Evidence from nationalist movements in Scotland and Northern Ireland shows that pragmatism and the ability to adapt are key to electoral success, and that nationalism is still a potent political force.

*Contemporary political analysis tends to draw few comparisons between nationalist movements in Scotland and Northern Ireland. However, **Eve Hepburn** and **P. J. McLoughlin** argue that in both cases, such movements have adopted variously pro-European positions in order to benefit from opportunities for aid and for greater political representation, and have thus successfully moderated their nationalist ambitions.*

There has been a great deal of analysis written comparing the activities of stateless nationalist and regionalist parties across states, but there are few concerning parties that operate *within* them. In the UK context, political scientists usually have a preference to compare conflicts in Northern Ireland with other 'conflict regions' such as the Basque Country or Palestine, whilst ignoring comparisons with more peaceful nationalist movements in Great Britain. In recent decades, these movements, as well as those that operate across states, have taken advantage of opportunities for greater European integration. This has become an important part of stateless politics in Europe.

Both the Scottish National Party (SNP), and Northern Ireland's Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), have sought to use the opportunities of European integration to advance their particular constitutional agenda – independence or greater autonomy from the UK state for the SNP, and Irish reunification for the SDLP.

There are remarkable similarities between the SNP and the SDLP. Obviously the two parties operate in very different political contexts – although Scotland has similar religious cleavages to those in Northern Ireland, the challenges which these have created for the SNP appear negligible when compared to the violent sectarian conflict with which the SDLP has contended. However, both parties have sought to transcend religious divisions by articulating a liberal and inclusive nationalism. And it was this progressive brand of nationalism which allowed each party to embrace the ideals and practices of the EU – a project rooted in a rejection of extreme nationalism in favour of more pluralist conceptions of identity and political organisation.

Of course, it was not this alone that encouraged the SNP and SDLP to adopt pro-European positions. The considerable monetary aid that could be accrued from Brussels by peripheral regions such as Scotland and Northern Ireland; the opportunities to gain political representation and present the Scottish or Irish nationalist case in political fora beyond the UK state; and the chance to augment those cases by making alliances with other regional nationalist parties in Europe – all of these factors played a part in drawing the SNP and SDLP into a pro-European embrace. This was most evident in the late 1980s, when the "Europe of the Regions" movement was at its height. Though the aims of this movement were never clearly defined, essentially it advocated a radical restructuring of the European nation-state system, reducing the power of central governments in a way that would allow regional and peripheral nationalisms to flourish. Both the SNP and the SDLP flirted with such ideas as they sought to make their proposals – for a Scotland independent from the UK, or a united Ireland without British support – more politically acceptable and economically viable.

However, there were also differences between the SNP and the SDLP in terms of their relationships with Europe. Most notably, the SNP's pro-Europeanism only really became apparent in the 1980s – a time when it was particularly "vogue" for regional nationalist actors across Europe. By contrast, the SDLP, formed in 1970 by activists from Northern Ireland's idealist "civil rights generation", was pro-European from the outset. This was evident in the party's very first proposals for a peaceful settlement in Northern Ireland, published in 1972, which noted the role which inter-European co-operation might play in bringing together the two parts of Ireland. The SDLP continued to develop such ideas in subsequent years, submitting more radical, even "post-nationalist" proposals to the peace talks of the 1990s.

In contrast, the SNP was already moving away from its dalliance with the Europe of Regions project, noting the failure of EU regional institutions, such as the Committee of the Regions, to win any substantial rights for regions in Europe. Some sections of the SNP also began to question the nature of European integration, demanding the return of certain Common Policy areas to national or regional authorities, such as fishing and

agriculture. Indeed, during the debates on the draft European Constitution in 2004, the SNP maintained that it would campaign against this document in protest against the Common Fisheries Policy, which was seen to undermine Scottish interests. The SNP's move to a more 'Euro-critical' position was reminiscent of the party's pre-1980s stance, when it viewed the EU as a distant, bureaucratic and centralist organisation.

This divergence of approach suggested significant differences in the two parties' thinking on Europe. The SDLP's commitment to Europe was more rooted, and part of its formative ideals. Certainly, its pro-Europeanism won the party important allies at Strasbourg, and much needed economic support for Northern Ireland's conflict-damaged economy in the 1980s and '90s. But even after the party lost its only European seat in 2004 – at a time when Brussels' generous financial support for Northern Ireland was beginning to be scaled back, with funds being redirected to the needier new EU states of the East – the SDLP continued to argue for the expansion and deepening of the integrationist project. By contrast, the SNP was actually opposed to European integration until the early 1980s. In the 1975 referendum on continued UK membership of the EEC, the SNP campaigned on the theme 'no voice, no entry', perceiving integration as a centralising tendency that concentrated powers in the hands of the UK government.

Certainly, the SNP became more positive about Europe in the 1980s, helped by the election of SNP members to the European Parliament and the reform of European structural policy that brought in considerable funds to Scotland. This change in attitude enabled the SNP to articulate a discourse of 'independence in Europe' (which, in a way, sought to replace the framework of the UK state with that of the EU). However, there remained a section within the party that was sceptical of any sort of larger political organisation – be it the UK state or the EU – that had the potential to encroach on Scottish self-determination.

These differences – crudely put, between a principled and more pragmatic approach to Europe – also help to explain the recent divergence in the respective electoral fortunes of the SNP and SDLP. After forming the main opposition in the first two sessions of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 and 2003, the SNP formed minority government in 2007, before enjoying a stunning electoral victory in 2011, securing a historic majority with 69 out of 129 seats in the Scottish Parliament. By contrast, the SDLP, for a long time the dominant party in Northern Ireland's nationalist community, now comes a poor second to Sinn Féin. This is also interesting because of the SNP's and SDLP's relationship with the respective constitutional arrangements in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Though devolution to Scotland was obviously a response to nationalist agitation, the current settlement is not a creature of Scottish nationalism's creation. Rather it was the progeny of the British political centre, and specifically the New Labour project. Though it lacks the Conservative Party's instinctual ideological commitment to the Union, Labour, and particularly Scottish Labour MPs, have always had greater electoral incentive to ensure that Scotland remains part of the UK. Thus, the Blair government saw the creation of a Scottish (and indeed Welsh) parliament as a way of strengthening the Union by reducing the "democratic deficit" between the regions and UK political centre.

This was certainly not the way the SNP saw the situation. It wanted a more powerful Scottish assembly than that created in 1998, but had little influence in the early days of devolution, when Labour co-operated with the Liberals to maintain power in Edinburgh. However, with the decline of the Labour Party in Scotland in recent years, the SNP has now been able to seize control at Holyrood, and begin pushing for a settlement more in keeping with its ambitions.

Devolution to Northern Ireland was also achieved by the Blair government, but the particular institutions and ideas behind the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) – power-sharing between nationalist and unionist parties; formal recognition of the national identities of both communities; and political linkages and increased co-operation between the North and South of Ireland – reflected proposals long advocated by the SDLP. However, though commonly recognised as the key architect of the GFA, the SDLP has not been the electoral beneficiary of the settlement, having since been eclipsed by its republican rival, Sinn Féin.

As a result, comparison between the SNP and Sinn Féin is now more constructive. Indeed, Sinn Féin's recent moderation of its nationalism – so that it now advocates "critical engagement" with the EU – and the SNP's retreat from the more nuanced programme it was advocating in the late 1980s, has seen the two come to rest quite close to one another on the nationalist spectrum. Indeed, the repositioning of both parties leaves them articulating a rather well-balanced nationalism – assertive but not overly strident; confident and seemingly constructive. This appears to match the mood of the majority amongst their respective electorates. Also, the "can do" demeanour of both the SNP and Sinn Féin has led them to dominate settlements not of their making, but which they now seek to maximise. Thus, the SNP has moved from part-player, to minority and then majority government in Edinburgh, and aims to use this mandate to push for greater independence. Meanwhile, though the terms of the GFA mean that Sinn Féin still needs to persuade

Ulster unionists to join a united Ireland – a prospect which appears even less likely given the recent and astonishing collapse of the Republic's "Celtic Tiger" economy – the party continues to drive a political process which is making Northern Ireland ever more accommodating for nationalists.

The apparent lessons from all of this should be familiar to political analysts and historians the world over – pragmatism and the ability to adapt are key to electoral success; and the power of nationalism is not just a 20th century phenomenon. Nor is nationalism's contemporary currency limited to less developed countries. Articulated with appropriate measure, and allied to political competency, it remains a potent force even in 21st century Western Europe.

This blog is based on a recently published article: Celtic Nationalism and Supranationalism: Comparing Scottish and Northern Ireland Party Responses to Europe.