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The Antinomies of Insurgency: The Case of the Scottish National Party

JAMES FOLEY, TOM MONTGOMERY AND EWAN KERR

Abstract

The Scottish National Party (SNP) has emerged from generations on the periphery to make a substantial imprint on mainstream British politics. However, in only a matter of months, the foundations of that success have crumbled and, by the admission of its leaders, the SNP is experiencing its greatest crisis in five decades. The roots of this crisis are not well understood, since most recent research has sought to explain the SNP's post-2014 successes. However, the article argues that these successes have always hinged upon a prior moment of politicisation in 2014 on the one hand, and annual cycles of mobilisation and demobilisation on the other. The article draws attention to the SNP's governing strategy of stabilising itself through a process of strategic depoliticisation on independence, which supplanted activist mobilisation with a politics of spectatorship. It then goes on to suggest that, for the SNP, this depended on a paradox of crisis in the British state and being a governing party of the British state.

Keywords: (de)politicisation, devolution, crisis, Scottish National Party, sovereignty, Scottish politics

Introduction

THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY (SNP) has emerged from the periphery to make a substantial imprint on mainstream British politics. Already the third largest bloc in the House of Commons, polls in early 2023 even suggested the SNP might supplant the Conservative Party as the UK's official parliamentary opposition—an extraordinary prospect for a party competing in less than 10 per cent of UK seats.¹ However, the foundations of that success have crumbled in just a few months. Even its own officials concede that the SNP has experienced its greatest crisis in five decades.² A succession of troubles has included the sudden resignation of its figurehead, Nicola Sturgeon, alongside her husband,

party CEO Peter Murrell; police investigations into party finances; and precipitous declines in polling numbers.

The roots of this crisis are not well understood, since most recent research has sought to explain the SNP's post-2014 successes. This article considers the party's recent evolution holistically, re-examining the undoubted electoral successes of the Sturgeon era, while accounting for its recent woes. Scandal alone cannot explain the SNP's downturn; indeed, many of the allegations have been reported for years, but have only recently impacted upon the party's standing. Beneath the high-profile arrests and resignations, there are thus deeper questions about the origins of the SNP's legitimacy: externally, with respect to sections of the Scottish public; and internally, concerning the governance processes inside the party.

The roots of electoral Scottish nationalism are often traced to the 1970s and 1980s, with the discovery of North Sea oil and the breach between civic Scotland and Westminster during Margaret Thatcher's reign. These historical foundations remain relevant to understanding the SNP's route to power. Equally, their

¹A. Garton-Crosbie, 'SNP "not interested" in becoming official opposition at Westminster', *The National*, 10 February 2023; <https://www.thenational.scot/news/23314655.snp-not-interested-becoming-official-opposition-westminster/>

²BBC News, 'SNP facing "biggest crisis in 50 years"—Mike Russell', *BBC News*, blog, 8 April 2023; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-65219944>

relevance should not disguise the quantitative and qualitative breach that occurred with the 2014 referendum, which transformed the SNP as an organisation. The referendum, as we conceive it, was a case study in what Rancière calls *politicisation*.³ It opened previously closed channels for debating accumulated inequalities of wealth and power sustained under the long arc of the UK's neoliberal consensus. One outcome was to transform the SNP almost overnight from a relatively small organisation, with many activists on first name terms, into a mass membership party. This seemed, at first, to solve a longstanding dilemma in the party's history: of establishing a permanent sociological base in the Scottish landscape that would provide a mobilising mechanism for fundraising and electoral activism. However, far from democratising the party, the influx triggered a centralising reflex, ossified internal power relations and precluded critique of leadership decisions. In strengthening the governing party, the politicisation of the 2014 referendum would paradoxically serve to *depoliticise* social questions of inequality within Scotland. The resulting accumulation of frustrations and grievances injected destructive new energies into Scottish politics, which prefigure the SNP's legitimacy crisis.

Much of the subsequent unravelling was a consequence of the SNP's peculiar relationship with movement politics. Historically, the SNP is atypical among political parties in its emphasis on extra-parliamentary goals and purposes. Its success was, in part, a consequence of this link to disruptive social movements, which allowed it to tap latent energies of politicisation via the 2014 referendum. Nonetheless, the SNP remained inescapably structured by pressures comparable to all parties with serious investment in government. Mair and Katz observe that party organisations must present three faces: the party in public office; the party on the ground; and the party central office.⁴ This framework allows for comparison in the genetic structure of party organisations. On the one hand, the

SNP's electoral success can be regarded as typical of 'catch-all' nationalist parties, serving as a broker between social groups and the state rather than a servant of particular social interests. On the other hand, the SNP was unusual in its routinised dependence on mass mobilisation and a large, committed membership. Examination of these relationships can offer insights into the surface scandals, most especially the initial police investigations into independence fundraising and party finances. More importantly, though, it offers insights into the SNP's specific nature as a political organisation and helps explain why it thrived in an era of economic downturn when so many centre-left parties suffered electoral decline.

Strategy, sovereignty and sociology

The SNP experienced both a quantitative and qualitative metamorphosis after the 2014 independence referendum. However, in establishing an electoral beachhead, the party had to confront questions of strategy, sovereignty and sociology, which added to its resilience in opposition, while also limiting its options in power. These founding dilemmas played out in the SNP's long road from outsiders and interlopers to a party capable (via devolution) of challenging for government. Throughout, as Mitchell observes, the SNP would retain characteristics of an extra-parliamentary movement which generated peculiar tensions between party members, parliamentarians and central office.⁵

Strategically, the SNP has a longstanding division between gradualists, who favour building nationalist legitimacy inside existing institutions, and fundamentalists, who favour decisive moves to separation.⁶ These camps had largely fused during the Salmond-Sturgeon era, with any exceptions forced to the margins of respectable nationalist opinion. However, the rupture within the SNP's historic leadership in the Salmond trial and the subsequent formation of the Alba

³J. Rancière, *Dissensus: On Aesthetics and Politics*, London, Bloomsbury, 2010.

⁴R. S. Katz and P. Mair, 'The evolution of party organizations in Europe: the three faces of party organization', *American Review of Politics*, vol. 14, 1993, pp. 593–617.

⁵J. Mitchell, 'From breakthrough to mainstream: the politics of potential and blackmail', in G. Hassan, ed., *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2009.

⁶J. Mitchell, 'Recent developments in the Scottish National Party', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 4, 1988, pp. 473–477.

Party—which has attempted to tap into the discontent of members, activists and MP/MSPs, including those previously aligned to the fundamentalist camp within the SNP—has reopened this most elementary dilemma. The gradualist-fundamentalist split, having once disappeared from nationalist thinking, has thus resurfaced with unusual factional intensity.

The SNP has also periodically disputed the sharing of Scotland's sovereignty with international institutions, military alliances and trading blocs. Notably, the party demurred on European Community membership long into the 1980s.⁷ Overlapping dilemmas persisted long after the SNP had embraced 'independence in Europe': disagreements over the place of an independent Scotland in NATO, for instance, caused three MSPs to leave the SNP between 2012 and 2014. More recently, the party has broadly aligned itself towards transnational power blocs. Yet, the new consensus has actually redoubled the underlying contradiction. In its vision of independence, the party has never reconciled internationalist anti-nuclear commitments with NATO membership; or unilaterally using the UK pound sterling—so-called sterlingisation—with belonging to the EU single market.⁸ On these questions, the SNP placed ideological coherence—a broad vision of Scotland's culture of 'openness' to wider global forces—before programmatic coherence. Just as much as Westminster's truculence, programmatic deadlocks can guard against constitutional confrontation. Firm answers would alienate a section of the party's voter base, leaving the SNP locked on the horns of a dilemma.

Finally, from its origins via a merger between the National Party of Scotland and the Scottish Party, the party has sought to define its complex relationship with Scotland's political sociology while speaking to a more amorphous 'Scottish interest'. A study of its membership from 1970, just prior to the North Sea oil explosion, suggested that 80 per cent did not identify with a social class. The ideological origin of SNP members was

correspondingly diverse: of those members, 11 per cent had been Liberals, 9 per cent Conservatives, 9 per cent 'left/socialist', 5 per cent 'radical/libertarian' (the exact recipients of their support are unspecified), and 5 per cent Labour.⁹ However, the effect of North Sea oil and the (unsuccessful) devolution campaign was to re-centre questions of class. Most famously, the 79 Group—a source of future leaders such as Salmond, Kenny Macaskill and Roseanna Cunningham—sought to re-define the party as social-democratic and centred on Scotland's urban, Labour-voting working class. Their approach emphasised constructing a representational mass party built around Scotland's (declining) industrial sociology. The 79 Group saw such foundations as necessary to overcome the party's status as a temporary protest party. Their agenda would clash not just with those representing the SNP's rural, previously Conservative voting constituencies, but also with the SNP's longstanding legacy as a 'catch-all' nationalist party.

Questions of strategy, sovereignty and sociology also highlight another dilemma, between the party's face in public office and its face to the party grassroots. Long prior to the Sturgeon era, the SNP saw bursts of professionalisation and modernisation, punctuated by anxieties over internal democracy and accountability. As a party of protest, with a limited social base, activists were joining a party with a strong degree of member autonomy and vigorous internal debate relative to the mass parties of British government. Even into the 1990s, researchers questioned whether the SNP was a traditional party or a variety of 'new social movement'.¹⁰ Unlike most parties, the SNP was not focussed on permanent survival and had a natural termination point. Indeed, it remained formally committed to disbanding upon independence. Conversely, the party engaged in periodic marketing overhauls and bouts of administrative centralisation: there are

⁷J. Foley, 'Europeanisation, devolution and popular sovereignty: on the politics of state transformation in Scottish nationalism', *Critical Sociology*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2021, pp. 437–458.

⁸See, for example, K. Hayward and N. McEwen, *An EU Border across Britain: Scotland's Borders after Independence*, London, UK in a Changing Europe, 2022.

⁹R. M. Crawford, *The Scottish National Party, 1960–1974: An Investigation into its Organisation and Power Structure*, PhD thesis submitted at the University of Glasgow, 1982, p. 4; <https://theses.gla.ac.uk/5002/1/1982CrawfordPhD.pdf>

¹⁰J. Brand, J. Mitchell and P. Surridge, 'Social constituency and ideological profile: Scottish nationalism in the 1990s', *Political Studies*, vol. 42, no. 4, 1994, pp. 616–629.

thus references to ‘oligarchical’ tendencies in the SNP as early as the 1970s.¹¹ Especially after the creation of the Scottish Parliament, modernising tendencies grew apace. The new monies flowing from parliamentary representation allowed the SNP to expand its staff, from a pre-devolution figure of less than twenty prior, to 150 personnel by 2009.¹²

Given its lack of a permanent home in the big blocs of industrial society, the SNP has depended on mobilising member enthusiasm, particularly for fundraising purposes. However, historically the size of the SNP membership varied substantially. Figures as high as 100,000 were claimed in the 1960s, prior to the party achieving electoral successes. But, by the early 1990s, the SNP membership was as low as 15,000: a significant challenge in terms of fundraising. In the pre-referendum devolution era, membership ranged from 10,000 to 20,000; by 2003, it had fallen below 10,000.¹³ Even the extra monies of political representation failed to stem the financial gaps, leaving an increasingly professional party dependent on fundraising from entrepreneurs such as Brian Souter.

Nonetheless, the SNP of that era had been hardened by long opposition and robust ideological debates on the party’s internal fault-lines. It therefore possessed a resilience—a distinctive and cohesive sense of identity—that separated it from the mainstream of Scottish governance. In retrospect, this provided the party with three advantages. Firstly, unlike the neoliberal era of Scottish Labour, it was not encumbered by the baggage of having held government. Even if the SNP had, in practice, advocated the ‘Celtic Tiger’ vision of capitalist modernisation, it had combined this with continuous criticism of Labour-Liberal policies of privatisation and outsourcing. Secondly, the party retained its sense of separateness from the state. This

allowed it to point to examples of small states with free market policies as success stories of independence, while targeting votes from those communities long considered to be solid Labour heartlands.¹⁴ Moreover, given the hegemony of Labour, particularly in the central belt of Scotland, the SNP felt free to antagonise the established policy networks and associational ecologies of governance surrounding what passes for the Scottish state. This prickliness served to insulate the party from the pressures of the conformist ‘village’ atmosphere that, in the parliament’s early phase, had bred a cosy, symbiotic relationship between the new parliament and the Scottish civic sphere.

Finally, the SNP was structured around a concept of loyalty to a common cause, hardened by the long experience of advocating an outsider platform. SNP members did not necessarily regard themselves as a ‘normal’ party. For all the 79 Group’s efforts to disrupt Scottish Labourism, its goal was not a permanent representational role in Scotland’s political sociology, but rather to achieve a substantive goal, which, according to the party constitution, would prefigure the breakup of the party itself. To many, it was merely a vehicle for achieving a definite aim—a movement more than a party. Even if this has been romanticised by critics of the party’s metamorphosis into the ‘New SNP’ under Sturgeon and Murrell, there is no denying the transformation that would ensue from the referendum and its aftermath.

2014: Scotland’s moment of politicisation

While the SNP had achieved an electoral majority at the devolved level by 2011, the referendum of 2014 represents a more definitive rupture with the past. This can be traced on several measures. Quantitatively, the authoritative Scottish Social Attitudes survey suggests that support for independence would almost double in the two-year course of the referendum. SNP membership numbers

¹¹Such claims are examined, for example, in Crawford, *The Scottish National Party, 1960–1974*.

¹²C. MacKay, ‘The SNP and the Scottish Parliament: the start of a new sang?’, in G. Hassan, ed., *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2009, p. 79.

¹³M. Burton and R. Tunnicliffe, *Membership of Political Parties in Great Britain*, House of Commons Research Briefing, London, House of Commons Library, 2022.

¹⁴G. Mooney, ‘The “broken society” election: class hatred and the politics of poverty and place in Glasgow East’, *Social Policy and Society*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2009, pp. 437–450.

provide another measure: they would rise from roughly 15,000 to nearly 120,000 in the immediate referendum period.¹⁵ Qualitatively, there was a clear break in historic assumptions about a link between Scottishness and Labourism; likewise, an imaginative break between Scottish Labour and its working class ‘heartlands’.¹⁶ Finally, the period marks the point where the SNP’s substantive purpose, Scottish independence, gained a mass following and a framework for mass mobilisation. Previously, it had been regarded as an electoral liability rather than an asset; and extra-parliamentary mobilisation for independence barely registered among protest movements. Indeed, while it might be easy, in retrospect, to claim that Scotland’s move to nationalist hegemony was inevitable or predictable, a review of commentaries from the referendum period suggests that few predicted the surge in support for independence or that this would translate into SNP domination of Westminster general elections.¹⁷

Early efforts to understand the Scottish referendum, particularly from commentators outside the country, centred on questions of national identity. Yet, evidence from polling provides little evidence for any such surge. Indeed, the part of Scotland registering as ‘Scottish not British’ had fallen from 33 per cent in 2006 to 23 per cent in 2014; the part registering as ‘equally British and Scottish’ had risen from 21 per cent to 32 per cent in the same period.¹⁸ Alternatively, left-wing supporters of independence centred their analysis on the strains of class inequality and austerity, against a backdrop of New Labour’s post-Thatcherite turn. Support for this thesis comes from the demographics of the vote, which was slanted towards the most deprived communities of voters; and from the class-based discourses of many pro-independence leftist campaigners themselves, who actively

pursued voter registration drives in peripheral, peri-urban communities. However, by itself, this explanation is limited. Paterson has observed that the migration from Labour to the SNP and the broader pro-independence camp was not an evenly working class process.¹⁹ There was also a notable shift among left-leaning middle class professionals. Moreover, as time wore on, this latter group would be of growing significance to SNP-Green hegemony, while the working class surge of 2014 would dissipate.

So, what explains the transformation in Scottish politics? Given the electoral outcomes, there remains a lingering impression of an orderly handover from mass Labourism to mass nationalism. However, in orchestrating that transition, by raising the SNP’s legitimacy and delegitimising Labour, there was a crucial mediating moment of *politicisation*. As conceptualised by Rancière, politicisation involves a challenge and disruption to the existing distribution of power and authority in society.²⁰ Its effects are rarely reducible to sociological demographics or formal political organisation: it emerges more organically, as disruptive demands for recognition that register their *dissensus* with established norms. These politicising energies flowed through the 2014 Yes campaign, often in quite spontaneous expressions. ‘In the week running up to September 18th, Buchanan Street in Glasgow turned into an open-air hive of debate’, remembers Jonathon Shafi, a leading pro-independence activist from the left. ‘Matters of state, rather than being reserved for elites, became a question for all to grapple with.’²¹ While often overlooked in academic accounts, there are few obvious comparisons to these movement mobilisations in modern Scottish history, excepting perhaps the miners’ strike and the poll tax movement.

The referendum thus served to open disruptive debates in areas foreclosed from mainstream politics. Most obviously, it loosened debates on the UK’s constitutional future;

¹⁵Burton and Tunnicliffe, *Membership of Political Parties in Great Britain*.

¹⁶See G. Hassan and E. Shaw, *The Strange Death of Labour Scotland*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

¹⁷J. Foley, B. Wray and N. Davidson, *Scotland After Britain: The Two Souls of Scottish Independence*, London, Verso, 2022.

¹⁸J. Curtice, *Has the Referendum Made a Difference?*, Edinburgh, NatCen Social Research, 2014, pp. 6–8.

¹⁹L. Paterson, ‘Utopian pragmatism: Scotland’s choice’, *Scottish Affairs*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2015, pp. 22–46.

²⁰Rancière, *Dissensus: On Aesthetics and Politics*.

²¹J. Shafi, ‘How it came to this’, *Conter*, blog, 7 April 2023; <https://www.conter.scot/2023/4/7/how-it-came-to-this/>

however, as the earlier referendum on electoral reform suggested, constitutional reform itself often fails to excite popular enthusiasm. The 2014 referendum was different insofar as it also loosened the restrictions on working class agency that had been normalised by the post-Thatcherite Westminster consensus, exciting turbulent mobilisations in working class communities long accustomed to routinised Labour voting. In understanding the disruptive role of ‘class’ in this context, questions of agency and power mattered just as much as economic distress. Certainly, the cross-party austerity consensus from Westminster gave impetus to the Yes campaign. Yet it would be wrong to suggest a mechanical relationship between economic cause and political effect: austerity was not merely the fact of economic losses; it also symbolised the retreat of the British state as a guarantor of social citizenship.

Equally, the referendum was itself a longer-term reflection of the breakdown of collectivist and mass party organisation. It was thus the occasion for the final (and, arguably, long-postponed) collapse of the Scottish Labour Party’s claims to a mass social base. Moreover, since the stresses of austerity also fell upon younger members of the graduate middle class, politicisation did not fall evenly across the social spectrum. Nor was it confined to one group. The radicalisation that flowed through the Yes campaign, like the parallel Corbyn campaign in Labour, was thus itself an ironic consequence of class dealignment in a context of declining economic expectations.²² This encouraged activists to pursue a wider critique of those areas of British politics usually foreclosed from debate, ranging from monarchism and environmental strategy to foreign policy, even where these debates clashed with the SNP leadership’s efforts to present itself as a mainstream party. Disputes over NATO led swathes of established SNP activists to participate in anti-establishment campaign groups like Radical Independence and Common Weal. Notably, these energies of activist enthusiasm unleashed by the referendum were channelled into mass mobilisation, with the left wing of the movement actively pushing for voter

registration drives modelled on Jesse Jackson’s 1984 American presidential campaign.

During the referendum itself, the relationship between movement and governing party was complex. In a context of austerity and economic breakdown, the SNP entered 2014 less weighed down by historical baggage than Scottish Labour. Nonetheless, the party was faced with substantial problems of programme and presentation. Independence paradigms resting on the virtues of small nations in competitive global spaces had to be discarded after the crises facing, among others, the Irish and Icelandic economic models. In Scotland itself, the nation’s two preeminent firms, its banking titans—blueprints of successful globalisation both for Scottish Labour and the SNP—had been nationalised at the expense of the UK taxpayer. Moreover, party intellectuals themselves admitted that a successful prosecution of their case for independence rested on a booming world economy, which would form the precondition for a new ‘take-off’ in Scottish economic growth.²³ In these respects, the SNP’s superior adaptation to the post-2008 era of endemic crises cannot be explained on grounds of intellectual or programmatic consistency alone.

In Alex Salmond, the party also had a sometimes divisive figurehead; culturally, it still struggled with a reputation for machismo, reflected in the demographics of the Yes vote; financially, it remained dependent on entrepreneurial figures like Brian Souter. Conscious of that, the SNP deliberately sought the legitimacy of extra-parliamentary broadness. Whereas Better Together was a party-political alliance centred on mobilising elite consensus, its pro-independence counterpart, Yes Scotland, was fronted by a range of Scottish celebrities, campaigners and civic figures; its CEO, Blair Jenkins, was a broadcast journalist with no party-political experience. What followed was a case study in successful social movement rebranding: the image of independence politics would emerge younger, more female and less middle class than before. The Yes movement’s autonomy was no mere case of ‘astroturfing’: high-profile Yes campaign groups and leaders were often

²²See, for example, P. Whiteley, M. Poletti, P. Webb and T. Bale, ‘Oh Jeremy Corbyn! Why did Labour Party membership soar after the 2015 general election?’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2019, pp. 80–98.

²³J. Foley, *The Scottish Economy and Nationalism*, London, Routledge, 2023 [forthcoming].

vocally antagonistic to the SNP leadership. And the wider politicising energies were real enough, reflecting pervasive disaffection with a fossilised Labour electoral dominance. Nonetheless, in Yes Scotland itself, serious power belonged to the SNP precisely because nobody else wielded equivalent party-political mobilising capacity.²⁴

Quantitatively, the effect of politicisation is apparent in polled support. At the time when the referendum was announced, the Scottish Social Attitudes study measured support at just 23 per cent; in two years, this would rise to 45 per cent. There were significant gradations within this support: for instance, unprecedented levels of both independence support and turnout were registered in the most deprived and disengaged of Scotland's communities. It would be an exaggeration to claim that class was the referendum's significant variable: any such assessment depends on misattributing class to community deprivation.²⁵ Given wider trends of class dealignment, the referendum was inevitably a complex sociological patchwork. Nonetheless, the most deprived voters tended strongly towards Yes; conversely, opinion among elite professionals and businesses tended, if somewhat passively, towards the status quo. Furthermore, the referendum served to deliver other social groups previously linked to Labour hegemony into the orbit of nationalism: notably Irish Catholics, Muslims and residents of social housing.

Rising support for the SNP would eventually follow from the referendum, fitfully and unevenly, but with unstoppable force. From the low of 19.9 per cent in the 2010 general election, SNP support was polled at 29 per cent around the launch of Yes Scotland; and even in the months before the referendum, it still ranked as low as 31 per cent. However, after the referendum, polls showed support registering well above 40 per cent and even above 50 per cent. Under Nicola Sturgeon's leadership, in the long aftermath of 2014, this would

form the normal range of polling for both the SNP and independence.

Sturgeonism: centralisation, consolidation, depoliticisation

How did this disruptive, extra-parliamentary politicisation find accommodation so easily within a centralised party? The answer is complex. Some point to the natural commonalities between Sturgeon's leadership and the movement's progressive currents, and certainly, Sturgeon's feminist appeal was a factor in her legitimacy. So too was the stylistic break she offered with Salmond's public persona, which had become a liability in converting voters during the referendum. However, to extend these contrasts of style into stock ideological contrasts between Salmond and Sturgeon provides only limited insights into subsequent developments. The early phase of Sturgeon's leadership belies any simplistic 'leftist' characterisation. For example, Sturgeon handed the task of revising the party's economic case for independence not to movement-led think tanks like Common Weal, but rather to Andrew Wilson, a former MSP linked to corporate lobby group Charlotte Street Partners. This, among other moves in terms of personnel in the shape of elected members, reveals Sturgeon's reluctance to embrace the more leftist messaging of the Yes campaign on economics; instead, she sought the aura of expertise that came with accommodation to the neoliberal consensus, albeit balanced by (rarely-defined) signifiers of 'sustainability'.²⁶

A more useful angle is to examine the waning energies of politicisation after 2014 and the shifting role of the party relative to the social movement. Research by Mitchell, et al., suggests that, while most new members had been much energised by the referendum campaigning, many had not participated directly and only a minority had any desire to continue the referendum's mood of mass participation.²⁷ Given how successfully 2014 morphed

²⁴N. MacKay, 'Ex-Yes Scotland director: SNP trashed us—that's why we lost in 2014', *The Herald*, 14 May 2023; <https://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/23520654.ex-yes-scotland-director-snp-trashed-us---lost-2014/#comments-anchor>

²⁵See, for example, N. Davidson, 'A Scottish watershed', *New Left Review*, vol. 89, Sept/Oct 2014.

²⁶E. Gibbs, 'Scotland's faltering green industrial revolution', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 92, no. 2, 2021, pp. 57–66.

²⁷J. Mitchell, L. Bennie and R. Johns, 'Parties, movements and the 2014 Scottish independence referendum: explaining the post-referendum party membership surges', *Party Politics*, vol. 27, no. 6, 2021, pp.1075–1295.

into the electoral successes of 2015 and afterwards, it is easily forgotten that the referendum movement had been conclusively vanquished; much of the ensuing momentum was driven by a desire to avoid any repeat of that painful defeat and by the temptation of emerging from defeat as the hegemonic ‘party of Scotland’. The proximate goal, shared across much of the defeated movement, was electoral retribution against a Labour Party condemned for its alliance with the Conservatives in the Better Together campaign.

For these reasons, a culture of a sometimes-spontaneous activist mobilisation was easily supplanted by a politics of spectatorship in which activists adopted an increasingly passive—although far from demobilised—role within the party. This was evident in the rapid acceptance of a pronounced presidentialism which was sustained by members’ loyalty to the cause of independence and the leadership of the SNP. Sturgeon’s team organised mass rallies that literally featured ‘I’m with Nicola’ foam fingers; symbolically, one such rally appeared next door to the leftist Radical Independence Conference, with limited suggestions of conflict between these forces. The SNP leadership remained, nonetheless, wary about the potential autonomy of the independence movement: Sturgeon, on succeeding Salmond, pointedly suggested that the imminent general election would see the SNP campaign under the banner of an all-party ‘Yes alliance’. The leadership was not yet sufficiently confident to abandon the appearance of grassroots coalition building.

For all the ongoing allusions to extra-parliamentary broadness, in practice the SNP apparatus circumscribed its new parliamentarians, both in Westminster and in Holyrood. Subjected to intense vetting procedures, they were required to sign pledges not to dissent or to criticise the party, leadership, or fellow members in public.²⁸ Controls over parliamentarians by the party central office would form part of a raft of reforms towards administrative centralisation. This included, in 2018, the abolition of the National Council, which had been the main mechanism for policy

contributions by grassroots members. The National Executive Committee (NEC), traditionally a smaller body answerable to the membership, tripled in size as (often insignificantly small) affiliated groups were allowed to propose nominees without endorsement from the overall membership. Moreover, the powers of NEC members were curtailed and it was this that led to the resignation in May 2021 of the SNP national treasurer, Douglas Chapman MP, who stated that he had not received the necessary financial information to perform the role.²⁹ And considerable executive control was exerted over increasingly presidential party conferences, partly to prevent deliberation over questions of independence, partly to limit potentially embarrassing policy discussions, but also to protect the range of corporate and institutional sponsors that paid a premium to access the official conference. As early as 2016, central office was warning delegates not to attend ‘fringe events or receptions which are outside the conference secure zone’, because ‘events within the secure area as part of the official fringe are those paid for by charities and commercial organisations who contribute greatly to the costs of the conference’.³⁰ The space for member or parliamentary agency and initiative was thus heavily restricted.

One of the oldest claims in political sociology is Robert Michels’s ‘iron law of oligarchy’, which observes that mass democratic engagement invariably fosters centralisation owing to the administrative gains of bureaucracy.³¹ Pessimists might thus see the party’s direction under Sturgeon as an inevitable product of professionalisation. However, there are peculiarities to the SNP case. Firstly, their sudden and extraordinary surge of recruitment emerged against a backdrop of decades of declining party

²⁹S. Paciaroni, ‘Douglas Chapman: SNP national treasurer resigns’, *The Herald*, 29 May 2021; <https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/19338460.douglas-chapman-snp-national-treasurer-resigns/>

³⁰K. McKenna, ‘The SNP mustn’t forget the battlers who swept it to power’, *The Guardian*, 16 October 2016; <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/15/snp-conference-nicola-sturgeon-idea-space>

³¹R. Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, New York, Free Press, 1962.

²⁸M. Gardham, ‘SNP clampdown on MPs who fail to toe the party line’, *The Herald*, 30 March 2015; <https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/13207900.snp-clampdown-mps-fail-toe-party-line/>

SNP Income & Expenditure 2002-21 Adjusted for CPI Inflation

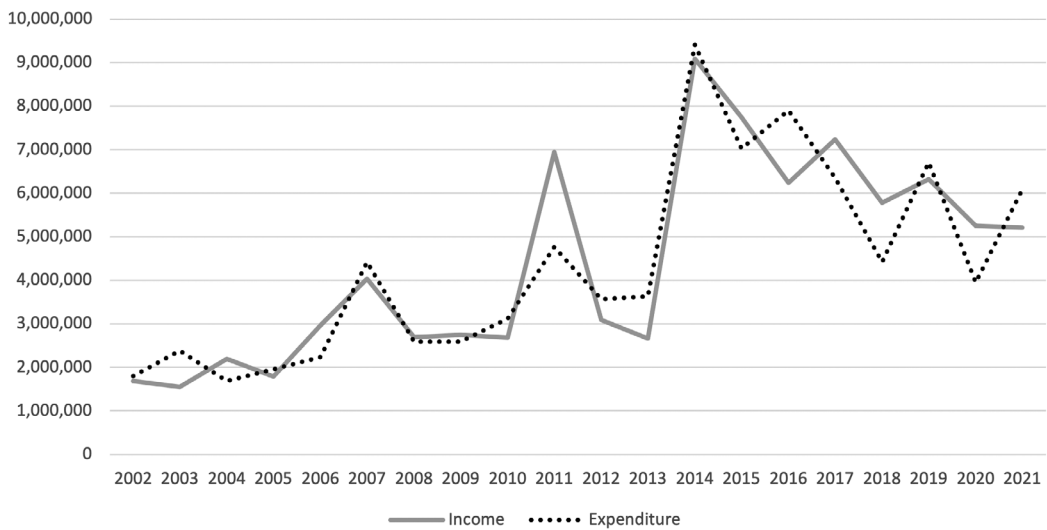


Figure 1: SNP income and expenditure 2002–2021
Source: Electoral Commission

memberships across Euro-America: what Mair had called the growing ‘void’ between politics and people.³² Secondly, the party retained a peculiar dependence on agitational mobilisation of membership and movement, orchestrated, particularly after Brexit, around the prospect of an imminent second independence referendum. This latter factor remains the centrepiece of criminal investigations into potential fraud: allegations focus on claims that the SNP unlawfully used extra-parliamentary fundraising to finance routine party activity. Regardless of how those prosecutions conclude, in both respects, the SNP emerges as a *sui generis* party organisation, rather than simply another case study in centralising mechanisms that Michels had attributed to social democratic parties. Its successes were adaptations to quite specific ‘emergency’ circumstances, most especially Brexit, which helped sustain a partially mobilised focus on an end goal that is almost unique to centrist governing parties in advanced capitalism.

A closer examination of the SNP’s finances (see Figure 1) highlights the dilemmas. The party’s income grew substantially as it emerged from outsider status to devolved leadership;

and reached new peaks during the referendum period, in line with rising mobilisation and membership numbers. However, the contradictions are clear in retrospect. Under Sturgeon, the flow of large donations declined, despite the party’s new successes and post-Brexit respectability among the upper echelons of Scottish opinion. Basic membership fees would make up a full 56 per cent of party income, up from 33 per cent in 2009. Doubtless, the party also grew increasingly dependent on other sources, such as ‘short money’ from its expanded cohort in Westminster. Nonetheless, member enthusiasm, issuing from 2014 and its rollover into the Brexit phase, would become financially central to sustaining an expanded central office apparatus to facilitate the party’s new expectations of parliamentary dominance.

The effect, following Brexit, was to lock the party into annual cycles of mobilisation and demobilisation for proposed independence referendums. This highlights the SNP’s trouble in reconciling what Mair and Katz called the ‘three faces’ of party organisation. While the party grassroots were curtailed in intellectual and policy-making roles, central office nonetheless fed from its emotional enthusiasm to prosecute the post-2016 crisis of the British state to its logical conclusion of separation. Conversely, there was little active

³²P. Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, London, Verso, 2012.

investment in public mobilisation. Hence, the formal fact of rising support for independence in theory—which, at one stage, reached 58 per cent—rarely amounted to mass, public urgency for *immediate* separation. In its public face, the party would reflect this ambivalence, particularly after poor results in the 2017 general election. For practical purposes, Sturgeon’s campaigning centred on reversing Brexit. Nonetheless, the SNP could not abandon a message, filtered through the independence newspaper *The National*, centred on imminent breaks towards independence.

Some interpretations would thus contrast an enthused membership with a disengaged, apathetic or ambivalent public. However, the scale of crisis surrounding the post-2016 British state makes this a misleading contrast. Indeed, without the polarisation of public opinion around constitutional questions, the SNP’s success would be almost inexplicable. While many would regard Scotland’s reaction to Britain’s constitutional crisis as a quintessential case of politicisation, the actual impact of this constitutional polarisation, in conjunction with the top-down internal transformation of the SNP, was precisely to *depoliticise* the disruptive and unruly social energies unleashed during the 2014 referendum. The ambient sense of imminent rupture allowed the party to pursue everyday governance with little scrutiny.

Freed from ordinary electoral pressures by a climate of emergency, Scotland’s governing party would preside over, at best, limited successes in a succession of core policy promises. Few policy advancements have been attributed to the Sturgeon years. Setbacks on topics ranging from child poverty and the poverty-related attainment gap in schools, to environmental targets and hospital waiting times, have been attributed to circumstances: the successive impacts of Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine-Russia war. While supporters may insist on some policy achievements, there is limited evidence that any successes impacted on public perceptions. A poll conducted immediately after her resignation asked members of the public to list Sturgeon’s best policy achievements: aside from Covid-19 management (41 per cent), a public health emergency that largely focussed on effective communications, the highest ranked policies were the baby box (9 per cent), furthering the cause of independence (6 per cent) and improving healthcare (2 per cent).³³ Polls while Sturgeon was in power

likewise show waning confidence in Scotland’s devolved public services. However, these objective hardships rarely affected the popularity of Sturgeon herself or the SNP. Constitutional polarisation possessed a circular logic: roughly half of voters preferred to blame the UK leadership for their hardships; and the promise of a future independence, a breach with Westminster’s failures, served to offset and channel grievances. Growing adversity for citizens, and a common sense of civic decline, rarely put pressure on party representatives.

A further factor in depoliticisation, likewise issuing from the energies of 2014 and 2016, was the symbiotic relationship between the SNP government and Scottish civic society. Whereas Salmond’s era had been defined by conflict with professional Scotland, the Sturgeon and Brexit era served to solidify relationships. The effect was to recast economic and political inequalities within Scotland as constitutional problems posed by Brexiteer extremism, even as the horizon for any prospect of a constitutional break from the UK retreated. Some have pointed to the growth of patronage relations between grant-funded entities and the devolved state. Equally, there was evidence of the opposite: civic institutions found the Scottish government receptive and even uncritical of low-cost initiatives; many organisations were invited to all-but author legislation, in what amounted to outsourcing legislative development on the cheap. In all cases, there was a growing symbiosis between the hollowed-out state and hollowed-out civic institutions centred on a common progressive post-Brexit national mythology. Perhaps the most notable evidence was the shifting discourses in Scottish trade unionism, traditionally a largely ‘Labourist’ force, which has grown increasingly accommodated to the new Scottish governance consensus.

The SNP itself would act as both an agent and a symptom of depoliticisation. This was of special importance, because the party’s post-2014 metamorphosis was intertwined with Scotland’s disruptive burst of referendum politicisation. Yet if the referendum had represented a splenetic burst of initiative from

³³M. Smith, ‘Nicola Sturgeon’s legacy according to Scots’, YouGov, 2023; <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2023/02/21/nicola-sturgeons-legacy-according-scots>

outsiders, the aftermath reinforced the gulf between political insiders and popular agency. The SNP membership remains disproportionately working class relative to other UK parties, but SNP parliamentarians increasingly hail from politics-adjacent fields and have become synonymous with centralised political discipline.³⁴ Far-left forces who had gained new attention with the 2014 referendum moved swiftly into alignment, as symbolised by the coalition government with the Greens.

Even disciplinary breaches with Sturgeon's party reinforced the logic of depoliticisation. Social movement organisation persisted independently of the SNP through the All Under One Banner demonstrations, which arguably represent the most prolonged mass mobilisations in modern Scottish history. However, their distinctive gambit, reflected in the name, was to postpone all questions about existing inequality or the nature of national sovereignty until after the accomplishment of independence. Where populist elements of the Yes movement breached discipline, they rarely criticised the policy agenda of Sturgeon's government, except on questions of gender reform: a proposed Wings over Scotland electoral pact, based on the widely read blog, featured few policy disagreements with Sturgeon excepting gender and independence strategy. Salmond's Alba Party has likewise often focussed its policy critiques on questions of gender philosophy. Notably, no such disputes had appeared relevant in the 2014 tumult of politicisation. Severe economic strains have continued to hit Scottish society, as across the world, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 lockdowns and the Ukraine-Russia war. But, no autonomous political agency has emerged to represent voters suffering under these new adversities. The structure of party-political alliances continues to reflect the legacies of 2014, even if the energies of political conflict have long been absorbed into stationary governance networks.

Conclusion

Sturgeon's resignation, which prefigured the party's crisis, emerged against the backdrop

³⁴Burton and Tunnicliffe, *Membership of Political Parties in Great Britain*.

of three pressures. Firstly, the exhaustion of efforts at constitutional conflict with the UK state, symbolised by defeat in the Supreme Court and internal SNP divisions over Sturgeon's (now abandoned) strategy of using a general election as a '*de facto* referendum'. Secondly, the acceleration of police investigations into the party's financial affairs. Thirdly, divisions over the Gender Recognition Reform (GRR) (Scotland) Bill, which had formed part of the SNP's coalition agreement with the Scottish Greens. How these factors interacted, individually or in concert, has been contested. Sturgeon herself has minimised the relevance of GRR to her resignation, and outright denied the relevance of the police investigations. Nonetheless, regardless of their proportional role, all three reflect the limits of the SNP's peculiar combination of politicisation and depoliticisation—and, relatedly, of mobilisation and demobilisation—that issued from the 2014 referendum and its aftermath.

The SNP's electoral successes are thus intertwined with their recent difficulties. Its expanding central office and party machinery was dependent on a logic of politicisation deriving from the disruptions of 2014. However, particularly after Brexit, the party gained new legitimacy and respectability as the political face of a devolved governing class that offered the reassurance of the status quo, set against the commotions unleashed by Westminster's shift towards a pro-Brexit consensus. In practice, the party made persistent electoral gains and stabilised itself through a process of strategic depoliticisation. Layers of civic society and media opinion, in Scotland and beyond, accommodated to the SNP as the natural governing party. However, that success always hinged upon that prior moment of politicisation in 2014 on the one hand, and annual cycles of mobilisation and demobilisation on the other. Routine party operations, from winning local elections to financing central office refurbishments, thus depended on a paradox of crisis in the British state and being a governing party of the British state. Reckoning with this contradiction could have been postponed for some years if the police investigations had not intervened. But the model's logical limits would prevail eventually.

For political science, the SNP emerges as a *sui generis* organisation, deriving from peculiar historical circumstances. The 2014 surge of

politicisation bears parallel with other movement parties of that era, whether Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain or the Five Star Movement in Italy. However, it was uniquely successful in navigating implausible contradictions, combining retreat into depoliticised governance with perpetual civic mobilisation, presenting radically different faces to ordinary voters, the media, civic leadership and grass-roots activists. Most obviously, this was symptomatic of the crises of the British state and its governing elites in the Brexit era. This gave the polarised logic of 2014 a long, residual afterlife that survived depoliticisation of social questions and brought new, increasingly respectable elements to the party's

defence. Nonetheless, the SNP's success and crisis were not merely reflections of a 'British exception'. As across the 'populist moment' internally, Scotland's experience was a rebound after a long era of disorganisation of collective institutions and parties. This explains both the exaggerated hopes raised by the party's growth and its limited capacity to accomplish even modest demands for change.

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