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Labouring under a delusion? Scotland's national questions and the crisis of the Scottish Labour Party

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Abstract

In recent years, the Scottish Labour Party has lost its once dominant position in Scottish politics. Its support has collapsed and it now faces multiple political challenges, relating both to cleavages in Scottish politics over the constitution and Brexit, and to divisions within the party over its leadership and direction. Employing semi-structured elite interviews with key figures within the party hierarchy and focus groups with grassroots activists, this article examines the causes of this crisis through an analysis of party members' views. It identifies sources of the decline of Scottish Labour in unresolved disagreements over strategy and identity. Unable to coalesce around a distinctly Scottish strategy for competing in a multi-dimensional, multi-level political space with both civic nationalist challengers and conservative defenders of the constitutional status quo, in 2017, Scottish Labour reasserted a class-based identity, seeking to compete largely on the left-right economic dimension of politics. Instead of marking out a Scottish political identity, the Scottish Labour Party chose leftward national alignment with the Corbyn leadership of the UK Labour Party. The electoral and political failure of this strategy offers important lessons for understanding the prospects of multi-level social-democratic parties.

Keywords: Scottish Labour, devolution, civic nationalism, multi-level parties, Brexit

Introduction

Faced with mounting pressures, a political party that has dominated the national landscape for a generation experiences a remarkably swift fall from power and subsequently finds itself trapped in a struggle to understand how, if at all, it can pick itself back up again. This story, the recent history of the Scottish Labour Party, is a particularly stark one. Yet, as converging phenomena, the political challenges the party faces are far from unique; Scottish Labour's story fits into a wider narrative about the problems today's social-democratic parties face, competing as they are in increasingly multi-dimensional, multi-level political spaces.

Seeking insights into this situation, this article turns to the men and women who make up Scottish Labour with the aim of uncovering the stories they have developed to explain the problems they face and the answers to them. Drawing upon a mixture of semi-structured elite interviews with key figures within the Scottish Labour movement and focus groups with grassroots activists, the article asks how members across all levels of Scottish Labour believe the party should respond to the challenges it faces. In so doing it identifies sources of the party's current crisis in disagreement over its strategy and identity, largely mapping onto an intra-party distinction between party workers and politicians, and activists and trade unionists. The article helps explain why Scottish Labour attempted to reassert a class-based political identity to compete on the left-right economic dimension of politics, and why this strategy has failed. It also generates important broader insights into the position of national-parties of the social-democratic left, in particular where they are threatened by both civic nationalist challengers and conservative defenders of the constitutional status quo.

In the first section, we review the challenges facing Scottish Labour. We structure this discussion along the axes of four divisions that have dominated intra-party debate in the party in recent years, and which themselves reflect wider political cleavages: (1) *Yes/No* on the issue of Scottish independence and where Scottish Labour should position itself on the constitutional question; (2) *Remain/Leave* on the question of the UK's membership of the European Union (EU) and the relationship between Scottish

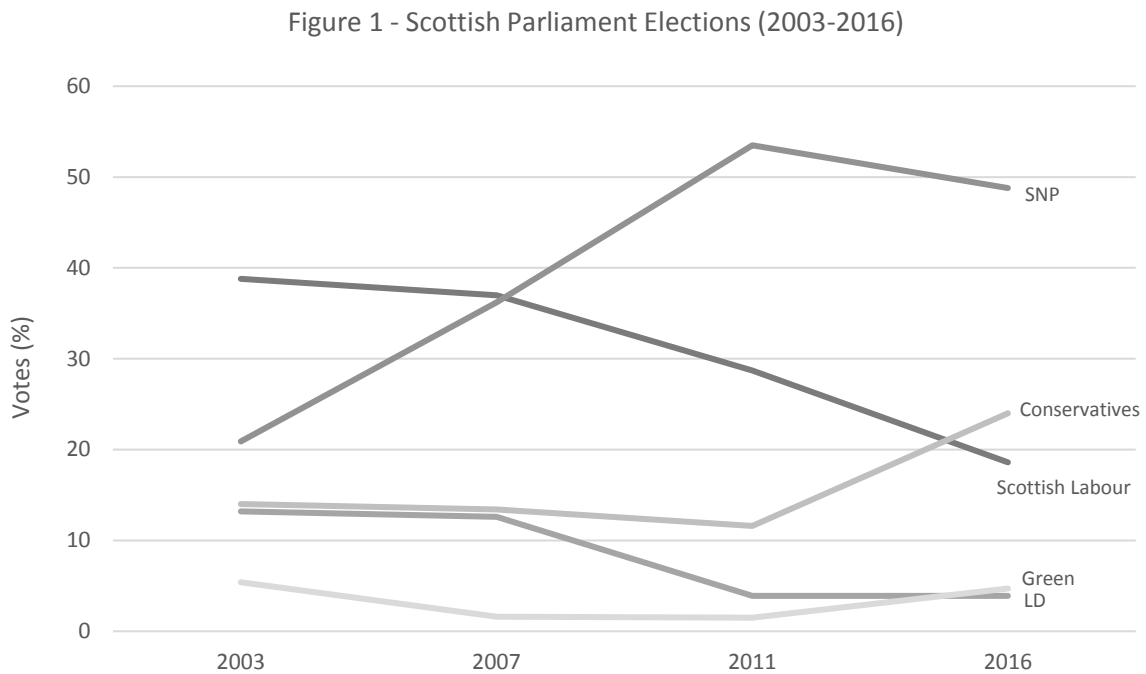
Labour and UK Labour Party (UKLP) positions on Brexit; (3) *Socialism/Social democracy* on the question of the character, policies and direction of Scottish Labour; and (4) *Holyrood/Westminster* on the issue of where power and control should lie between the Scottish Labour Party and the UKLP.

In the second section, we turn to the qualitative research itself, setting out our methodology, followed by an analysis that is structured around the same four key divisions. We conclude with a discussion of our findings, examining how the distinct nature of the transformation of Scottish electoral politics in the last decade has impacted upon Scottish Labour and why its attempt to reassert a class-based left-wing political identity aligned with the national leadership of the UKLP has failed as a strategy. We argue that, if social-democratic parties are to shift to the left, the articulation of this shift as a reassertion of the party's class-based political identity and subsequent conceptualisation of party competition as determined solely or largely on the left-right economic dimension of politics will be unlikely to succeed. This is because competing at the sub-state level, integrated parties need clear answers to constitutional questions and those of national identity (be these related to the sub-state nation or Eurosceptic challenges). Central to this is the need for parties' state-level leaderships to seriously engage with, survey and understand the socio-political situation in sub-state electoral arenas and adapt their messages and policies accordingly.

The Challenges Facing the Scottish Labour Party

At the 2010 General Election, Labour won 42% of the vote in Scotland, electing 41 MPs from 59 Scottish constituencies on a 2.5% swing. By the 2015 General Election, however, it had slumped to a single MP in Scotland, with less than a quarter of the vote share. Having previously lost power in the 2007 Scottish Parliament elections and witnessed the election of a majority Scottish National Party (SNP) government in 2011, the Scottish Labour Party then proceeded to come third behind the Scottish Conservatives in the 2016 Holyrood elections, losing 13 seats and registering barely over a fifth of the popular vote. As the SNP climbed the heights of power, the Conservatives followed close behind them to become

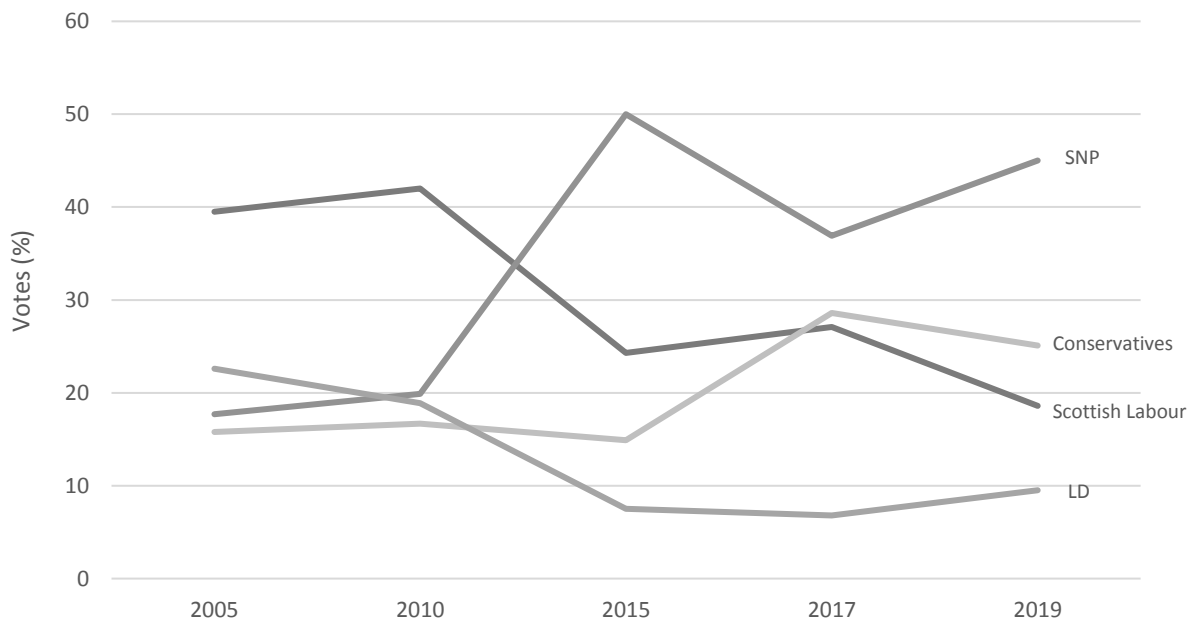
Scotland's official opposition, leaving the once hegemonic Scottish Labour Party spiralling into a deep crisis.



At the 2017 General Election, Scottish Labour made limited headway in regaining support, winning seven seats with a 2.8 percentage point increase in its vote share, far short of the 9.8 percentage point increase registered across Great Britain as a whole by the UK Labour Party (UKLP). Despite a shock resignation and subsequent bruising and fractious contest, in November that year the party elected a new leader, Richard Leonard MSP, who set out to recover the electoral support lost to the SNP. Opinion polls showed the party experiencing a modest if fitful recovery, challenging the Conservatives for second place in the polls and chipping away at the SNP's support amongst younger voters (Curtice 2018). However, at the 2019 European Parliament elections Scottish Labour's support collapsed, and it fell to fifth place in Scotland, registering less than 10% of the vote and losing both of its MEPs. Leonard's leadership came under fierce attack from all sides, including from former allies within the Scottish trade union movement (Hutcheon 2019a; Davidson 2019). At the 2019 General Election, Scottish Labour's

slide back into the abyss was confirmed: it again lost all but one of its MPs, securing only 18.6% of the popular vote. Pressure on Leonard’s leadership intensified.

Figure 2 - Westminster Election, Scotland (2005-2019)



Yes/No

The rise of the SNP and the collapse of Scottish Labour’s vote share after the 2014 Scottish independence referendum have starkly posed the challenge of how it adjusts to long run centrifugal developments in the British state. Since the Second World War, state-wide parties – that is, ‘parties that campaign in all or most regions of the state’ (Libbrecht et al., 2013: 625; Fabre and Swenden 2013) – have been forced to adapt to a shift in governance towards increasing regional authority (Hooghe et al. 2010) and the electoral rise of territorially-based regionalist parties that only campaign in one region of the state (Keating and McGarry 2001; Fabre and Swenden 2013). This shift towards multi-level political systems has introduced new arenas of electoral competition across different regions and sub-state levels, necessitating the institutional adaptation of state-wide parties (Deschouwer 2003: 216-7;

Fabre 2010; Swenden and Maddens 2009). As Miragliotta and Jackson (2015: 550) argue, 'decentralised polities discourage strong centralised party structures'; the result is a 'loosening of strict organisational hierarchies within parties in order to grant subnational organisations the autonomy and freedom necessary to respond to distinctive regional demands' (Koop 2011: 85).

These developments have introduced challenges not only for the parties themselves, but also for their academic analysis. Historically, the political parties literature was 'affected by a national bias' (Fabre and Swenden 2013: 342) and/or was wedded to a 'single-level language' (Deschouwer 2006:213); that is to say, it did not widely take into account the multi-level aspect of political party organisation. Yet, operating across multiple-levels of government and multiple party systems, state-wide parties 'are *intrinsically* multi-level' (Libbrecht et al. 2013: 627 – emphasis added), a reality captured in recent conceptualisations such as the 'multi-level party' (Moon and Bratberg 2010), 'franchise parties' (Carty 2004) and analyses focused on the 'stratarchical' nature of intra-party relations (Koop 2011). Recognition of these institutional complexities is important for understanding the nature of intra-party power relations and has wider political implications. Acting as 'integrated parties' (Renzsch 2001: 2), state-wide parties provide organisational linkages between different levels of government and subsequently play a role in the health (or otherwise) of devolved/federal systems. This is vital in multinational states such as the United Kingdom, where issues discussed in sub-state nations often differ significantly from those that dominate central state politics (van Biezen and Hopkin 2006). This has led to significant debates over degrees of party system nationalisation versus regionalism (Schakel and Swenden 2016; Cabeza et al. 2016) as nationalised parties establish linkages across levels and regions of the state, opening up sub-state institutional channels for different national/regional voices to be heard.

This literature has thus far largely focused upon the comparative study of formal organisation and electoral strategy (Fabre and Ménez-Lago 2009; Libbrecht et al. 2009; Cabeza et al. 2016) rather than intra-party debates amongst members as is the case in this article. UK-specific studies have

understandably focused upon the three state-wide parties, Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats (Hopkin 2009; Jeffrey and Hough 2009; Laffin, et al. 2007) but also regionalist parties such as the Democratic Unionist Party (Tonge et al. 2014) and the Ulster Unionist Party (Hennessey et al. 2018) in Northern Ireland, and the SNP in Scotland (Mitchell, et al. 2011). Turning to the literature on the Scottish Labour Party itself, studies have noted that, despite having its own distinctive origins, history and culture, Scottish Labour has been part of one of the most centralised political parties in Western Europe (Hassan 2002: 144). From the party's formation, Labour in Scotland operated as a regional unit of the UKLP and therefore had little formal autonomy over policy, finances and candidate selection procedures (Hopkin and Bradbury 2006). It is unsurprising, therefore, that the party has struggled to adapt to regionalising trends in UK politics. Moreover, its supporters are also split on the constitutional question, with nearly one in four backing independence for Scotland in recent polls (Curtice, 2018).

Remain/Leave

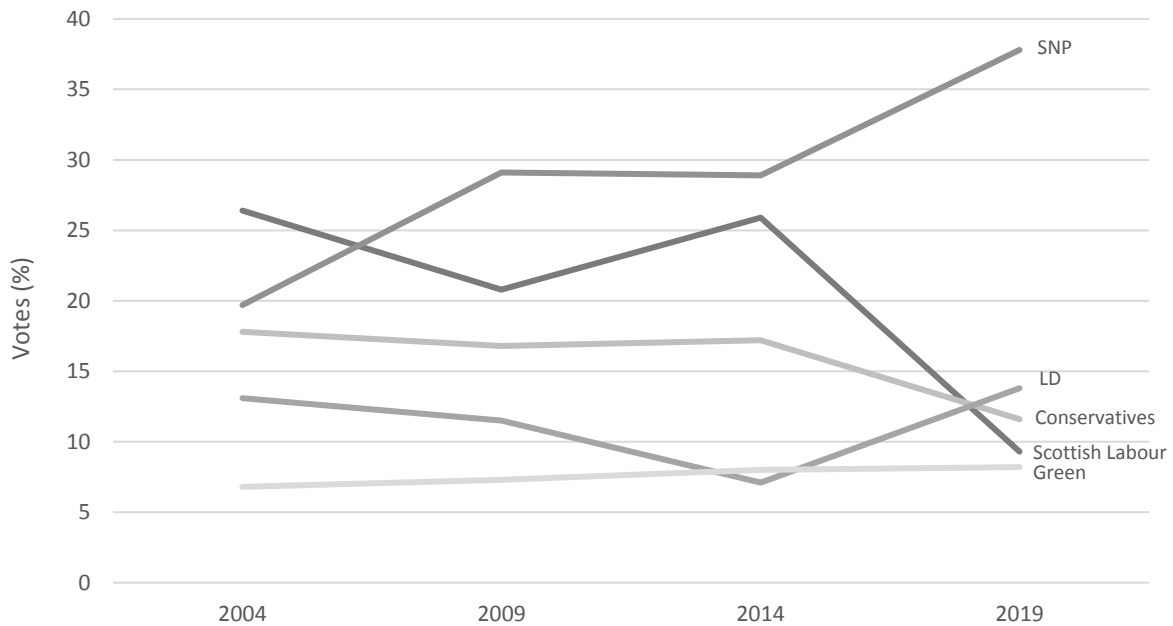
Scottish Labour lost over 45% of its 2010 General Election voters to the SNP in 2015, including over 90% of those who voted 'Yes' in the 2014 independence referendum (Fieldhouse and Prosser 2017; 2018). While in 2015 it held onto its 'No' voters, in 2017, it lost half of those who voted 'No' and then 'Leave' in the 2016 Brexit referendum to the Scottish Conservatives, as well as one in five of its 'No'/'Remain' voters. Under Ruth Davidson's effective leadership, unionist 'No' voters switched in large numbers to the Scottish Conservatives, who nearly doubled their vote share.

This indicates that the vote to leave the EU in the Brexit referendum overlaid a further cleavage upon the fractured politics of Scotland. The Scottish electorate voted 62% to 38% to 'Remain' in the EU in the Brexit referendum, the highest proportion of any of the nations of the UK. In contrast, the electorate in England voted Leave by a margin of 53.4% to 46.6%. Yet despite this, the Brexit cleavage did not map so readily onto the nationalist-unionist divide at the General Election of 2017. The strong performance of the Scottish Conservatives and the modest revival of Scottish Labour at the expense of the SNP

suggested that attempts to use Brexit as a lever to renew the campaign for independence had at least partially backfired. Of those who voted 'Yes' in the referendum on Scottish independence, SNP at the 2015 general election and 'Leave' in the Brexit referendum, four in ten switched to another party at the 2017 election, with similar proportions going to the Conservatives and Labour. This suggests that the SNP's strong pro-Remain stance alienated Leave voters amongst its 2015 supporters. Conversely, the Scottish Conservatives drew support from both 'No' and 'Remain' voters and 'No' and 'Leave' supporters in 2017. Of the latter group – the 'No' and 'Leave' voters at the 2017 general election – the Conservatives 'picked up nearly half the 2015 Labour voters, six in ten 2015 Liberal Democrats, and the vast majority of 2015 UKIP voters. Combined this nearly doubled the Conservative share of the vote in this group, with nearly two-thirds voting Conservative in 2017' (Fieldhouse and Prosser 2017).

Like the UKLP, the Scottish Labour Party maintained a studied ambiguity on Brexit after the 2016 referendum – opposing a 'hard Brexit' without unequivocally supporting Remain or backing a second referendum on whether to stay in the EU. It was not until after its catastrophic performance in the 2019 European Parliamentary elections that the Scottish Labour Party leadership committed to a second referendum on Brexit and to support 'Remain' in that ballot (UKLP policy at the 2019 general election was to support a second referendum without committing to support 'Remain'). At the 2019 General Election, the renewed strength of the SNP and its clear 'anti-Brexit' message suggests that this attempt at repositioning failed. The politics of Brexit posed severe strategic and tactical challenges to the Scottish Labour Party, of which its leaders and senior figures were acutely aware, as our interviews attest.

Figure 3 - European Elections, Scotland (2004-2019)



Socialism/Social Democracy

After the election of Jeremy Corbyn as UKLP leader in 2015, the party shifted markedly to the left. Its membership increased substantially, rising from 388,000 members in December 2015 to 564,400 members in December 2017 (Audikas et al. 2018). Figures for Scottish Labour show an increase from a reported low of 13,500 party members in 2014 to 21,500 members in September 2017. Alongside 9,500 affiliated through trade unions, the combined figure of 31,000 individuals affiliated with the party may even eclipse the previous peak reported in the run-up to the 1997 General Election (Hutcheon 2017). By comparison, however, the SNP’s membership dwarfs Scottish Labour, surging following the 2014 Independence referendum from 25,000 in December 2013 to in 125,534 in December 2018, in so doing becoming the third-largest party in the UK (Audickas, et al. 2019: 12).

Scottish Labour members were also more divided on the party’s swing to the left than the rest of the UKLP: in 2016, a majority backed Owen Smith MP in his challenge to Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership, and in 2017, party members and registered supporters were relatively evenly split over the future

leadership, with Richard Leonard's victory secured by a decisive lead amongst affiliated supporters (Wearmouth 2017)¹. The Scottish Labour Party does not therefore neatly divide between left and right, or 'moderates' and 'Corbynites'. Nonetheless, under Richard Leonard's leadership it has attempted to position itself to the left of the SNP government, opposing austerity and stressing its credentials as a party of social solidarity. Importantly, it sought to align itself with the Corbyn leadership of the UKLP; under Kezia Dugdale's leadership it had appeared out of step and critical of the left-wing shift in the national party.

In many ways, Scottish Labour's problems are in line with sister parties elsewhere. Across Europe, social-democratic parties' vote shares are declining as they are overtaken by parties representing territorially-based minority nationalisms and/or radical right neo-nationalist politics on the one hand, and green and radical left competitors on the other (Beramendi, et al, 2015). In 2000, social democrats or socialists were in government in ten out of the fifteen countries making up the EU at the time; by late 2018 they were in single-party government in just two states and in coalition governments in only seven of the EU's 28 member states (Sweeney, 2018). This decline reflects a number of factors, including the post-industrial decline of the organised working class, which has hollowed out social democracy's core vote. Also significant is the impact of historic incumbency. Gravitating towards the state and away from their class roots during their periods in office, social-democratic parties have become increasingly constrained in government by supra-national obligations to international bodies such as the EU and WTO on the one hand and by the shrinking fiscal headroom available to governments in the period following the great financial crisis on the other (Mair, 2013).

¹ Amongst full party members, Leonard won 51.8%, to Sarwar's 48.2%. These proportions were reversed amongst registered supporters (48.1% to 51.95, respectively). But in the affiliated supporters' section, which includes trade union members, Leonard won 77.3% to 22.7%. See <https://web.archive.org/web/20171118203229/http://www.scottishlabour.org.uk/pages/scottish-leaders-result-2017-slp>

In common with other sub-state social-democratic parties, such broader factors are exacerbated for the Scottish Labour Party, which faces further distinct electoral challenges. The introduction of an Additional Member System of voting for the Scottish Parliament transformed the dynamics of party competition in Scotland, creating the opportunity for the rise of the SNP as a serious challenger party that had previously been (largely) denied to it by first-past-the-post elections to the Westminster Parliament. The SNP used this space to become a party of government in Scotland, and then to mobilise support for a referendum on Scottish independence, consolidating the constitutional cleavage in Scottish politics. Thus, although Scottish politics has not witnessed the emergence of a radical right party, it has a 'tripolar' political space similar to that elsewhere in Western Europe, with voters split between left, centre-right and civic nationalist parties (Oesch and Rennwald 2018).

Holyrood/Westminster

While the electoral competition posed by the SNP in the 1960s and 1970s created increasing pressure for the party to have a more distinctive Scottish identity, it was only in 1994 that the name 'The Scottish Labour Party' was formally adopted. It was within this context, and the debates around devolution in the 1990s, that the most important issues of party organisation arose. Political decentralisation across the UK meant that state-wide parties now had to balance incentives to differentiate themselves from their central party leaderships with the imperatives of national party cohesion and maintaining a consistent political message at UK level. This balancing act was particularly difficult for Labour; reluctance to decentralise party structures was most evident in the continued central party control over candidate selection in the first Holyrood election in 1999 (Marsh and Hall 2007). There was also a mixed reception to attempts to extend UKLP campaign slogans and identity with the branding of 'Scottish New Labour' (Hassan 2002). Devolution, however, marked the first time that the Labour Party in Scotland was able to elect its own leaders, although this position was still not formally recognised in the UKLP's constitution.

After the first devolved elections, the UKLP loosened the grip of central party control, allowing the party in Scotland to follow their own policy-making procedures and generate their own election material, yet no major changes were made in the constitutional relationship between Scottish Labour and the UKLP. More extensive reform came in response to the electoral success of the SNP, whose decisive victory in the Scottish Parliament elections of 2011 prompted a 'root and branch review' led by Jim Murphy MP and Sarah Boyack MSP. The Murphy-Boyack review made several recommendations designed to shift the primary focus of Scottish Labour to the context of Scottish politics rather than Westminster. The reforms, including the creation of an elected leader of the Scottish Labour Party as an official position within the party constitution, and local branches based on Holyrood rather than Westminster constituency boundaries, were approved by a special conference later that year (Hassan and Shaw, 2012: 330). The first Scottish Labour leader to be elected under these changes was Johann Lamont MSP, whose later accusation that the London-based leadership persisted in treating Scotland like a 'branch office' highlighted the continued tensions around centralised control (BBC News, 2014).

Within the context of SNP electoral dominance and the devolution of further powers to Scotland in 2016, discussions around party decentralisation continued. The case for greater autonomy was taken up under the leadership of Kezia Dugdale MSP, who suggested a more federal model of party organisation. As a result, Scottish Labour took responsibility for decisions on general election candidate selection as well as the management and organisation of CLPs and other units of party organisation in Scotland. However, tensions with the UKLP have persisted, particularly on the question of whether a Westminster Labour government would negotiate with the SNP to allow a second referendum on independence (Massie, 2019).

As a party in a multi-level polity undergoing substantial political turbulence, the Scottish Labour Party is criss-crossed by complex fault-lines. As it seeks to pull itself out of its current quagmire, the question becomes how the party perceives its own situation, and how it envisages a route out of its four major

divisions: Yes/No; Remain/Leave; Socialism/Social Democracy and Holyrood/Westminster. It is to this question that the following analysis attends.

Methodology

In representative democracies, political parties provide a link between voters and political elites, with party members subsequently playing a role as intermediaries (Heidar & Wauters, 2019: 6). Most political parties – including Scottish Labour – express an ethos emphasising membership democracy, with decision making powers and influence over such areas as the selection of the party leader, and policy motions to party conference. The views of members across different layers of the party are thus central to understanding the Scottish Labour Party’s strategic outlook, which in turn shapes the policy documents, manifestos and other internal party outputs.

Previous empirical investigations into the nature of political party memberships have utilised both qualitative and quantitative research methods (Bale, Webb and Poletti 2018; Hennessey et al. 2018; Mitchell et al. 2011; Tonge et al. 2014). To date, Seyd and Whiteley’s (1992; 2002) research into Labour’s grassroots remain the most comprehensive surveys of attitudes across the UKLP. Utilising membership survey data and semi-structured interviews, Seyd and Whiteley provide a valuable insight into the UKLP and the pressures that existed across the party hierarchy. More recently, survey data which samples the views of party members across the four largest parties in British politics highlighted the tensions that continue to exist across the hierarchical structures of the UKLP, and the gap between the party’s positioning and the rank and file, particularly on Brexit (Bale, Webb and Poletti 2018).

The analysis in this paper goes deeper into the Scottish Labour Party to explore how several complex fault lines intersect with sub-state organisational and political dynamics two decades after devolution. In order to capture perceptions of intra-party debate from a sub-state political level and further explore how these tensions are perceived across the party hierarchy, the research adopted a qualitative

methodological approach based upon 22 semi-structured elite interviews that took place in 2016 and 2017, and seven focus groups with members of Scottish Labour in 2016.

In order to better understand the central political cleavages in relation to different levels of the Scottish Labour Party hierarchy, the data from across the 22 elite interviews and seven focus groups has been grouped by party strata. Firstly, *party grandees* are identified as senior figures within the Scottish Labour Party who have previously held high profile, frontline positions and/or who have also been, but are no longer, elected representatives either in Westminster or in Holyrood. The *politicians and advisors* group refers to those who currently hold elected office (note, this does not include members of the House of Lords, who have been assigned the identifier 'grandees') or who are, or have previously been, advisors to elected politicians. The final grouping of *grassroots activists* consists of party members and trade union officials. As this research focuses on the dynamics across the internal hierarchies of Scottish Labour, party voters do not feature in this analysis.

The participation of members in the research took the form of seven focus groups of between four and 11 members each, run across Edinburgh, Glasgow and Dundee. Focus groups were chosen as a specific tool for eliciting party members' views due to their ability to facilitate participants' collective exploration of mutual experiences, while allowing individuals to be stimulated into discussion on their own terms by the conversation of their peers, rather than putting them 'on the spot' with one-to-one interviews (Michell 1999). Members invited to participate were selected at random from local membership lists provided by the Scottish Labour Party. In order to explore the differences in members' views following Labour's membership surge, in certain cases the invitees were categorised in order to distinguish between 'new' and 'old' members (i.e. pre-/post-2015), with some focus groups specifically organized to gain the views of 'new' or 'old' members, and others mixed or 'unidentified' (this distinction did not yield any notable differences in the analysis itself).

The 22 elite interviews were conducted on two separate occasions in August 2016 and November 2017, during the period of Kezia Dugdale's leadership or, in the latter case, during the electoral contest for

her successor, but before the announcement of Richard Leonard's victory. In order to track any changes in opinion, particularly relating to the EU referendum and party leadership changes, a sample across the groupings were interviewed twice. All quotes have been anonymised, referring only to the interviewees' 'grouping' and date of the interview/focus group. The analysis that follows groups the interview material into four sections, corresponding to the most significant divisions in the Scottish Labour Party: the first three of which correspond to political cleavages (Yes/No, Remain/Leave, and Socialism/Social Democracy) and the fourth to the intra-party division on power in a multi-level party and polity (Holyrood/Westminster).

Understanding the Contemporary Scottish Labour Party: Analysis

Yes/No Divide

There was a broad consensus amongst interviewees that Scotland suffers a 'hangover' from the independence referendum of 2014. Interviewees consistently registered a major problem for Scottish Labour of being squeezed between the definitive 'Yes' position of the SNP or the definitive 'No' position of the Scottish Conservatives. This broad analysis was accepted across the board by interviewees and focus group members, who acknowledged that the Scottish Labour Party had been 'outmanoeuvred on the constitution' and had therefore struggled to carve out its own identity in the post-2014 landscape.

There were two broad schools of thought about how the party should deal with the 'hangover'. Some argued that Scottish Labour should embrace it and purposefully fashion a unique position on the constitutional question, which inevitably meant for those proposing this view, a form of federalism:

'I actually think Labour's got to have an answer on the constitution and I think refusing to talk about and to ignore it isn't going to work. The solution might be and, in my view, probably is a version of federalism ... Labour can no longer avoid talking about the constitution' (Activist, Aug 2016)

In contrast, others refused to engage with the constitutional question and continued to want to fight politics on the left-right axis and ‘traditional’ Labour issues such as social justice and public services:

‘Personally, I think we should just shut up about the constitution and we need to play the long game ... It’s about left and right and show the inequalities that exist in Scotland, the competency or otherwise of the government ... and just keep plugging away at that.’ (Advisor, Aug 2016)

Those emphasising a federalist platform were overwhelmingly grassroots activists and trade union officials, whereas party grandees, and politicians and advisors, were much less keen to accept the constitution as a permanent fault line in Scottish politics. One interpretation of this is that those ‘on the ground’ were much more in tune with the realities of Scottish political discourse and debate, and thus the concerns of the voters. Conversely, it might be argued that activists were unable to see past the short-term and that those in higher positions within the party were able to take a *longue durée* view. It must be stressed, however, that not all activists wanted to embrace the new constitutional blueprint of Scottish politics. Equally, not all politicians and party grandees believed the party has no business in fighting politics in such terms – indeed, Kezia Dugdale made a shift towards a new post-Brexit ‘federal’ settlement a signature position of her leadership (Carrell and Walker 2016).

Those interviewed in 2016 were much more pessimistic about Scottish politics and Scottish Labour’s future than those interviewed after the 2017 general election, unsurprisingly given both the Scottish Labour Party’s and UKLP’s better than expected performance at the election. There was a tangible shift in opinion from 2016 to 2017 towards a general belief that the post-referendum hangover was starting to come to an end (although none claimed that it had definitively ended). However, enthusiasts for a federalist offer claimed that Scottish Labour’s upturn in fortunes in 2017 was in no small part down to Kezia Dugdale’s decision to adopt a quasi-federalist policy platform, particularly as a way of getting permission to move onto more familiar ground such as the NHS and education: ‘The reason why in 2016 no-one listened to it [the manifesto] was partly due to the constitutional question; people weren’t ready then to talk about ideas, they were still caught up in the Yes/No bind.’ (Politician, Nov 2017)

The final point to note is that there remained those who disagreed that the hangover had started to fade and were sceptical about constitutional politics: 'I think that the whole thing is as complex as it always has been in some senses ... No one in their heart and soul cared [about federalism]' (Activist, Nov 2017). These voices were keen to argue that Scottish Labour lost votes to the Scottish Conservatives because the latter offered a much more convincing 'No' position to voters who had concerns over the SNP's continued drive for a second independence referendum;

'I have no doubt in my mind whatsoever that a lot of our voters who are fed up with the constitutional question and want it to go away looked to Ruth Davidson and admired her ... So we're still caught. Ordinary working-class people who have been Labour voters are sick to the back teeth of the constitutional question and want somebody strong to say, 'Right that's enough'. And Ruth has done that and people have told me at the door, 'I've been Labour all my life and my dad'll be turning in his grave' and all the rest of it, but they were going to be voting for her.'

(Politician, Nov 2017)

Remain/Leave

Two broad schools of thought – pessimistic and optimistic – emerged on the Brexit referendum. Pessimistic voices were strongest in the 2016 batches of interviews, as party leaders and members battled to keep up with the latest shock in UK politics. Their concerns were twofold. First, there was a concern that the result of the referendum - a narrow Leave vote with Scotland voting strongly to Remain - played right into the SNP's hands. Second, they worried that Scottish politics would continue to be structured by constitutional debates and conflicts with the Westminster government for a while to come, to the detriment of the Scottish Labour Party. The first line of thinking followed the rationale that the SNP could quite easily craft a narrative of, 'We told you so', continuing to portray to the electorate an image of Scotland being ignored by Westminster. The second was that Scottish Labour had a profound difficulty in crafting a strong position in a Scotland dominated by constitutional politics.

There was also some optimism, however, and while this was more tangible in 2017, there were traces of it in the 2016 interviews as well, particularly amongst activists and union officials. With the whole of the UK now engaged in constitutional debates, they viewed Brexit as a perfect opportunity for Scottish Labour to get on the front foot and make a federalist position work. In 2017, this optimism had been strengthened by the results of the general election, which some interviewees attributed to the SNP's mishandling of Brexit. These interviewees argued that Nicola Sturgeon's calls for a second independence referendum in the aftermath of the Leave vote backfired, as voters had grown weary of the constitutional issue: 'people couldn't believe the cynicism of using the Brexit vote to revisit the referendum vote... Brexit was a disaster for her [Sturgeon]' (Politician, Nov 2017). This bred further optimism that voters were now fed up with the Yes/No debate and wanted the Scottish government to get on with governing the nation rather than agitating for independence. One senior Scottish Labour politician put it like this:

'... I got quite a lot of angry SNP-leaning supporters who were saying, 'Why are they trying to tell me when I've just voted?' and by that they meant, 'In the EU referendum I've just voted to come out and they want to design something so I'm driven back in against my will. I've voted against this!' So there were a lot of SNP-supporting Yes voters in 2014 who had voted to leave [the EU] in 2016 who were absolutely not going to accept the proposition being put forward by the SNP leadership that the result of 2016 gave them license for a second independence referendum on the pretext that this would keep us in Europe. We've just voted to come out of Europe. So, there was a fragmentation of their base which led them to be absolutely persuaded that now actually wasn't the time to press for the second independence referendum.' (Politician, Nov 2017)

Another notable difference between the 2016 and 2017 interviews is that a much broader analysis was taken in the latter set when it comes to reflections on both the 2014 and 2016 referenda. The Party's senior figures – particularly its elder statesmen and women – shared an analysis of Yes voters and Leave

voters as symptomatic of a growing anti-establishmentarianism within the UK. One interviewee went further, grouping Trump, Brexit, Corbyn and the SNP all under a banner of disaffection with Western liberal democracy, arguing that the Scottish Labour Party's struggles in recent years were a result of it being seen by voters as part of the establishment; 'Brexit and Trump give you a context for what happened in Scotland and actually we were just earlier' (Activist, Nov 2017). However, indications of splits in Scottish Labour over how to handle the European question – and how far to use Brexit to drive a clearer divide between the two main unionist parties – also emerged. As one senior figure argued:

'We've haemorrhaged votes to the SNP since 2014 and we're starting to get some of them back because of the Jeremy effect but that's only going to help us to a certain extent... we've also got a second opposition which is the Tories who we are haemorrhaging votes to consistently. We're not going to out-union them so ... how do we get some of the votes we've lost back and how do we create a clear dividing line with them? Brexit is the only place to go.'

(Politician, Nov 2017)

This insight looked prescient in light of the 2019 European Parliamentary results, after which the party officially backed a second referendum on Brexit and committed to campaigning for 'Remain' in it. This shift in policy, which broke significantly with UKLP's position, was led by Richard Leonard (BBC News 2019) and fell into line with what Anas Sarwar, Leonard's leadership rival in 2017, had been calling for. Prior to the policy change, Sarwar, reflecting on the 2019 results, stated:

'We must be an unequivocally pro-Remain party. We must be an unequivocally pro-UK party. We have a radical policy programme under Richard Leonard's leadership... But we will only earn the permission to be listened to on these policies if we are clear on the biggest issues of the day' (Sarwar 2019).

This indicates that both sides of the ideological divide within the party recognized the importance of crafting a clearly identifiable Scottish Labour position on Brexit, regardless of whether that put the party

at odds with UKLP policy. However, the 2019 General Election result simply opened up further divisions within the UKLP's ranks as to whether Brexit was the primary cause of the party's defeat or not, while the catastrophic nature of the defeat in Scotland provided little succor for any wing of Scottish Labour.

Socialism/Social Democracy

Across the whole range of interviews and focus groups, three topics of conversation emerged when discussing issues of ideology. These were: the concept of a 'Left Scotland'; the SNP and its left-wing credentials; and the UKLP's and Scottish Labour's shift to the left.

On the first issue, interviewees from all sections of the party were keen to stress that Scotland is not an inherently left-wing nation, or more so than the rest of the UK. Some interviewees referred to social attitudes surveys, while others discussed their experiences on the doorstep:

'I think Scottish people are on the right and they like to tell themselves they're on the left because it makes them feel better ... We're quite a conservative (with a small c) country ... we don't vote Conservative, but in my view that's because they [Scottish voters] think they're English, not because they're right-wing.' (Advisor, Aug 2016)

'[We] kidded ourselves in the '80s that Scotland was a Tory free zone. Well it was a Tory *MP* free zone. The Tories didn't go away, they just voted differently ... half of them are in the SNP.'

(Politician, Aug 2016)

These comments challenge a perceived stereotype of Scotland that it is a progressive country and more left-wing than the rest of the UK. They are borne out by attitudinal data: social attitudes in Scotland are only marginally more social-democratic than in England (Curtice and Ormston, 2011) and attitudes towards immigration are very similar (Curtice and Montagu, 2018). Interviewees also routinely dismissed the idea that the Scottish Labour Party is more left-wing than the rest of UKLP: 'You'd probably put the Scottish Labour Party certainly in the centre of the [UK] party, if not slightly to the

right. I don't think there's any evidence that the Scottish Labour Party has been particularly more left-wing than the UK Labour Party' (Activist, Aug 2016).

Interviewees across Scottish Labour were also at pains to discredit the image of the SNP as a left-wing party, a view they believed is commonly held outside of Scotland. They frequently referred to the SNP's record in government and highlighted the diverse political persuasions of both the party's membership base and some of its high-profile politicians. One interviewee described the SNP as 'kind of Christian Democrats. I see them as centre-right' (Advisor, Aug 2016). Another identified them with 'quite a right-wing agenda' (Grantee, June 2016). There was consistent rejection of the 'frankly dreadful views' (Activist, Aug 2016) of Labour supporters in England proposing an alliance with the SNP.

The issue of ideological divisions within the party changed over the period of this research. It first began to emerge in later 2016 interviews. Here, Corbyn became a major talking point and opinion could be easily split between pro- and anti-Corbyn positions. Those more supportive of Corbyn were activists and union officials, whereas party grantees, politicians and advisors were much more critical. Interestingly, however, pro-Corbyn interviewees were much more muted in their support than anti-Corbyn interviewees were in their criticism. Corbyn sympathisers frequently called for returns to 'traditional Labour values', which were often discussed in broad terms such as 'equality' and 'fairness', rather than declarative support for socialism, and were frequently accompanied by references to Keir Hardie, such as the following from a supportive member in Edinburgh: 'James Keir Hardie, 1886. The same things he was fighting for we're fighting for now and this is what we do, this is who we are, this is what we fight for, this is what we argue for. The world has changed but we haven't' (Activist, Aug 2016).

In contrast, anti-Corbyn voices were much more direct, criticising Corbyn's leadership qualities, electability and personal character ('People think it's mental [Corbyn as leader] and utterly ridiculous because he's totally incapable of doing the job' (Activist, Aug 2016)). However, they did not attack his personal beliefs or ideological positions associated with him; hardly any interviewees went as far as to say that a more socialist direction would be a mistake. It was even suggested, in fact, that the Scottish

Labour Party manifestos of 2015 and 2016 were just as left-wing as Corbyn's positions. A critic of the UKLP leader argued: 'anybody criticises me about Jeremy Corbyn, I just send them the 2015/16 manifesto and say, 'Read them, everything's in there already'' (Politician, 2016).

The party's leftward shift was much more prominent in the 2017 interviews and focus-groups. Given the 2017 general election result, pro-Corbyn voices became much more overt and direct in their support for the party's leader. They hailed the 'Corbyn effect', claiming Corbyn had a direct and positive influence on Scottish Labour's performance in the election:

'The Corbyn agenda does resonate right across the board in society, particularly with young people and indeed among the party membership ... The whole thing about Corbyn was that energy, that enthusiasm, that presence, the message that was there... It certainly has enthused the Labour Party members and I know from speaking to people on the doorstep that there are people who previously departed from the Labour Party are coming back.'

(Activist, Nov 2017)

Supporters believed this was attributable to both the manifesto and, more importantly, Corbyn's perceived authenticity and credibility: 'he's seen to be somebody that people will not always agree with, but he always seems to act on the basis of some political principle rather than just positioning or manoeuvring' (Politician, Nov 2017).

In contrast, anti-Corbyn voices – mostly politicians – were more muted than previously. Critics questioned the reality of the 'Corbyn effect' and pointed to both experiences on the doorstep ('I would say of the people who raised his name for seven it was a problem and three it wasn't a problem. So people were voting for us despite him rather than because of him' (Politician, Nov 2017)) and Theresa May's exceptionally poor campaign. The most direct criticism of Corbyn came from a senior union official and a high-profile politician. Both were extremely concerned by what they saw as a major

increase in misogynistic behaviour by pro-Corbyn activists and blamed the London leadership for allowing a hostile, over-masculinised environment to develop within the party:

‘What I have not liked about the people that Corbyn has brought into the party and has strengthened - it is that really aggressive, macho, personal tone. It’s always been in the party so let’s not pretend it’s not. But they seem to have been unleashed and unbound and I just don’t really like it. ... Corbyn has made it bubble up even more.’ (Activist, Nov 2017)

It appears that a new line of division is opening up within the party that is centred not just on the content of discourse within the party, but how that discourse is articulated.

Holyrood/Westminster

Throughout the interviews the topic of party structure was extremely popular, discussed at length by party grandees, politicians and advisors, and activists alike. There was near-universal acceptance that the Scottish Labour Party had long struggled to define and shape its relationship with the UKLP, and that the latter, despite being the government that devolved power to Scotland, had never understood devolution.

Some believed tensions over party structure stemmed from Westminster’s ignorance of Scottish politics, whereas others believed there was a more calculated hostility at work from current and former Scottish Labour MPs. Those with more experience of the early days of devolution, typically party grandees and politicians, pointed to the fact that many Scottish MPs were against devolution from the start as they saw it as a dilution of their power – a position articulated in the claim that, ‘most Scottish MPs did not want devolution ... MPs hated it, they didn’t like it, they didn’t want it, they didn’t understand it ... it has always been the fundamental problem that Scottish Labour has had in my view since devolution, the Westminster problem’ (Activist, Aug 2016). Senior party figures also accused the UKLP of continuously trying to control from afar, on occasion treating the Scottish Labour Party ‘like a branch office, which was entirely unacceptable’ (Politician, Aug 2016); this was followed up, however,

with acknowledgment that due to later reforms, 'that ... in general terms has now been sorted' (Politician, Aug 2016).

Others, however, were much more conciliatory towards the UKLP, and believed that Labour MPs at Westminster simply did not understand the effect that devolution had on changing the relationship between Holyrood and London. They attributed this to Scottish MPs becoming cocooned in the Westminster bubble and losing touch with Scottish politics. Whilst more recent reflections acknowledge that progress had been made, vigilance for any possible backsliding was recommended:

'One of the reasons why we have lost votes in every single Scottish parliamentary election since devolution is the Scottish Labour Party itself struggled to come to terms with devolution. I think we finally have now come to terms with devolution. I think there's a real risk that we go back from that. I still think the UK party hasn't understood devolution.' (Politician, Nov 2017)

When considering how to address these issues, opinion again split between improving relationships through dialogue, on the one hand, and forcing their improvement through structural reform, on the other. Those in the former camp believed that communication needed to be improved and that people on both sides of the divide, but particularly those in Westminster, needed better to educate themselves about Scottish politics. Some referred to calls from the London media for Scottish Labour to enter into a progressive alliance with the SNP as an indicator of Westminster ignorance of the realities of Scottish politics, and that such ignorance was not something that could be resolved by implementing structural change.

Those who favoured structural change believed that the lack of any clear guidelines or rules left open the possibility for matters to regress. There was no identifiable division between party grandees and politicians on the one hand and activists on the other regarding this issue, however. In addition, not a single person in our interviews advocated a fully autonomous and separate Scottish Labour Party. All of those interviewed acknowledged the importance of maintaining a formal Holyrood/Westminster link

and exercising the autonomy of Scottish Labour as part of a 'wider family'. There was a general desire for the Scottish Labour Party to maintain and assert its own form of identity while simultaneously maintaining its position as a key component of the wider British Labour movement; 'I'm in favour of the strides we've made towards autonomy but I also am proud of the fact that we contest UK general elections as one party and I'm pleased that I'm a member of the same political party as Nye Bevan and Tony Benn and Jennie Lee' (Politician, Nov 2017).

It is also important to note that there were two clear dissenting voices in our interviews. One party grandee downplayed the idea of a geographically-founded divide, stating 'it is the policies that matter, not the structure' (Grandee, June 2016). The Scottish Labour Party's plight was instead attributed to electioneering by the SNP who have simply mobilised and organised better than Scottish Labour in recent years. Another politician (Aug 2017) recognised a divide of Holyrood's creation rather than Westminster's.

Most interviewees had positive things to say about Kezia Dugdale's reforms to give the Scottish Labour Party more control over its own affairs, with many specifically referencing new control over PPC selection for Westminster elections. No one said that a perfect solution had been reached, but conversely, no one advocated further autonomy. More recently, however, Scottish Labour's disastrous European Elections and 2019 General Election results have raised these issues again; following the decision to have Jeremy Corbyn's image on the European election literature in Scotland, rather than his own, Scottish Labour leader Richard Leonard stated, 'There is still work that needs to be done, some battles that need to be re-fought, to establish the importance of having a distinctive Scottish Labour presentation to the people of Scotland' (Hutcheon, 2019b). Continued challenges clearly remain as the party seeks to sustain a unique Scottish Labour branding, reflective of the political landscape in Scotland.

Discussion

Scottish politics has been transformed in the last two decades and with it, the fortunes of the Scottish Labour Party. In common with other European party systems, Scottish politics is no longer dominated by the class cleavages of an industrial society (Beramendi et al. 2015). The hegemony that a majoritarian political system gave to the Scottish Labour Party as the leading party of the working class, confronting conservative and liberal opponents on a foundational socio-economic, left-right axis of electoral competition, has collapsed. Electoral competition in Scotland is now tri-polar, largely fought between civic nationalist (SNP), left (Scottish Labour) and right (Scottish Conservative and Unionist) parties, and takes place in a multi-dimensional political space of socio-cultural as well as economic concerns. Like other social-democratic parties, the Scottish Labour Party commands the support of the new middle class or 'socio-cultural professionals' but must compete for their loyalty with the SNP and Green Party, while the liberal or cosmopolitan views of these voters are often in tension with more socially conservative views amongst its core working class voters, who have also split off to both the SNP and the Scottish Conservatives (Gingrich 2017; Hausermann 2018). Scottish Labour has been forced to adjust to both new political challenges and new political challengers.

The UKLP, like some other social-democratic parties, responded to the loss of support it previously enjoyed by shifting to the left – seeking to attract working class voters back into the fold alongside the new middle class. The Scottish Labour Party broadly followed this trajectory, positioning itself as a challenger to the SNP from the left of the economic-redistribution axis. However, while at Westminster the UKLP benefits from the tendency of majoritarian systems to consolidate electoral support behind two main parties, in Scotland, the use of the Additional Member System for Holyrood elections facilitates multi-party politics. Nor can the multi-dimensions of Scottish politics be collapsed into the economic one, with parties competing solely or largely on the left-right axis. Brexit has overlaid another division onto the existing constitutional cleavage in the social-cultural dimension of Scottish politics.

Our research shows that the Scottish Labour Party is acutely aware of these strategic dilemmas. At all levels of the party, members recognise that, as the sub-state division of a state-wide party, operating

in a territory of a multi-level, multinational state that has a different electoral system and structure of party competition to those of the nation state 'level', it has to contend with more complex electoral dynamics than the UKLP as a whole. To create the space necessary to frame and prosecute a political strategy appropriate to its distinct situation, it has resultantly sought and won new forms of autonomy and political identity from the UKLP. In so doing, the Scottish Labour Party's adaptation is reflective of wider trends familiar to state-wide parties operating across other multi-level polities, such as Spain (Fabre 2008; 2010).

However, our interviews show that Scottish Labour suffers considerable divisions over its identity and strategy. Senior members of the party – grandees, elected politicians and advisors - are more sceptical of its recent left turn than grassroots activists and trade union officials. The latter were particularly important to Richard Leonard's leadership victory and the party's leftward shift, as they were for the election and consolidation of the Corbyn leadership of the UKLP. After the 2017 general election, when the Corbyn leadership's power in the UKLP was at its height, the trade unions and a little over half of the rank-and-file membership were able to effect a change in the strategic direction of Scottish Labour.

At the same time, our interviews show that grassroots members and trade unionists have been readier than senior party figures to embrace a quasi-federalist perspective on the constitutional question. Left and right divisions in Scottish Labour do not map directly onto the constitutional question; it was under the 'moderate' leadership of Kezia Dugdale that the Scottish Labour Party staked out a clearer quasi-federalist constitutional policy, but this found more support with grassroots members in our interviews, than with senior party figures. Conversely, it was the 'moderate' or right of the Scottish Labour Party that more consistently sought to shift the party towards an unequivocally 'Remain' position on the Brexit question.

Despite these divisions, there is near unanimity that there has been a long running and deep cleavage between Scottish Labour and the UKLP over power and how it is exercised within the party itself, and most of our interviewees blamed this fault-line on the national party and its failure to understand

Scottish politics. Jeremy Corbyn's declaration at the Scottish Labour Party's 2019 annual conference, that 'the real divide in our society is not between people who voted yes or no for [Scottish] independence' or 'people who voted to remain or to leave the EU', but rather 'between the many ... and the few' (Carrell and Sabbagh, 2019), may thus have resonated with many members' own feelings, while showing limited understanding of the strategic dilemmas of the Scottish context. Nonetheless, for all that, the Scottish Labour Party remains a constituent part of a state-wide party, and this continues to structure how it views its history, values and indeed obligations. It has embraced a quasi-federalism, in both structure and substantive policy, but is neither ready nor willing to constitute itself as an independent Scottish party. For the foreseeable future, it will therefore continue to inhabit the tensions created by the transformation of both Scottish and UK politics, and continue to seek a narrative that offers a route out of its crisis.

More broadly, what the Scottish Labour Party case illustrates is the difficulty faced by state-wide parties operating in multi-level systems, in particular social-democratic parties adverse to campaigning on the constitution and national questions. The desire amongst Scottish Labour members to swing left, politically, was perhaps predictable in the context of a long period of austerity politics; shifts by sister parties on the Iberian Peninsula show a similar dynamic. But ironically, a key reason for this change in direction was to align the party with the leftward shift of the national UKLP under Corbyn's leadership. Instead of marking out a distinctive Scottish political identity, Scottish Labour chose national alignment and in the process sacrificed much of what it had gained as a semi-autonomous sub-national party. It subsequently found itself at odds with the UKLP leadership over whether to agree to a second referendum on independence in Scotland – the price the SNP had been expected to demand in return for supporting a minority Labour government at Westminster.

At the sub-state level, integrated parties need clear answers to constitutional questions and national identity (be these related to the sub-state nation or Eurosceptic challenges) if they are to compete with both civic nationalist challengers and conservative defenders of the constitutional status quo. Central

to this is the need for parties' state-level leadership to seriously engage with, survey and understand the socio-political situation in sub-state electoral arenas and adapt their messages and policies accordingly. These are questions that will not diminish with a return to an assumed left-right political equilibrium. In advanced capitalist-democracies like the UK, political spaces have become increasingly multi-dimensional and multi-level, and state-wide parties are faced with fights upon multiple fronts. Party members and their leaderships need to embrace this issue of pluralism within their political identities and electoral strategies.

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