

Politics, the Constitution and the Independence Movement in Scotland since Devolution

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Abstract

This article explores the course of Scottish politics since the establishment of the devolved parliament in 1999. It begins by considering the political roots of devolution before assessing the extent to which the electoral successes of the Scottish National Party (SNP) at the 2007 and 2011 devolved elections indicated a rise in support for Scottish independence. The focus then shifts to the political consequences of the 2014 independence referendum, in particular the relationship between the 'Yes' campaign and the SNP, as well as the changing social composition of the SNP's electoral support. The article concludes by examining the attempts of the SNP, and the wider independence movement, to secure a second independence referendum before reviewing recent political developments in Scotland.

Keywords: Scottish independence, devolution, SNP, referendum

Introduction

AS THE TWENTY-FIFTH anniversary of the establishment of the devolved Scottish Parliament approaches, it can seem self-evident that the programme of constitutional reform pursued by the Labour government in the late 1990s has stoked support for independence and occasioned a historic political realignment in Scotland. The transformation of Scottish politics since the arrival of devolution has undoubtedly been stark and can be traced via the familiar signposts: the rise of the Scottish National Party (SNP) to a previously unimaginable position of ascendancy; the parallel decline in the fortunes of a once-dominant Labour tradition in Scotland; the spirited popular debate that preceded the 2014 independence referendum; and the subsequent emergence of a political culture in which attitudes towards Scotland's constitutional future appeared to become the primary determinant of political allegiance. Yet, if the chronology is clear, then the lines of causation are still blurred. Certainly, it can be difficult to gauge with any precision whether the constitutional innovations of recent decades have themselves generated new commitments and identities, or if they have merely allowed for the clearer expression of political attitudes

shaped by longer-term processes of social and economic change. There remain questions too as to the relationship between backing for the SNP at parliamentary elections, whether for Holyrood or Westminster, and the broader movement in support of Scottish independence. Likewise, the case for independence, in both its constitutional and broader social and economic guises, appears to be in grave need of renewal. Lastly, the durability of the SNP's electoral dominance is uncertain following Nicola Sturgeon's departure as First Minister and party leader, with a number of internal divisions and controversies being exposed during the contest to appoint her successor, Humza Yousaf.

Devolution and the rise of the SNP

There was, from the outset, a basic tension present within the devolution settlement between acknowledging an already distinctive Scottish political culture and potentially providing the constitutional basis for further political divergence between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. At a fundamental level, the scheme detailed in the 1998 Scotland Act was retrospective in outlook, designed as an answer to the constitutional questions posed by the politics of the preceding decades.

Support for devolution had been adopted, largely grudgingly, in the 1970s by the Labour Party in Scotland as a result of the perceived need to respond to the SNP's improved electoral performance. However, the experience of the 1980s, when Labour repeatedly gained an overwhelming majority of Scottish MPs, but was confronted with a seemingly immovable right-wing Conservative government at Westminster, strengthened the left-wing rationale for devolution. Devolution could now be understood not as a concession to nationalism, but rather as a way of protecting a left-leaning and egalitarian Scottish polity from the excesses of a Conservatism culturally and economically rooted in the south-east of England. Thus, while Labour critics of devolution, most notably Tam Dalyell, the MP for West Lothian, had wielded substantial influence during the debates over the Labour government's ill-fated devolution proposals of the late 1970s, by the time the party returned to power in 1997, there was a widespread consensus in favour of constitutional reform within Labour's Scottish ranks; significantly, Labour had played a leading role in the cross-party Scottish Constitutional Convention, which had helped to bolster support for devolution during the 1990s. For senior Scottish Labour figures in this period, such as Gordon Brown, Donald Dewar and George Robertson, a devolved parliament would recognise and institutionalise the progressive politics believed to prevail in Scotland. From a narrower, partisan perspective, devolution also seemed likely to entrench Labour's electoral supremacy in Scotland; and while the use of proportional representation for elections to the new parliament was a genuine concession that stemmed from Labour's participation in the Constitutional Convention, and an attempt to differentiate devolution from the confrontational two-party politics embedded at Westminster, it was also a means through which an enduring centre-left coalition of Labour and the Liberal Democrats could be assured, locking out both the Conservatives and the SNP. In an important sense, then, devolution was understood by its architects as resolving the constitutional debates that had shaped Scottish politics in the final third of the twentieth century; the new parliament would meet the demands for greater political autonomy and accountability voiced since the late 1960s and

would, at the same time, it was believed, undercut the political appeal of Scottish nationalism.

Such forecasts appear, of course, almost absurdly naïve in hindsight. While Labour and the Liberal Democrats were able to form coalition administrations for the new parliament's first two terms, since 2007 the SNP has held power, latterly in coalition with the Scottish Green Party. Moreover, polling conducted since the 2014 independence referendum, where the pro-independence 'Yes' campaign secured 45 per cent of the vote, has consistently shown that an independent Scotland remains the desired outcome of close to half of the Scottish electorate. It is, however, critical that the SNP's electoral fortunes prior to 2014 and the rise in support for Scottish independence recorded at the referendum are not conflated too crudely. The SNP's emergence as the dominant party at Holyrood was driven, in part, by the relative success of the modernisation measures undertaken under the leadership of both Alex Salmond and John Swinney. In particular, the concerted efforts made to address the SNP's historic weakness with voters from Catholic backgrounds was crucial in broadening the party's appeal in traditional Labour seats in urban and postindustrial Scotland. The SNP's approach to electioneering and fundraising also became increasingly professional and effective in the lead up to the 2007 and 2011 Scottish Parliament elections.¹ Nonetheless, the SNP was, to a significant extent, the beneficiary of fluctuations in the fortunes of other parties, shifts that often had little to do with the nuances of Scottish politics, but which, when refracted through the 'additional member' voting system in place at Holyrood, produced dramatic electoral changes. At the 2007 Scottish Parliament election, for example, while the SNP did recover from the disappointing performance it had registered four years earlier, the party still polled fewer votes than it had at the first devolved election in 1999; it was the continued insipid performance of the Labour Party and the sharp fall in support for

¹P. Jones, 'The smooth wooing: the SNP's victory in the 2007 Scottish Parliament elections', *Scottish Affairs*, vol. 60, 2007, pp. 10–16; J. Mitchell, L. Bennie and R. Johns, *The Scottish National Party: Transition to Power*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, ch. 3.

the Greens and the Scottish Socialists, who had both polled well in 2003, that ensured that the SNP was able to form a minority administration for the first time, having won forty-seven seats to Labour's forty-six. It is also telling that the steepest decline in the Labour vote in elections to the devolved parliament occurred between 1999 and 2003, when, looking at constituency ballots, the party lost the support of close to 250,000 voters.² This would suggest that disillusionment with the Labour governments led by Tony Blair at a UK level, and perhaps the impact of the Iraq war, played an important role in determining the course of devolved politics in Scotland. Similarly, while the SNP vote did increase dramatically at the 2011 Scottish Parliament election, delivering the single-party majority that the electoral system was designed to prevent, Labour and Conservative support proved relatively stable. The decisive factor was the collapse in the Liberal Democrat vote, which more than halved as the party was punished by Scottish voters for its participation in the Conservative-led coalition government at Westminster. Even after devolution, Scottish politics was shaped by the impact of wider British trends.³

It is, then, difficult to conclude that the SNP victories in 2007 and 2011 pointed to any meaningful upsurge in support for Scottish independence. Indeed, polling undertaken during the 2007 contest suggested that fewer than a third of Scots endorsed independence and that even one in three SNP voters were in fact opposed.⁴ Even in the wake of the SNP's striking triumph in 2011, support for independence remained confined to between a quarter and a third of the public.⁵ The extremely low voter turnout evident at the early elections to the devolved parliament

was equally instructive: turnout was well below the levels typically witnessed at Westminster elections, slipping from 58 per cent in 1999 to 49 per cent in 2003; it was barely above 50 per cent in 2007 and 2011. Such figures are hardly suggestive of either the thriving culture of popular political participation envisioned by devolution's proponents, or of a groundswell in pro-independence sentiment. Rather, the public apathy that seemed to surround devolution in its early years triggered, if anything, expressions of concern about the legitimacy and long-term future of the Scottish Parliament.⁶

Independence and the Scottish electorate

Although it was plainly a practical outcome of the majority won at Holyrood by the SNP in 2011, the 2014 independence referendum is, therefore, best understood as a discrete event, one that shunted Scottish politics on to a different path, as opposed to a straightforward or logical extension of pre-existing political trends. The referendum was enabled by the Edinburgh Agreement, co-signed by the SNP First Minister Alex Salmond and the then UK Prime Minister David Cameron, and under which the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition administration at Westminster agreed to delegate authority to the Scottish Parliament to legislate for an independence referendum. The agreement gave the SNP, through its majority in the Scottish Parliament, control over the date of the referendum, the franchise—clearing the way for 16 and 17 year-olds to be enfranchised—and the wording of the question; the UK government did, however, demand a simple binary choice between independence and the constitutional status quo, stymieing the SNP's desire to include a third option allowing voters to endorse the so-called 'devo max' model. Nevertheless, once the campaign was underway, the pro-independence movement soon vaulted clear of traditional party boundaries as a host of new organisations, overwhelmingly radical in political orientation and positioned to the left of the SNP, arrived to

²D. Denver, "'A historic moment?'" The results of the Scottish Parliament election 2007', *Scottish Affairs*, vol. 60, 2007, pp. 61–79; House of Commons Library, Research Paper 03/46, *Scottish Parliament Elections: 1 May 2003, 14 May 2003*; <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/RP03-46/RP03-46.pdf>

³D. Denver, 'Another "historic moment": the Scottish Parliament election 2011', *Scottish Affairs*, vol. 76, 2011, pp. 33–50.

⁴Denver, 'A historic moment', p. 78.

⁵N. Davidson, 'A Scottish watershed', *New Left Review*, vol. 89, 2014, p. 9.

⁶N. McEwen, 'Is devolution at risk? Examining attitudes towards the Scottish Parliament in light of the 2003 election', *Scottish Affairs*, vol. 44, 2003, pp. 54–73.

canvass for a Yes vote. For those involved in the Radical Independence Campaign, National Collective, Women for Independence, or Common Weal—often an assortment of Greens, left-wing SNP members, former Labour voters and activists, and the newly politically enthused—the referendum offered a unique opportunity to make the case for a more equal and just society, and to reject the policy of austerity being pursued by the UK government at the time. These arguments in favour of independence, which found their most receptive audiences in previously neglected working class communities, bore only the loosest, if any, relationship to the more limited official case presented by the SNP administration in its 2013 White Paper.⁷ As the late Neil Davidson noted, the SNP's vision of an independent Scotland appeared to have been crafted 'to make the prospect of independence as palatable as possible to the unconvinced by proposing a form which would involve the fewest possible changes to the established order'. Davidson concluded that there had, in effect, been two separate pro-independence campaigns.⁸

The referendum result, while it delivered a majority in favour of Scotland remaining part of the UK, demonstrated the impact of this new pro-independence movement. The 45 per cent vote polled by the Yes campaign was far above what supporters or opponents could plausibly have expected or feared prior to the referendum. But of arguably even greater significance was the extent of popular engagement: some 85 per cent of Scottish voters took part in the referendum, a figure unmatched in the era of mass democracy. The pro-independence portion of the electorate that backed Yes in 2014 was, then, profoundly different from that which had returned the SNP to office at the preceding Holyrood elections. In part, this was merely a question of numbers: the increased turnout in 2014, on an expanded franchise, meant that it was certain that a vast number of Yes voters simply had not participated in earlier elections. But there were other critical geographic and demographic differences too. At the 2011 Scottish Parliament election, the SNP had, to be sure, made significant inroads in Labour's heartlands in west-central Scotland; all the same,

the SNP's electoral strength continued to rest upon the party's traditional strongholds in central and north-eastern Scotland.⁹ The pattern of support for independence in 2014 was different: the only local authority areas in Scotland to register a majority Yes vote were Glasgow, Dundee, North Lanarkshire and West Dunbartonshire. In contrast, regions such as Aberdeenshire, Angus, Moray and Perthshire, established bases of SNP support since the party's initial electoral breakthrough in the early 1970s, delivered higher than average majorities against independence. There were, we must assume, a number of voters in such areas who, while they might vote SNP in a normal election, did not support the party's ultimate aim of an independent Scotland. Those who did back independence tended to be younger, working class and living in Scotland's urban centres.¹⁰

Elements of the new pro-independence coalition created by the referendum campaign, which totalled nearly half of the electorate, had, therefore, only a conditional attachment to the SNP. For many, either because of their relative youth or their prior detachment from electoral politics, the referendum had been their decisive political experience: more than this, their commitments were inspired by the radical possibilities that activists argued would be released by constitutional change; independence was a route to social and economic transformation, not an intrinsically worthwhile destination. In the short term, of course, these voters swung behind the SNP, swelling the party's membership, which rose to more than 100,000 in the referendum's wake, and delivering the astonishing result at the 2015 UK general election, where, on a markedly increased turnout, the SNP secured almost 50 per cent of the popular vote in Scotland and gained fifty-six of Scotland's fifty-nine seats at Westminster; in 2010 the SNP had returned just six MPs to Westminster on a share of the vote below 20 per cent. Yet, while of immediate benefit, the influx of a younger, more radically inclined cohort into the party's ranks also created difficulties for the SNP. In particular, by expanding the party's support to such an extent in urban

⁷*Scotland's Future: Your Guide to an Independent Scotland*, Edinburgh, Scottish Government, 2013.

⁸Davidson, 'A Scottish watershed', pp. 13–14.

⁹Denver, 'Another "historic moment"?', p. 37.

¹⁰Davidson, 'A Scottish watershed', p. 21.

and working class Scotland, it raised the possibility that more longstanding SNP voters in provincial Scotland, where the central belt, and especially Glasgow, is often viewed unsympathetically, would become alienated. The impact of any decline in SNP support in these areas was apparent at the 2017 general election, which saw the Scottish Conservatives stage a striking revival under the leadership of Ruth Davidson, winning a number of seats in southern, central and north-eastern Scotland, even unseating the former SNP leader Alex Salmond in Gordon, which he had represented since 2015 following his decision to reverse his post-referendum retirement.¹¹ While the SNP did recover some electoral ground at the 2019 general election, and largely retained its dominant position at Holyrood at the 2016 and 2021 devolved elections, despite falling short of the overall majority achieved in 2011, it seems doubtful whether in the long term the party can continue as the leading representative of both urban and rural Scotland. If there were in 2014 two prospectuses for independence, then in the aftermath of the referendum the SNP's electoral momentum was being propelled by at least two distinct electorates.

The case for independence since 2014

The years after 2014 also saw the flaws in the SNP's case for independence become increasingly apparent. The SNP's 2013 White Paper on independence had, as we have seen, sought to downplay the extent to which independence would be a dramatic constitutional watershed. Instead, voters were reassured that, while independence would require the dissolution of the parliamentary Union of 1707, Scots would continue to participate in 'five continuing unions': NATO; the European Union (EU); the 1603 Union of the Crowns, with an independent Scotland retaining the monarchy; a currency union based on the continued use of sterling; and a social union comprised of 'connections of family, history, culture and language'.¹² This

was, in many respects, an attempt to find a way to offer the electorate the 'devo max' option blocked by the UK government, one in which the powers of the Scottish Parliament would be strengthened, while a shared UK foreign policy and currency was retained. This version of independence, questionable in 2014, became frankly untenable after the Brexit referendum of June 2016, which saw the UK vote to leave the EU by a margin of 52 to 48 per cent. The case for a sterling currency union post-independence had always been dubious and had been bluntly rejected by the UK government in 2014; after the Brexit result, it was impossible to reconcile with the SNP's continued commitment to seeking full EU membership after independence. Equally, the concept of an ongoing post-independence 'social union' was harder to envisage were Scotland to be inside the EU while the rest of the UK had departed, particularly given the complexities surrounding the UK border that Brexit had caused in the Northern Irish context.

In addition, the Brexit vote further exposed the tensions present within the electoral coalition that had coalesced behind the SNP after 2014. Viewed from one angle, of course, the conflicting result recorded in Scotland, where 62 per cent had voted to remain within the EU, could be deployed as evidence of Scotland's distinctive—and, frankly, less right-wing—political culture, one that was being disregarded at Westminster. Certainly, the Brexit result appeared to satisfy the precondition for demanding a second independence referendum proposed by the SNP at the May 2016 Scottish Parliament election, namely that there had been 'a material change in the circumstances that prevailed in 2014'; ironically, of course, the prospect of a newly independent Scotland being prevented from joining the EU had been a key feature of the pro-Union campaign in 2014.¹³ But support for independence did not necessarily entail a pro-European outlook and polling suggested that around one in three SNP voters had actually voted in favour of leaving the EU.¹⁴ Again,

¹¹G. Hassan, 'After the landslide: Scotland still marches to a different politics, only slightly less so', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 3, 2017, pp. 375–81.

¹²Scottish Government, *Scotland's Future*, pp. 214–15.

¹³Scottish National Party, *Re-Elect: SNP Manifesto 2016*, p. 2.

¹⁴A. Henderson and J. Mitchell, 'Referendums as critical junctures? Scottish voting in British elections', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 71, supp. 1, 2018, p. 116.

an important consideration here was the SNP's traditional sources of support in the farming and fishing communities of the north-east where Euroscepticism enjoyed a long lineage: while no Scottish constituency voted in favour of Brexit, it was here that the Leave campaign polled best. In Moray, then represented by Angus Robertson, the SNP's leader in the House of Commons, Leave gained 49.9 per cent of the vote; tellingly, the Conservatives took the seat at the general election the following year. While Nicola Sturgeon, who had succeeded Salmond as First Minister and SNP leader after the 2014 referendum, might declare that the 'stark divergence in democratic will between the different nations of the United Kingdom' on the European issue had to be acknowledged, and that Scotland should be allowed to remain within the single market, the truth was that Brexit complicated rather than confirmed the case for independence.¹⁵

More than this, and despite the party's victories at successive Holyrood and Westminster elections since 2014, the SNP has found no viable path to a second independence referendum. The precedent set by the 2012 Edinburgh Agreement, and the nature of the powers reserved to Westminster under the devolution legislation, means that this would once more require the consent of the UK government. The consistent position of the recent Conservative administrations has, however, been that the 2014 poll was a once in a generation event, placing any rerun at least another decade away. The Labour Party, meanwhile, remains chastened by the experience of the 2015 general election, when the Conservative Party used allegations of an unofficial understanding between Labour and the SNP to strengthen its position in England. If there were times, during Jeremy Corbyn's tenure as Labour leader, when figures on the party's left could strike a relatively sympathetic tone on the question of a second referendum, Keir Starmer has overseen a reassertion of Labour's historic antipathy towards the SNP. This uncompromising stance has been encouraged by the possibility—raised by recent opinion polling—of Labour retaking a substantial number of Scottish seats from the

SNP at the next UK general election.¹⁶ The recent focus of the Labour Party has been on detailing plans for 'widening the powers' and 'entrenching the permanence' of the devolved parliament, building on the example of both the Scotland Act of 2012 and of 2016.¹⁷ SNP efforts to secure a second referendum have also been hampered, somewhat unfairly, by the exceptional election results recorded in 2011 and 2015, with any failure to match those being portrayed by the party's opponents as evidence that support for independence has declined.

With the electoral route to a second referendum seemingly barred, the SNP turned instead towards the Supreme Court, with the Scottish government seeking confirmation that the Scottish Parliament could legislate to hold an advisory independence referendum. It was, though, little surprise when the Supreme Court rejected this argument, ruling unanimously in November 2022 that any referendum, even if presented as advisory, would nonetheless relate to matters reserved to Westminster under the 1998 Scotland Act. The judgement prompted Nicola Sturgeon to make the uncharacteristically confrontational assertion that, if no legal avenue to a second referendum was available, then the SNP would treat the next UK general election as a *de facto* referendum, where a majority of votes for the pro-independence parties would be considered as a mandate to begin negotiations on independence. Yet, this statement provoked some unease within the SNP and Sturgeon's successor, Humza Yousaf, who assumed office in March 2023, has already executed a retreat, suggesting that, should the SNP win a majority of Scottish seats at a general election, this would instead provide the basis for negotiations with the UK government on the holding of another referendum.¹⁸ The SNP finds itself back in exactly the same position as it was

¹⁶All polling information sourced from <https://www.whatscotlandthinks.org/>

¹⁷*A New Britain: Renewing our Democracy and Rebuilding our Economy (Report of the Commission on the UK's Future)*, London, Labour Party, 2022, p. 101.

¹⁸L. Brookes, 'SNP leader says general election win would be mandate for independence push', *The Guardian*, 24 June 2023; <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/jun/24/snp-leader-general-election-win-mandate-independence-push-humza-yousaf>

¹⁵*Scotland's Place in Europe*, Edinburgh, Scottish Government, 2016, p. vi.

prior to the Supreme Court decision, waiting, in effect, for a change in the political climate at Westminster that seems unlikely to arrive anytime soon, if at all.

Still, the SNP's commitment to pursuing independence only through legally recognised means—meaning, in practice, a referendum on the 2014 model—should encourage a certain scepticism towards the attempts of opponents of independence to depict the party as part of a broader populist tendency visible internationally in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008 and the austerity politics that followed. To be sure, strands within the broader independence movement might fit that description, but the SNP, with its concern for constitutional propriety and political respectability, and accompanying desire to be seen as a competent party of government, has little in common with, for example, the genuinely populist figures who led the Brexit campaign, such as Nigel Farage or Boris Johnson. Indeed, under Sturgeon's leadership, and especially during the Covid crisis, the SNP administration at Holyrood benefitted from the contrast between its public image and that of the Johnson government at Westminster, even though the public health outcomes were largely the same in Scotland as in the rest of the UK.

The failure of the SNP to identify a workable strategy for securing independence has, though, been at the heart of the recent rifts that have developed within a party that had, for much of the post-2014 era, been noted for a formidable internal discipline that contrasted with the vicious intra-party conflicts characteristic of Conservative and Labour politics in the same period. The arrival of Alba as an additional pro-independence party in early 2021 was, of course, inspired to a large extent by Alex Salmond's pursuit of political redemption after his expulsion from the SNP amid allegations of sexual misconduct, and his eventual acquittal at the ensuing trial. Yet, while Alba failed to make an impact at the 2021 Holyrood election, the party did also give expression to the desire among some nationalists for a more combative public campaign for independence, calling for greater use to be made of the public demonstrations organised by the All Under One Banner group, as well as the convening of an Independence Convention that would welcome independence supporters from all parties, an idea

with a long lineage among advocates of constitutional reform in Scotland. In addition, Alba served as a vehicle for those sceptical of aspects of the current SNP-Green coalition's social policy, particularly the moves made to strengthen the legal rights of transgender people by making it easier for someone to change their legal gender. Ash Regan, the previously unheralded SNP MSP who outperformed admittedly low expectations in the leadership election that followed Nicola Sturgeon's departure in early 2023, adopted a similar stance, calling for a cross-party pro-independence campaign; given that the SNP was already in coalition with the Greens, this presumably meant an alliance with Alba. Revealingly, Regan had previously resigned from her ministerial role in the Scottish government over her opposition to the proposed gender recognition reforms. Disputes over the future direction of party strategy on independence continue, chiefly among SNP MPs at Westminster, where Angus MacNeil, MP for Na h-Eileanan an Iar since 2005, has, as of July 2023, been suspended from the party after calling the approach of the leadership on the issue 'utterly clueless'. MacNeil has advocated triggering an early Holyrood election, which should then be treated as a *de facto* referendum.¹⁹ The recent financial controversies that have dogged the SNP, and which have been the subject of a deeply damaging police investigation that has seen a number of senior party figures, including Sturgeon, taken into custody, are also rooted, if only indirectly, in the absence of a coherent strategy. The police inquiry, which began in July 2021, is centred on the question of what happened to around £600,000 in funds raised for a second referendum campaign that never arrived.

Conclusion

There is, then, a feeling that Scottish politics, and especially the movement for Scottish independence, has begun to enter a new era, that the identities and divisions formed by the 2014 referendum and its aftermath have become exhausted. The ability of the SNP to hold together the mass support it attracted

¹⁹'Angus MacNeil says SNP "clueless" about independence plan', BBC News, 12 July 2023; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-66178870>

after 2014 appears to be waning: party membership has declined to around 70,000 from a peak of approximately 125,000 in 2019. Further, polls since Humza Yousaf replaced Nicola Sturgeon, conducted against the backdrop of the police investigation into the party's finances, have indicated that backing for the SNP has fallen to below 40 per cent of the electorate, sharply down from the results recorded in the most recent Holyrood and Westminster contests. The same polls have recorded a marked rise in Labour support in Scotland, signalling that the party's improved prospects at a UK level, where Labour appears on course to win the next general election, are having a positive impact in a Scottish context. But it is revealing that support for independence has proved more robust and has not been impacted by the SNP's recent troubles. This hints at a decoupling of the SNP vote and pro-independence sentiments; if these could in recent years be treated as basically equivalent, then that seems unlikely to be the case in future elections. As has been suggested here, a section of the pro-independence vote created in 2014 had an instrumental view of the SNP, seeing the party as a vehicle for the realisation of certain aspirations. If their faith in the SNP has been shaken, it may be that they switch their allegiance to other parties or opt to simply not vote; their belief in Scottish independence will, however, remain.

A similar process of fragmentation can be seen in relation to the case for independence, which has once more become a significant area of debate. Kate Forbes, the former SNP Finance Minister who finished a surprisingly close second to Humza Yousaf in the recent leadership election, polling 48 per cent of the final vote, represented not just a strand of social conservatism that is seldom heard within the SNP, but also a more right-wing and pro-business economic outlook than the party had pursued under Sturgeon's direction. Notably, Forbes was a member of the Scottish government's Sustainable Growth Commission, established in 2016 to explore the economic policy options open to an independent Scotland, and which issued a report in 2018 that advocated firm limits on public spending post-independence as well as praising the virtues of flexible labour markets. Whatever the objective merits of such policies, and the extent to which they might

help assuage doubts within the business community about the wisdom of independence, they are unlikely to help the SNP retain the loyalties of those left-wing supporters of independence who were so crucial to both the Yes vote and the overall turnout in 2014. Indeed, such voters may be tempted to back the Labour Party at the next general election in order to prevent the return of another Conservative government; others may simply abstain. As has been the case with the clashes over the issue of transgender rights, reconciling the competing social and economic ambitions present within the independence movement has become harder while the prospect of a second referendum remains remote.

It is probable that, at the next general election, some of the pro-independence vote that has been largely, if not entirely, channelled by the SNP since 2015 will move across to the Labour Party, with the Greens offering a further option at Holyrood elections. In certain respects, this echoes the experience of the 1980s, when, following the disappointment of the abortive 1979 referendum, pro-devolution voters could be found in Labour, SNP and Liberal ranks. For supporters of constitutional change, that can be interpreted as a positive comparison: devolution, although delayed, arrived eventually. A more pessimistic reading, however, would observe that, despite devolution enjoying far greater support in Scotland than independence does now, successive Conservative governments simply ignored public opinion; it required the return of a Labour government at Westminster in 1997, enjoying a large Commons majority bolstered by a sizeable cohort of Scottish MPs, to change that situation and deliver another referendum on devolution. For all that support for Scottish independence increased during the 2014 campaign and has remained high since, there is no equivalent political vehicle or mechanism available to the independence movement, and no sense of how to respond if a future Labour government reiterates the stance of the current Conservative administration and refuses to countenance a second independence referendum.

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