

Defeat and Renewal: the Scottish National Party in the Eighties

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SUCCESS, SORROW AND THE SNP

Since the end of last century, there have been waves of support for Scottish home rule. In the 1880s, the first Scottish Home Rule Association was founded largely following the Irish example. Its members were overwhelmingly Liberals. It was well supported in Scotland, but the course of world events overtook it. After the First World War, the Labour Party quickly took over the second position in British politics and a new Scottish Home Rule Association expressed the strong interest in Scottish autonomy (1). According to the Authorized Version, that war had been fought for the rights of small nations, and many Scots assumed that they qualified. Economic events this time came in the way of success, and British, including Scottish, politics became class politics. Many members of the Association were, however, outraged by the lack of interest of the Labour leaders. They split off and formed the National Party of Scotland (1928); later the modern Scottish National Party (1934) (2).

Until the early sixties, this organization was a tiny fringe body which had some impressive leaders, but it was rather different from the earlier associations. These latter had worked for Scottish "autonomy" in which a Scottish government would look after Scottish domestic affairs, and defence and foreign affairs would be handled in London. The SNP, from the beginning, sought a Scotland which was completely independent.

It was largely this policy which condemned the SNP to the sidelines. In Ireland nation and class struggled to be the basic cleavage in the politics of the country and nation won hands down. In Scotland class virtually obliterated any concern with the nation. In the early sixties, however, with virtually no warning, Nationalist candidates began to get more and more votes. By the 1970 General Election, the major parties in Scotland realized that they had a new competitor and, as Table 1 shows, at the General Election in October 1974, they collected thirty per cent of the vote, won eleven of the seventy two Scottish seats, came second to Labour (the dominant Scottish party) in thirty six of their forty one seats and they did not lose any deposits. Their success terrorized the Labour government into rediscovering their ancient commitment to Home Rule and introducing legislation for it; one of the two most important policies of this Parliament. It was lost, largely because Labour MPs were not prepared to unite to let it through, and their own Government fell.

The effect on Scotland and the SNP was very dramatic. At the resulting General Election, the Nationalists crashed to seventeen per cent of the Scottish vote, lost nine of their MPs and were in total, snarling, self-destructive disarray.

Table1

MOVEMENT TO PARTY

This paper is concerned with what happened within the SNP after this disaster. My argument is that there has been an important change taking the organization from a movement to a modern type of party, with the result that there will be quite serious changes in which the Nationalists will operate. There have been three major internal debates which I shall state here and then explore in the next three sections.

The most striking change is that the SNP is now a party with left-wing policies, often more radical than those of the Labour Party. Up to the late sixties the orthodoxy within the party had been that the SNP was neither a party of the right or the left but was a party for Scotland. As such, it ought to have no policy other than Independence, for that policy alone could solve Scotland's problems. Since 1979 there has been a vigorous debate resulting in the unwilling acceptance of a need to target Scottish working-class voters and this meant adopting policies which would attract them.

The second major debate has been over whether the party should pursue a gradual road to independence or whether they should accept no compromises and cooperate with other bodies only in the cause of complete independence.

The final debate revolved around whether, having got rid of English domination, Scotland should pursue a path wholly on her own or whether she should seek to enter the European Community since this would act as a counterfoil to the English connection.

ADOPTING THE SCOTTISH WORKING CLASS

First of all, why has the SNP moved to the left and what is the significance of this for the future of the party?

In an outstanding study of European politics, Angelo Panebianco stresses the importance of the genetic imprint in the development of parties (3). In the case of the SNP, one part of the genesis was that the movement was set up largely by people who had been in the Labour Party in Scotland. I have referred to this when I discussed the Scottish Home Rule Association. The organization is heavily influenced by the arrangements of the Labour

Party and the early publications show a concern for employment and housing of the Scottish working class. One cannot, then, say there was no precedent for placing the SNP on the left of British politics. On the other hand there were no links between the party and the working class movement. On the contrary, perhaps more in Scotland than in any other part of the United Kingdom, the Scottish working class was unionized and thus firmly associated with the Labour Party; with the exception of the strongly Protestant working class in the west of Scotland which was Conservative as a result of anti-Catholic feeling and hatred of Irish Catholics (4). Neither group was likely to support the SNP. Thus the sympathy of the early SNP for the plight of the working class was really middle-class sympathy for a group with which they had no close ties.

Within a few years generation which had founded the SNP moved-on and their successor, after 1945, faced a Labour government which was every bit as hostile to Scottish autonomy as the Conservatives had ever been.

Under these circumstances, the ruling approach in the tiny SNP was that theirs was a party of the whole of Scotland. Class politics was irrelevant to a society which was being exploited, not just by capitalists, but by English capitalists to whom the English working class seemed to lend willing hands. After independence it would be up to the people of Scotland to decide whether the country was to be Socialist or Conservative or Liberal or anything else. The Scottish National Party had nothing to do with this and many of its members doubted whether the party would even survive once the country regained its freedom.

To understand this period properly, one must remember that the SNP was a tiny party at the fringes of Scottish politics. In 1960 it had two branches in the whole of the country and probably under one hundred members. It was as much as they could do to keep alive the idea of nationalism.

To a large extent, the change in the fortunes of the SNP owed a great deal to the fall in support suffered by both the main British parties (5). From 1961 onwards the economy showed clear signs of going wrong and no one seemed able to handle it. Even the new Labour government in 1964, with a strong commitment to bring down unemployment through its trade union connections, was impotent. Large numbers of people who had always voted for these big parties ceased to turn out for them; some went to the Liberals or even the National Front and a large percentage started to vote for the SNP (6). That must be part of the explanation of the rise in the vote for the Nationalists, but it is not the only one. They could, for example, have voted Liberal especially since that party still held more seats proportionately in Scotland

than in Great Britain as a whole. Somewhat less imaginable is that they might have voted Communist. In fact, since the ethnic cleavage was second only to the class cleavage in Scotland, it is not surprising that, when neither of the class parties in Scotland seemed able to deliver more economic security, to their voters, the SNP should be the second choice.

The Nationalists were, however, the choice of constituencies on the peripheries of Scotland. Despite their early successes in the Central Industrial Belt seats of Hamilton and Govan: both won at by-elections from Labour: their wins in 1974 hardly touched the largely working class seats in any of the major southern industrial towns (7).

Despite the fact that Labour suffered a cataclysm in the 1979 election in Britain as a whole, this was the first election where it became clear that the voting patterns in Scotland, and to some extent in the North of England, were rather different from those in England as a whole. The Labour Party emerged as the hegemonic party in Scotland and has retained this position ever since. Despite the Conservatives' dominance of this and all subsequent elections in Britain, they consistently lost ground in Scotland. Since the 1987 Election, the Conservatives have not even been able to elect sufficient Scottish MPs to staff the major Scottish parliamentary committees.

Given that last development, three strategies were open to the SNP. They could have decided to appeal to the Scottish people as a whole without regard to class or other divisions. To a large extent, they do this, as they have always done, but the two other options imply important changes of emphasis. They could appeal to Scottish middle-class voters and especially to Conservatives. Since there are only ten seats now out of the seventy two who return Conservatives in Scotland, this would not do much to attain the target majority among Scottish seats. Much more attractive is the final strategy which is to appeal as champions of the working class and thus steal Labour voters. They are a much larger proportion of the Scottish electorate and a more glittering prize.

There are other reasons for recommending the left strategy. Among the general economic decline of Britain since the war, the older industrial areas have done worst of all. Scotland has particular problems because virtually all its economy was based on the heavy engineering of the South West: on shipbuilding and other steel based industry (8). Today there is only one large shipyard on the Clyde (run by Norwegians) and only one (heavily threatened) steel mill. Thus, as the table shows, there have been massive numbers of industrial closures in Scotland and unemployment is much higher than the British average. If the SNP going to arrest the process of industrial

decline, it must rethink a new manufacturing strategy. With so many on unemployment benefit and other forms of state aid, and with so many others employed in various public sector jobs, both compassion and common sense seem to point the SNP in a leftward direction.

Table2

There is another reason for a move to the left. During the hundred years when Scottish home rule has been an issue, among its fiercest opponents have been the Scottish business class. They have always feared that English markets might be closed to them and they have not felt confident that they could compete on equal terms with other areas either in Britain or elsewhere. Many indicators of their skills suggest that they are right to be afraid. In fact the situation is more serious than that: One of the striking features of Catalan nationalism, as I understand it, is that it was supported by virtually all the Catalan elites including the business elite. The reverse of this has been true in Scotland. The Church of Scotland was given a privileged position in the Act of Union (1707). So also were the lawyers who operated the Scottish system completely differently from the legal system in England and Wales. The local government system was also given a protected position and the same could be said of other Scottish elites such as those running the Universities and the major cultural institutions in the world of art, music and, to a lesser extent, theatre. The effect of all this was to make these institutions staunch supporters of the Union. In the case of the educational and cultural institutions, this was compounded even more by the fact that the heads of the vast majority of them are English (9).

With all these considerations, it might seem apparent that the SNP should turn to the left. It was not.

The debate on the proposal that the SNP should move left was heavily influenced by the internal dynamics of the organization. In the first place, although it had been growing since 1962, the party was still dominated by a small group of people who had run it, in some cases, since before the war. Robert MacIntyre had been the first successful SNP parliamentary candidate in 1945. Arthur Donaldson had been a national office-bearer before the War. There were several others less prominent, but who still had control of the machine. Although several of them had been socialists in their youth, that was a long time ago and for them the Labour Party was the enemy. Labour reciprocated this feeling. The experience of keeping the party going at a time when a great many of their fellow Scots probably thought they were a little mad, seemed to have steeled their resolve to keep the party as it was. The certainly did not want to lose control just at the point when the party had

become an established part of Scottish politics. A more important feature of the personal histories of this old guard was that they came from a time when Scottish nationalism was more of a cultural movement. All the talk of saving steel works or shipyards was important for them, but not of the first importance.

One relevant question is why these old men and women still retained their positions in the party. One quick answer is that MacIntyre and Donaldson, at least, were skilled and devious operators. The other is that many of the new members who came into the party in the 1960s and 1970s respected them for having kept the movement together through the bad times. Thirdly, many of these younger members came into the party for a short time, but there was a very considerable turn-over. Often they went off to work in other organizations such as the anti-nuclear movement or the poverty lobby while the old guard stayed on as they had done for many years. Finally, and perhaps most important, most of the new members were non-political in the sense that they had not been deeply interested in politics before: certainly not to the extent of joining a political party. They did not have clear political views other than a feeling of Scottishness and the conviction that the English were doing better than they were (which they were). As such, the simplistic, non-political views of the old guard appealed to them. The younger generation who pressed the party to work out policies sounded too like the Labour and Conservative politicians with whom they had just dispensed.

In the acrid debate about what had gone wrong in the 1979 elections this old guard and the majority of the party members who agreed with them formed one side of the argument. The other was taken up by a group of young Nationalists, most of them in their twenties, who were opposed to the "non-political" approach of their elders (10).

The 79 Group was set up on three principles. It was Nationalist, Socialist and Republican. Nobody quarreled with the first basis of the group. In support of the second basis, the Group argued, as I have already described, that the natural base for the Nationalist vote was the working class. Several polls had shown that the SNP was the second choice of the majority of Labour voters, where this was not true of other voters (11). In any case, if one were to attract Labour voters to the SNP: the only hope of victory: the SNP had to become the workers' party and socialism was the ideology of a workers' party. Finally, the Group argued that there was no place for the Monarchy in a modern Scotland. It was a prop for the class system and a justification for snobbery. Nothing could be more alien to the life of a Glasgow housing estate than the Queen and all the apparatus of Royalty. If the SNP were to become a modern party, it had to be done with all of that.

The most important reaction to the foundation of the 79 Group was that this was factionalism. Although there had been disagreements about policy in the past ten years, no faction had been formed. The SNP stood for a united Scottish effort to gain freedom and could find no place for organized internal opposition groups, trying to take over the party for their own ends.

There was another way of interpreting the reactions of the SNP establishment to the 79 Group. They represented a new generation introducing the ideas of the 1970s, disrespectful of the elders and eager to occupy the leading positions in the party. Basically it was a clash of generations.

I have discussed the establishment and the banning of the 79 Group in an earlier article (12). It is significant that the seven members who were expelled from the Party for their refusal to abandon the principles of the 79 Group were readmitted to the Party after a period of only six months only. Much more important was the official acceptance by the party of the left-wing tactic. To crown this, most of the leading positions in the party, by the late eighties were in the hands of the left wing. Why had this turn-around taken place. The party which once expelled the apostles of socialism, now elected them as their leaders. Why had this happened?

The first reason was simply the passing of time. By the mid-Eighties, the Old Guard were very old and, in many cases, beyond even the honorific positions. Although there were many "non-politicals" who shared the anti-factional views of the old guard, there was no one of a sufficient status to occupy their position.

The second and more obvious reason was that the policies of Mrs. Thatcher's Conservative Government had particularly bad effects on Scotland. As regional aid was cut off, even the surviving heavy industries began to close down. In the huge working class housing estates, the cuts in welfare benefits created more poverty with fewer and fewer ways out. Under these circumstances it was difficult for the SNP to take anything other than an anti-Conservative stance. This might not be socialist in the terms of Karl Marx, but it certainly meant that the Nationalists could not but identify with the Scottish working class if they wanted to appear to be against the government.

Finally, the Conservative government ushered in a period of prosperity for the South of England which self-evidently was not shared by Scotland. For the effort of turning on their television sets, Scottish people could see how well the southern English working class were doing. They could look around them

and see how badly they were doing in comparison. To make matters worse, the symbol of that Conservative revolution was an English woman with a peculiar forced southern English accent who seemed totally alien to the needs of a Glasgow high-rise or a croft on Barra.

My contention has been that the development of British politics made it almost inevitable that the SNP should move to the left. Just to drive the point home, the thrust of SNP policies became the thrust of the 79 Group argument. Their main concern were the protection of Scottish jobs.

The evidence for this statement is easy to produce. The 79 Group had backed up its advocacy of socialist policies with campaigning to save jobs in firms which were scheduled to close. Perhaps their most famous action was in support of the women workers in the Lee Jeans factory in Greenock. In the years after the Group was dissolved many more factories and works were shut down of which the most important was probably the huge steel strip mill at Gartcosh and the threat to the even larger works at Ravenscraig. For a country with its industrial past and its myths built upon heavy industry, the protection of these steel works had a special place. In the years since the 79 Group was closed down and then its leaders readmitted, there have been many of these campaigns. The closures of virtually all the many large factories in Scotland have been accompanied by demonstrations and delegations led by the SNP: not just by the leaders of the deceased SNP faction, but by the Chairman and other major figures in the party who fought vigorously against the Group. To make the point even more forcefully, during the long and bitter miners' strike, support from the Labour Party flagged when it became clear that the leader of the union: Arthur Scargill was a fierce left-wing critic of the Labour leadership. By the midpoint of the strike, it could not be said that Labour enthusiastically supported the strike party pressure was exercised on the miners to accept the settlement (13). By contrast, the SNP declared its support for the miners right from the start and never wavered.

To close this section it is important to say that the left policies of the SNP were not confined to questions of industry and industrial relations. The SNP was and is a party which supports unilateral nuclear disarmament: a policy only adopted by the Labour Party for two years periods in the early sixties and the early eighties. The SNP has never wavered. It is also opposed to the peaceful use of nuclear power and certainly to nuclear dumping.

SCOTLAND AND EUROPE

The two other policy changes in the SNP can be dealt with more

quickly. First, the party was completely against entry to the European Common Market when the matter was debated in the sixties and seventies. Scotland should not exchange the tyranny of London for that of Brussels.

The movement to the new policy occurred when Jim Sillars, lately a left-wing Labour MP, joined the SNP. He instantly became an idol of the 79 Group. Despite the fact that the Labour left had in general been anti-Market, Sillars supported it and he brought this enthusiasm to his new party. If we look at the sides in the battle within the SNP over this policy we find that the opponents were the old guard within the party: even the old left such as Jim Fairlie. The Marketers were almost exclusively 79 Group members and generally those of the young (20s and 30s) generation. They looked realistically at the economy of Scotland and decided that Scotland needed Europe if it were to become a modern nation state. Only in the EEC was there a convenient and large market. Only in Europe could Scotland cooperate with other states of similar size and shake off the dominance of England in the same way as Ireland had.

By 1984, the policy of the left, Scotland within Europe had become the policy of the party.

INDEPENDENCE NOTHING LESS

When the Referendum on a Scottish parliament was lost according to the forty per cent hurdle, the SNP smelt immediate betrayal. It was predictable that they should vow to have nothing more to do with other parties such as Labour and the Liberals who claimed to fight for Scottish Home Rule, but always found reasons for not delivering.

Despite the fact that many Nationalists supported the all-party Campaign for a Scottish Assembly founded after the Referendum, the official policy of the party was completely opposed. Once again the hands of the old isolationist Nationalists is visible. Within the 79 Group there was a recognition that Independence was not going to be won at a single swoop. The majority of Scottish people were not ready to support it and the legislative campaign need the support of the other parties. It was significant that the founder and Chairman of the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly was also a founder member of the 79 Group and he worked closely with other members of the Group such as its chairman: Stephen Maxwell. The refusal of the Party to accept this line was initially an indication of the power of the old isolationist Nationalists. It was equally significant that the Chairman of the Party: Gordon Wilson: who was not from the left: soon launched a plan for a Scottish

Convention which was in many ways identical with the tactic of accepting home rule first in cooperation with other groups in Scotland. The implicit aim was that this would be a step on the way to complete independence.

Wilson's plan was not approved by the Party. Even as the old guard faded out, the rank and file of the SNP still felt enormous bitterness about the betrayal by Labour over the Referendum. More significant than this, Sillars and the left: which now dominates the leadership of the Party: also refuse to cooperate with Labour and the other groups which have set up their own version of a Constitutional Convention. The cause of this stance is that the Labour Party has indeed captured the Convention. The SNP was refused the proportion of delegates which it thought was its due and in general the SNP leaders: the left and the others: suspected that to cooperate with the Convention was simply to connive in building a vehicle which was really meant to attract even more Scottish voters to Labour. In private, the new leaders of the SNP are well aware that home rule in Scotland can only be won by cooperation.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The Scottish National Party has moved very quickly to the left in the last ten years. In addition, it has renewed its leadership leaving very few of the old guard in post. I believe that what has been experienced is a change from the old "movement" type of organization where winning elections and power were less important than keeping pure certain principles, to a modern type of party willing to think in terms of strategy and tactics to attain power. As a long-surviving part of the Scottish political landscape with an established and experienced leadership, it is likely to fight in Scotland for many years to come.

Table1

Table 1: SNP Votes at General Elections						
	1970	1974 Feb	1974 Oct	1979	1983	1987
Cons	36	33	25	31	28	24
Lab	33	37	36	42	35	42
Lib etc	7	8	8	9	25	19
SNP	15	22	30	17	12	14

Table2

**Table 2: Unemployment in Scotland
Percentage Unemployed, First Quarter**

1979	5.8
1980	6.1
1981	9.0
1982	11.0
1983	12.1
1984	12.5
1985	12.6
1986	13.1
1987	13.6
1988	11.9
1989	10.1

NOTES

- (1) HANHAM, Harry: Scottish Nationalism. London, Faber, 1969.
- (2) BRAND., Jack: The National Movement in Scotland. London, Routledge, 1978
- (3) Political Parties: Organization and Power. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- (4) HARVIE, Christopher: Scotland and Nationalism. London, Allen and Unwin, 1977, pp. 192-232.
- (5) ALT, Jim: Dealignment and the Dynamics of Partisanship in Russel Dalton (ed). Electoral Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies. Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, .1984.
- (6) BRAND, Jack; MILLER, William and McLEAN, Duncan: "The Birth and Death of a Three Party System". British Journal of Political Science.
- (7) The seats which they won in 1974 were Dunbartonshire East, Perth and East Perthshire, Moray and Nairn, Aberdeenshire East, Argyll, Stirlingshire East and Clackmannan, Galloway, Banffshire, Angus South, Dundee East and the Western Isles.
- (8) SLAVIN, W.: The Development of the West of Scotland. London, Routeledge, 1977.
- (9) See the BBC Scotland programme The Englishing of Scotland. BBC, 1988.
- (10) See BRAND, Jack: Dynamics of the 19 Group in Michael Watson (ed); Peripheries and Nationalism (Provisional Title). London, Routeledge, 1990 (forthcoming) and MITCHELL, James: The Scottish Government Yearbook 1990. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1990.
- (11) See BRAND, Jack and MILLER, William: "The Labour Party in 1979: Advance or Retreat". Strathclyde Papers on Government and Politics, Glasgow, 1983.
- (12) BRAND, Jack: The Dynamics of the 79 Group.
- (13) CRICK, Michael: Scargill and the Miners. London, Penguin, 1986 C9.