the Conservative vote fell more sharply, to a lower level and sank below the share of the vote achieved by the party in England. The increased competitiveness of the Liberals and the SNP were part of this story but multi-party politics were emerging in England as well and the Conservative vote did not suffer to the same degree. A distinctively Scottish politics seemed to be emerging from the period of two-party domination. The deficiency in the party's Scottish performance opened up in the 1980s. There is no doubt that the Conservative government was very unpopular in Scotland and that Mrs Thatcher, despite strenuous efforts, had little feel for the distinctive features of Scottish political culture (Cameron 2010, 320–48). The orthodoxy of Mrs Thatcher as the matriarch of devolution has emerged in the years since her downfall in 1990 and there is no doubt that we are in need of a more nuanced account of that decade. There is a danger that we accept the simplistic assumption that a wide range of ills can be placed at the door of Mrs Thatcher without taking into account wider factors. The global economic forces driving the process of de-industrialisation, the extent to which social and economic change was under way in the 1970s, in the housing market, for example. An uncritical narrative of the 1980s can become a too handy

explanation for much of our recent history, the source of new myths and risks a narrowing of our political culture. As Gerry Hassan (2012, 86) has pointed out

... the world of the 1980s has become the defining set of events for a generation that has grown up; they remember a simplified version of that decade: the miners' strike, the poll tax, 'the doomsday scenario', the 'Sermon on the Mound' and Ravenscraig. This set of mobilising myths has become as important to contemporary Scotland as the folklore of a selective memory of the 1930s based on mass unemployment, Jarrow marches and Tory appeasement of Hitler to an earlier generation, omitting the collusion of the entire political classes – including Labour – in all of the above. What happens when the 1980s pass, as they have to, into the mists of history, when children stop being raised on the parents' knees with tales of the poll tax, warrant sales and the Scots being treated as 'guinea pigs'?

One answer to this pertinent question is to engage in more historical research on the 1980s. There are signs that such work is beginning to appear, a recent searching study of the miners' strike of 1984–5, firmly grounded in a very wide range of sources, provides a model of what can be achieved (Phillips 2012). There are other signs in the recent literature that competing versions of the history of the 1980s are beginning to emerge (Stewart 2009; Torrance 2009). While recognising that even the political history of this decade needs to be built on a very wide range of sources, insights are emerging from the release of official material from the early 1980s. Whilst themes of continuity with the

pre-1979 period should not be eschewed, revisionism can be exaggerated. There is much evidence that Mrs Thatcher's government took a radically different approach to existing economic problems. This can be seen in the way in which industries such as shipbuilding and car manufacturing – which had been the focus of efforts at preservation on the part of previous governments – were phased out. The policy, especially towards shipbuilding, was pointedly different from that of the earlier Conservative cabinet of which Mrs Thatcher had been a member (Johnman and Murphy 2002, 231; Payne 1985, 1993; Phillips 2008, 79–116 ).

Higher Education is another area in which the 1980s saw policies which were a marked contrast from those which went before. This had an effect on Scottish politics and the debate on the national question. In the 1970s the Scottish Universities had been fearful of the plans for modest devolution which were then current. In the Scotland Act of 1978 Higher Education was reserved to Westminster (TNA, CAB198/372, 426; UGC7/1088. The experience of the cuts implemented by the UGC in the 1980s transformed the context and by the 1990s a separate Scottish Higher Education Funding Council had been established, the expanded universities system was enthusiastic about devolution and Higher Education was one of the key devolved policy areas in the Scotland Act of 1998 (Paterson 1998). This then is one area where the narrative of Thatcherism stands up to some scrutiny, although it was not at the centre of popular politics.

This brings us to the politics of oil, central to the narrative of the 1980s and integral to the debate about independence. The capacity of the north-sea oil industry to transform

Scottish politics and economics has been one of the longest-running debates in recent political history. This ties in with narratives of the 1980s, as it has been asserted that among the greatest sins of the Conservative governments of that period was their squandering of oil revenues to pay the welfare costs arising from their economic policies. The Labour governments of the 1974–9 period are also culpable if this line of argument is followed (McCrone 2013, 105–19). This has not been a major theme of biographers of Thatcher (or indeed of other Prime Ministers), with the exception of John Campbell (2003) and there is a silence in many of the key memoirs of the period. The use by the SNP of the slogans ‘it’s Scotland’s oil’ and, of Thatcher, ‘No wonder she’s laughing she’s got Scotland’s oil’, indicates the extent to which this theme is central to a narrative of Scottish politics (Lynch 2002, 123–7). This remains current, as is shown by the contemporary debate over the effect the division of oil revenues will have on the economy of an independent Scotland, a matter which has been dealt with by the author of the comprehensive official history of the industry (Kemp 2011, 2013). There is also a historical dimension in the form of the controversy over the ‘secret’ memo by the government economic adviser Professor Gavin McCrone from 1975. This memo, now available to researchers in both the National Archives of Scotland and The National Archives of the UK, presented an optimistic picture of the effect of the industry on the Scottish economy and, it is alleged, would have altered the terms of the debate in the 1970s had it been published (McCrone 2013, 106). The discussion of what to do with the declining, uncertain, but still significant, oil revenues is important to the referendum. The SNP policy of investing in an oil fund, based on the example of Norway, has much to commend it and is preferable to using the revenue for current expenditure. If the revenues

are invested their impact on assumptions about the scale of a Scottish economic deficit is much reduced. The best-case scenarios about oil and the Scottish economy are based on assumptions about the division of the North Sea that are possibly optimistic. Although there has been much work on the industry, including some on the political dimensions, it would be interesting to have a sustained study of the politics of North-Sea oil so that an evidentially-based view of its history could be set alongside the popular narrative (Harvie 1994; Phillips 2008, 146–77).

## **Conclusion**

If the language used in political debate and the means of communication at the heart of it are central to the new political history (Beers 2010), we have been singularly remiss in not engaging with the evidence for long periods of the twentieth century. As a distinguished Scottish journalist has argued, Scotland in the middle of the twentieth century was at the heart of an extraordinary newspaper industry. At its peak the *Scottish Daily Express* – hardly read at all by historians – had a circulation of 650,000. The *Daily Record* sold 450,000 copies (Reid 2006). If these newspapers have not crossed the research radar of Scottish political historians then other titles which were very popular locally, such as the *Bulletin*, a Glasgow newspaper, have been almost entirely forgotten. The fact that these sources are not available on-line, as is *The Scotsman* for the period up to 1950, is a very lame excuse for our neglect of them. Indeed, some historians have begun to draw attention to the potential dangers of treating extensive online text databases in an uncritical manner (Hitchcock 2013). This is a real problem in the Scottish case so long as there are few twentieth-century newspaper archives available online.

Without a more complete picture of Scottish political history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the place of the union in it, our terms of reference in the current debate are very uncertain. If notions such as semi-independence (Murdoch 1983), unionist-nationalism (Morton 1999) or Scottish autonomy (Paterson 1994) can be detected within Scotland's experience of the union then it is possible that independence – if it occurs – might not see the end of the union in every respect. Cautious advocates of independence – such as the First Minister – have an innate understanding of this point but it has been submerged in the shrill tones of the current discussion. So, the polarised debate, in which we are in the midst, elides and disguises significant blurring of the potential outcomes of the referendum. The opponents of independence have an interest in this polarisation but whatever one's view of independence we can do better in tone and substance than we are at the moment. Awareness of the richness and complexity of the different narratives of Scottish political history can help us to get there.



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