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National Opinion and the Press in Scotland before the Union of 1707

Karin Bowie, University of Glasgow

Abstract

Vigorous extra-parliamentary public debate over the question of union helped to ensure that Scotland brought into the Union of 1707 a sense of itself as a nation with national opinions. Though the parliamentary electorate remained small, a meaningful number of Scots engaged in public political debate on the question of union. Petitions from shires, burghs and parishes spoke for local communities and pamphleteers presented Scottish voices through archetypal figures such as a 'country farmer'. This allowed opponents to declare that incorporating union was inconsistent with 'the publicly expressed mind of the nation'. After the Union, extra-parliamentary national opinion continued to be expressed and sustained by the Scottish press and petitions, contributing to the maintenance of Scottish national identity within the united kingdom.

Keywords: public opinion, extra-parliamentary opinion, national opinion, the press, petitions, national identity

Introduction

In modern democratic states, 'national opinion' refers to the views of a politically engaged population outwith representative assemblies, gauged by polls, the press and petitions. When the united kingdom of Great Britain was created in 1707, the Scottish electorate was very small and we might assume that extra-parliamentary national opinion had not yet developed in any meaningful way. Scotland's parliament embodied a small

political nation: peers attended in person, shire representatives were elected by a limited number of property-holders and commissioners for the royal burghs were hand-picked by urban magistrates. But Scotland in 1707 had a strong cultural sense of itself as a nation with a distinctive history, and this idea of the Scottish nation also applied to the people at large and their political opinions. The notion of a national community of citizens, separate from the estates of parliament, had emerged before the 1707 union, forged by political conflict and social change and stimulated by expanding print communications. Public debates over the union strengthened the formation of Scottish national opinion and ensured that this remained a part of the united kingdom after 1707.

Political Participation

By the early eighteenth century, social participation in Scottish public politics had increased significantly. In the century between the 1603 union of the English and Scottish crowns and the 1707 union of the kingdoms, an expanding state made public affairs more relevant to more people. Rising taxation required all but the poorest to meet public obligations after reforms of parliamentary taxation in the 1640s and the introduction of poll taxes in the 1690s. All able-bodied Protestant men aged 16 to 60 were expected to serve in burgh and shire militias organised in 1705 on models developed in the 1640s and 1670s. Perhaps most significantly, Scotland's covenant oaths had required ordinary people to accept political platforms and responsibilities. The 1638 National Covenant and the 1643 Solemn League and Covenant asked swearers to promise to uphold a monarchy limited by law and a Presbyterian church in Scotland and Britain, giving each swearer, male and female, personal obligations in public affairs. The renewal of the oaths in some regions of Scotland at the Revolution of 1689, combined with a hard-line belief that the original oaths

had bound the nation for all time, meant that this political engagement still fuelled political debate and protests at the time of the 1707 Union.

Print and National Opinion

The formation of extra-parliamentary opinion was facilitated by an expansion in literacy and the availability of printed material. By 1700, growth in parish schooling in the Lowlands meant that many men and some women in the 'middling sorts' were able to read, with literacy beginning to stretch into the lower orders. This included merchants, tenant farmers, many urban artisans and some rural farmworkers. The emphasis placed by the Scottish church on literacy meant that many women as well as men could read, though fewer were taught to write. As a result, more individuals could engage with political pamphlets and newspapers published in London and, increasingly, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen. Regular Edinburgh newspapers were printed from 1699 and printed minutes of parliamentary proceedings, draft legislation and commentary in pamphlet form became more common after the 1689 Revolution. Printed material remained expensive, but by 1700 Scottish newspapers and pamphlets were read regularly in urban coffeehouses and taverns and circulated from hand to hand in landward districts. At about this time, some Scottish pamphleteers began to use a newly coined English term, 'the public', to refer to a national body of readers.

An early link between printed material and Scotland's civil society can be found in a newspaper published in Edinburgh in the spring and summer of 1705. The *Observer* offered an ongoing dialogue on current affairs between two figures, a 'country-man' and a 'landwart schoolmaster'. These figures represented the middling ranks of rural society in the form of a prosperous tenant farmer and a university-educated school teacher in a

landward parish. The tenant farmer opened their dialogue by asking, 'I hear, Domine, you was at Edinburgh Yesterday, what News have you brought Home?'. Demonstrating the flow of printed ephemera from Edinburgh to rural villages, the schoolmaster produced a print of the 1705 Alien Act, passed by the English parliament to force Scotland into union talks. The two proceeded to discuss the question of Anglo-Scottish union. In later editions, they discussed pamphlets from Edinburgh commenting on the (wrongful) conviction of the captain and crew of an English ship for the pirating of a Scottish ship. Their partisan rehearsal of the piracy charges spread awareness of the case and reinforced Scottish resentment of perceived English wrongs at a sensitive moment in Anglo-Scottish relations. In another issue, the country man offered a home-spun analysis of the Union of Crowns and the effects of the residence of the monarch of Scotland in London since 1603. He equated the kingdoms of Scotland and England to farms and observed that it was natural that a farmer with multiple farms would pay more attention to his home farm than to one that was further away.

The *Observer's* presentation of complex international relations and constitutional debates in an accessible format reflected the author's stated intention to publish in dialogue form to reach 'Vulgar Capacities'. The newspaper expressed an explicit desire to create an informed public, 'Vulgar opinion or Applause of things' being 'seldom well founded'. By addressing 'the unconsidering Croud', the *Observer* showed that the opinion of the people was starting to matter. But the paper also indicated the vulnerability of the Scottish press to commercial pressures. It ran for just eight issues in 1705, stopping during a vacation in the law courts when not enough readers were present in Edinburgh to sustain publication (Anon., 1705).

Petitions and National Opinion

Widening engagement with politics also was facilitated by petitions, both in manuscript and print forms. In the 1689 Revolution, a constitutional right to petition the monarch was established and collective petitioning campaigns conveyed opinions from localities to the Scottish parliament. In 1700-01, hand-written petitions from shires and burghs asked parliament to reduce taxation, defend the Company of Scotland and its colony of Darien and relieve local suffering caused by harvest failures. Some of these were printed in a contemporary collection of papers relating to the Darien colony bought by the many Scots who followed the news on this South American colony with great interest. Reports on the colony had appeared in the earliest editions of the *Edinburgh Gazette* in 1699 and a string of pamphlets had advertised its potential and expressed dismay at the Spanish king's aggression and the Scottish king's disinterest. This publicity meant that, as Patrick Hume, earl of Marchmont wrote in 1699, 'persons of all ranks' were concerned, even 'the meaner people' who held no stock in the Darien company (McCormick (ed.), 1774, 511). Another campaign in 1703 generated petitions to Queen Anne for religious toleration from dissenting Episcopalian congregations in some Scottish burghs and shires. This included a printed petition from a body of Episcopalian clergy to the queen and manuscript petitions from Glasgow, Dundee, Aberdeen, Elgin and Fife.

The printing of petitions added to the circulation of political ideas and opinions. Some of the 85 petitions submitted to the Scottish parliament in 1706-07 on the proposed union of the Scottish and English kingdoms were printed. The petitions of national bodies were more likely to be printed, including four from the Commission of the General Assembly (a committee of clergy and elders responsible for church affairs between sessions of the General Assembly) and one from the Convention of Royal Burghs (an assembly of

representatives from the Scottish royal burghs). Local printed petitions included those of the burgh of Stirling and the parish of Culross. Both appear to have been organised by Lt. Col. John Erskine of Carnock, the provost of Stirling, who reportedly called out the Stirling militia to sign the burgh's address.

An expansion in political participation can be seen in the petitions submitted to the Scottish parliament on the union treaty. While some petitions limited their subscriptions to a small elite of property-owners and town councillors, many included ordinary tenant farmers, servants, artisans and other ordinary inhabitants. The signatures displayed the cultural importance of hierarchy, with subscribers being ranked by property, office, craft and trade. Yet many included ordinary men unable to write, whose signatures were provided by notaries or church elders. Some texts stressed the constitutional right of all subjects to petition and few even claimed this as a natural right. The petitions generated wide participation from the southwest to the northeast. The northwest was represented in a pamphlet taking the form of a petition from 'te Fishers on the Highland coast, and all others inhapiting ta Highlands'. This employed a vernacular accent, portraying Scots as pronounced by native Gaelic speakers, to enliven its prediction of the harmful effects on west coast herring fishing arising from higher salt taxes in 'te Onion' (Anon., 1706).

Gender and National Opinion

Only men signed the union petitions, but women formed and expressed political opinions through other avenues. Many women in this period were politicised, like men, through Scotland's covenant oaths and shared a similar sense of patriotic identity. Female voices appeared in crowd protests in Glasgow and Edinburgh and surviving letters by elite women show their strong feelings on the union. One Presbyterian pamphleteer indicated

the strength of female opinion by arguing that the union question should be decided not by parliament, but by an assembly of freeholders, male and female. In his view--unusual for the time--propertied 'lasses' had as good a right to vote as their male counterparts (Hodges, 1706,).

Some prints used female voices and figures to speak for or represent the nation. In 1706, the parish minister in Kilmarnock, William Wright, wrote an allegorical pamphlet on a proposal of marriage between 'Fergusia', a venerable matron representing the Scottish kingdom founded by the mythical King Fergus, and 'Heptarchus', a 'Stout' and 'Valiant' man named after the medieval Anglo-Saxon heptarchy. Because Heptarchus had abused his sister Juverna (Ireland), keeping her 'as a conquered Slave', Fergusia hesitated to enter into marriage with Heptarchus, preferring instead the terms of federal union established by the Solemn League and Covenant (Wright, 1706). Another clergyman, James Clark of Glasgow's Tron Church, used a maternal national figure to make similar arguments against incorporating union in a broadside pamphlet entitled *Scotland's Speech to her Sons* (1706). On the pro-union side, an invented petition presented a message in favour of incorporation in the broad dialect voice of female textile workers. The 'Shank Workers and Fingren Spinners of Aberdeen, and Places thereabout' argued that 'the Eenion' would improve export sales of their woollen goods (Anon., 1706).

Conclusions: The Union of 1707 and National Opinion

The making of the United Kingdom helped to elaborate a rhetoric of Scottish national opinion. Opponents of the union argued that parliamentary votes for the treaty did not represent the views of the nation at large as represented in petitions. Robert Wylie, a leading clergyman from Hamilton parish, insisted that the treaty betrayed 'the publicly

expressed mind of the nation' and that the people therefore had an obligation to resist the treaty in arms (Bowie, 2015). William Johnston, marquis of Annandale, protested that 'this nation seems generally averse to this incorporating union' and John Murray, duke of Atholl insisted that Queen Anne should be told that the union was inconsistent with 'the inclinations of her people' (Records of the Parliaments of Scotland to 1707, M1706/10/15, 1706/10/212). In reply, supporters of the Union contended that parliament's votes outweighed extra-parliamentary views. As Sir John Clerk of Penicuik put it, 'the will of parliament, strengthened by mature deliberation, was considered of more account than the will of the people' because the opposition had 'laboured tirelessly to confuse public opinion' (Clerk, ed. Duncan, 1993, 106-7). The important point is that both sides in the union debate acknowledged the existence of extra-parliamentary public opinion, though they disagreed on how well informed it might be or how far it mattered. Opinions were engaged through the expanding reach of the seventeenth-century state in tax-collection, militia service and compulsory oaths and the exchange of news and views in print and petitions, facilitated by rising literacy. After the Union of 1707, increasing numbers of newspapers and magazines funnelled information to Scottish readers on Westminster affairs, continuing to form the opinions of the nation at large. Some petitions from Scotland joined UK-wide petitioning campaigns, but others reflected Scottish affairs. Scotland had brought into the Union a sense of itself as a national political community—a community that was more inclusive than its narrow parliamentary constituency might suggest. This ensured that a contemporary 'sense of the nation' could be sustained and developed after the Union.

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