

Feminist institutionalism and women's political leadership in Scotland: successes and failures



[Jenny Morrison](#) and [Ewan Gibbs](#) write that Scottish feminists' experiences of organising in the Women's Liberation Movement pointed to the importance of pragmatically working towards shared goals across traditional divisions. This emphasis on consensus decision-making has moulded a centre-left framing for Scottish women's leadership that rejects both conservatism and left-wing radicalism.

Nicola Sturgeon recently became Scotland's longest-serving First Minister. Sturgeon took power in the immediate aftermath of the 2014 independence referendum when Scotland still had a phalanx of Labour MPs, David Cameron was the Prime Minister at the head of a coalition government, and nobody had heard of 'Brexit'. She has since led the SNP to two Scottish Parliament election victories and saw her party top the poll in Scotland at three UK general elections. Sturgeon is a potent symbol of liberal tolerance and has often been compared to other female national leaders from contrasting political traditions with a reputation for competence and consistency such as Angela Merkel and Jacinda Arden.

Sturgeon stumbled across the contradictions between her association with a politics grounded in tolerance and social justice and the contemporary associations of nationalism with 'strong men' such as Trump, Erdogan, and Putin as well as support for Brexit at the Edinburgh Book Festival in 2017. Whilst speaking to the Turkish writer, Elif Shafak, the First Minister acknowledged her disquiet over the Scottish National Party's name, saying she felt the term 'national' was ['hugely problematic'](#). These comments revealed a long-running tension since Scottish feminists embraced the turn towards national institution building in the closing decades of the twentieth century.

When the Women's Liberation Movement was established in Scotland, it included a distinctive national organisation. The SWLM was a formally constituted organisation, but many of its members were suspicious of demands for devolution during the 1970s. They feared that a Scottish Parliament would threaten the recently won right to abortion. These concerns were only heightened following the Garscadden by-election of 1978, when both the SNP and Labour Party candidates were judged to have taken an opportunist line by failing wholeheartedly to embrace reproductive rights, in contrast to the governing British Labour Party's stance at the time. In this context, even comparatively economically radical Scottish socialists and nationalists could be understood as agents of social conservatism in a society where both the Protestant and Catholic churches remained pillars of authority.

Over the course of the 1980s, these alignments underwent a marked change as feminists came to embrace devolution. They did so in a much altered context. The Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher became viewed as a far greater threat to women's welfare and rights than Scottish parliamentarians, whilst a shifting national context appeared to hold out more optimistic prospects. Feminists who had persisted in building organisations such as Women's Aid and Rape Crisis became increasingly linked with local government and party politics. The Scottish Abortion Campaign also built close relationships with the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC), assisting in the building of enduring networks that linked feminists and their organisations to an increasingly sympathetic civil society. These connections further reinforced the sense that Scotland was a distinctive polity which merited its own democratic national institutions, and that these would hold out favourable prospects for women.

The tenor of calls for devolution had also shifted. Whilst calls for 'a workers' parliament' had characterised the STUC's championing of devolution in the 1970s, by the 1980s and into the 1990s, the union confederation stood at the centre of demands for a more pluralistic Scotland to be given representation in a new parliament. This call came to be focused on the cross-party Scottish Constitutional Convention which issued *A Claim of Right for Scotland* in 1988.

Feminists were involved, but also criticised that there was only a small number of women at the Convention's top table. They issued *A Woman's Claim of Right* which confirmed the crystallisation of a Scottish feminist approach to institutional politics that developed further under devolution. Embracing cross-party cooperation, disavowing Westminster's masculine and archaic practices was at the centre of this worldview. Grandstanding was condemned in favour of pragmatic cooperation on achievable aims. Increased representation for women emerged as a key objective for the new parliament, and one that was substantially achieved when 37.2% of MSPs at the first Scottish parliamentary election in 1999 were women.

A renewed Scottish political class has matured under devolution with female politicians enjoying a novel prominence. All three of Scotland's largest parties have had women leaders within the last decade. Female politicians have also been associated with championing socially liberal causes. One prominent example in the early days of devolution was when then Scottish Executive Minister for Communities, Wendy Alexander, pressed on with removing the homophobic legislation Section 28. Alexander faced down a noisy campaign of opposition that included a 'referendum' called by millionaire bus tycoon Brian Souter and which was supported by Scotland's best-selling tabloid, the *Daily Record*. Souter and his supporters perhaps resembled the fears of earlier feminists about the potential for devolution to provide an outlet for intolerant Scotland. Yet it proved to be a false dawn for bigots, with a raft of liberalising legislation following the path set by Section 28, usually passing comfortably and with cross-party support.

The limitations of these achievements are perhaps most apparent in the socioeconomic failures which have disproportionately impacted women and which the devolved administrations have a hand in. Alexander championed economic as well as social liberalism which was enunciated in the economic strategy, *A Smart Successful Scotland*, which heralded the abandoning of the decades-long policy of attracting greenfield investment in electronics industries. In practice, these changes entrenched the movement towards an increasingly feminised service sector labour market characterised by low wage and economic insecurity.

These shifts also expose the limits of the pragmatism which Scottish feminine political leadership has come to embrace. The forging of a more diverse professional political class was perhaps also accompanied by a movement away from links to the form of protest politics which had characterised the Scottish left over the previous century or so and the Scottish Women's Liberation Movement more particularly during the 1970s and 1980s. One important instance was the nursery nurses' strike of 2003-4. This was a long-running dispute between low-paid working-class women and their employers, with the public sector union, Unison, demanding a national settlement. Feminists in government found themselves on the other side of the picket lines to strikers. Parliamentarians from the Scottish Socialist Party were the strikers' most active supporters. Carolyn Leckie was thrown out of parliament whilst extending her support for the dispute and her colleague, Frances Curran, led a debate.

Leckie and Curran's contributions challenge the view that the Scottish radical left is summarised by tub thumping male radicals, and also underline the limitations of feminine political leadership in contemporary Scotland. Since the Scottish Socialist Party's disappearance, the hold of a more cautious and official form of feminine political leadership has been consolidated in a context where dialogue between 'social partners' and 'stakeholders' has become hines as a Scottish Government craft.

Nevertheless, by consciously adopting an institution-building orientation, the dominant strain of Scottish feminists succeeded in shifting the balance of representation and parliamentary culture. Yet in the process, they also arguably contributed to a political and economic settlement which continues to perpetuate exploitation and inequality as well as burden women disproportionately.

Note: the above draws on the authors' published work in *British Politics* available [here](#).

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