

A Study of Scottish Nationalism:

The Scottish National Party and the Changing Rhetoric of Independence

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Abstract

This article examines the Scottish National Party's changing rhetoric of Scottish independence from its formation in 1930s to the present day. It focuses on two things, firstly, political and economic environment surrounding Scotland, and secondly, the political struggle between the Scottish National Party (SNP) and other major parties such as the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats.

The article argues that the SNP's changing rhetoric on independence can be seen as a means of adaptation by a separatist party in response to growing interdependence between sub-state, state, supranational and global levels. The SNP's changing rhetoric on independence can also be seen as a means of exploitation of the unique political opportunity structure presented by Scottish devolution.

Introduction

The Scottish National Party (SNP), whose ultimate goal is to achieve Scottish independence from the United Kingdom (UK), gained a stunning victory in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election. While it won in the last election in 2007 as well, it did not get a majority of seats at the time, so it had to govern as a minority government. In contrast, the SNP got a majority of seats in the 2011 election and duly formed a majority government.

Recently, the SNP Government made its intention clear that it would hold a referendum on the issue of Scottish independence during 2014. As a majority government, the SNP is able to control the politics of an independence referendum. It seems that the future of the UK, as we know, is in great doubt because of the looming threat of Scottish independence.

What is Scottish independence? What type of sovereign statehood does the SNP envision for independent Scotland? At first glance, these questions seem easy to answer. But in practice, they are not so straightforward, and the SNP itself keeps changing the contents of its ultimate goal of Scottish independence.

This study will examine the SNP's changing rhetoric of Scottish independence since its formation during the interwar years. In doing so, it focuses on two things, the political and economic environment in Scotland, as well as the political struggle against unionist parties that oppose Scottish independence.⁽¹⁾ It will show that the SNP's changing rhetoric of Scottish independence can be viewed as a means of adaptation by a separatist party in response to the growing interdependence between sub-national, national

(1) Unionist or unionism in Britain means the political attitude which supports the maintenance of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In Scotland, it especially means supporting more than 300 years of union with England.

and supranational levels, as well as a means of exploitation of the unique political opportunity structure (Scottish devolution) created by the Blair Government.

From Early Years to Breakthrough

The SNP was founded in 1934 when the National Party of Scotland (NPS) and the Scottish Party came together. The NPS, which was founded in 1928, was a left-of-centre party, and its main goal was to achieve Scottish independence. In contrast, the Scottish Party, which was established in 1932, had a more conservative outlook in its ideological disposition, and it wanted to gain autonomy for Scotland while remaining within the British Empire.

Because the SNP was formed as a result of the merger of two parties which were different in ideology as well as constitutional vision, the ideological and constitutional position of the SNP in its early years was 'ambiguous and somewhere between devolution and independence' (Lynch 2002, 10). In other words, when the SNP came into existence, it did not support full independence for Scotland but a rather ambiguous concept of self-government for Scotland. The meaning of 'self-government' and the means to achieve it were left unclear to satisfy both pro-independence and pro-devolution elements within the party. Nor did it have a clear ideological position. The SNP emphasised that it was neither on the left nor on the right, but stood for all classes and sections of the Scottish people (Lynch 2009, 623-625).

Thus the newly formed SNP's goal was set as the establishment of a parliament in Scotland within the UK, and the party adopted a moderate centrist position. It was a compromise between pro-independence, centre-

left former NPS members and pro-devolution, centre-right former Scottish Party members (Finlay 1994, 154-156). Although ideological ambiguity did not cause much discord in the SNP's formative years, a compromise on the constitutional question was not able to contain intra-party disputes and sometimes became a flashpoint between opposing factions.

For a decade following its formation, the SNP had been plagued by the conflict between pro-independence and pro-devolution factions. At the 1942 party conference, there was a major showdown between the two factions, and the result was a clear victory for the pro-independence faction. This led to a split of the party, and some members of the pro-devolution faction went on to form the Scottish Covenant Association, which advocated a cross-party approach to establish a devolved Scottish Parliament.

The departure of the pro-devolution group made it possible for the SNP to articulate its position on the constitutional question. In 1943, its goal was clarified as 'the restoration of Scottish national sovereignty, by the establishment of a democratic Scottish government' (quoted in Finlay 1994, 236). This is much clearer than the vague 'self-government' concept, and can be seen as close to meaning full-independence, though the specific word 'independence' was not used. From that time on, Scottish independence has been the ultimate goal of the SNP, and its commitment to separating Scotland from the UK has been steadfast as well. However, there was a caveat in terms of separation from the UK, namely, independent Scotland was assumed to continue as a member of the Commonwealth, and the British monarch would remain to be the Scottish Head of State.

The SNP did not eliminate the pro-devolution tendency within its ranks even after the 1942 party split. On the one hand, there remained a small number of members who continued to support devolution within the UK.

On the other hand, after the demise of the Scottish Covenant Association in the early post-war period, most of its members returned to the SNP. In the post-war era, the fault line in the party shifted and the focus of contention was not about its ultimate goal (independence or devolution), but about the pace and process to achieve that goal. Increasingly, a growing tension developed between fundamentalist and pragmatist wings. The former saw independence as a zero-sum game and stuck to an 'independence, nothing less' stance. The latter saw independence as a step-by-step process and was prepared to make strategic compromises, such as accepting devolution for the time being (Mitchell, Bennie and Johns 2012, 19-20).

As shown in Table 1, in electoral terms, the SNP had been a fringe party until the late 1960s. Its first MP was elected in a by-election held in an unusual environment, just before the end of the Second World War. When normal politics resumed and the general election was held in May 1945, the SNP duly lost the seat it had won a couple of months earlier. From then on until the end of the 1960s, the SNP struggled to field candidates and keep deposits in general elections. Winning a seat was almost unthinkable in those barren years. It was said that the 'great achievement of the SNP from 1942 to 1964 was simply to have survived' (Hanham 1969, 179).

Things seemed to have changed in the late 1960s. A string of relatively good performances in local elections and by-elections was followed by a spectacular breakthrough. In the November 1967 by-election, Winnie Ewing, one of the rising stars of the SNP, won the Hamilton seat, which had been one of the Labour Party safe seats. Unlike the 1945 by-election, Ewing's victory sent a shock wave to the two main parties. While the Labour Government at the time set up a Royal Commission to consider establishing a parliament for Scotland, the opposition Conservative Party announced a change of policy on devolution. The Hamilton victory encouraged great

Table 1 UK general election results for Scotland, 1945–2010

Year	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat(a)		SNP	
	Votes(%)	Seats	Votes(%)	Seats	Votes(%)	Seats	Votes(%)	Seats
1945	41.1	27	47.6	37	5.0	0	1.2	0
1950	44.8	32	46.2	37	6.6	2	0.4	0
1951	48.6	35	47.9	35	2.7	1	0.3	0
1955	50.1	36	46.7	34	1.9	1	0.5	0
1959	47.2	31	46.7	38	4.1	1	0.8	0
1964	40.6	24	48.7	43	7.6	4	2.4	0
1966	37.7	20	49.9	46	6.8	5	5.0	0
1970	38.0	23	44.5	44	5.5	3	11.4	1
1974Feb	32.9	21	36.6	41	7.9	3	21.9	7
1974Oct	24.7	16	36.3	41	8.3	3	30.4	11
1979	31.4	22	41.5	44	9.0	3	17.3	2
1983	28.4	21	35.1	41	24.5	8	11.8	2
1987	24.0	10	42.4	50	19.4	9	11.0	3
1992	25.6	11	39.0	49	13.1	9	21.5	3
1997	17.5	0	45.6	56	13.0	10	22.1	6
2001	15.6	1	43.2	55	16.4	10	20.1	5
2005	15.8	1	39.5	41	22.6	11	17.7	6
2010	16.7	1	42.9	41	18.9	11	19.9	6

(a) Liberal 1945–1979; Liberal/SDP Alliance 1983–87

Sources: Neil McGarvey and Paul Cairney, *Scottish Politics: An Introduction*

(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 48. Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 353.

interest in the SNP among the Scottish people, and party membership soared because tens of thousands of new members were recruited in a short time (Wilson 2009, 27-43). Clearly, the SNP was on the rising tide.

Although Ewing lost her seat in the 1970 general election, the SNP won the Western Isles seat instead. This was the very first seat the party gained in a general election. In addition, its share of the Scottish vote (11.4%) was the highest ever. The SNP's forward march continued in the two

elections held in 1974. In the February 1974 election, the SNP's vote share rose to 21.9%, and it won seven seats. The October election in the same year brought even more dramatic results. The SNP's vote share and seats reached 30.4% and 11 respectively, which are the best-ever general election results till date.

There seemed to be two factors which facilitated the breakthrough of the SNP in the 1970s. One factor was a severe economic crisis caused by the Oil Shock in 1973 and deteriorating industrial relations at that time, which caused grave damage to the electorates' trust in the governing competence of the two main parties. The other factor was the discovery of oil in the North Sea. The SNP ran 'It's Scotland's Oil' campaign with great impact and emphasized the idea that it was economically viable and beneficial for Scotland to be independent from the UK (Wilson 2009, 76-90). It could be said that the SNP responded well to the changing circumstances in the 1970s and used them to its advantage.

Because of the SNP's breakthrough, the possibility of achieving Scottish devolution was enhanced under the Labour Government in the 1970s. The SNP faced a difficult task. On the one hand, it had to emphasise its rhetorical commitment to Scottish independence to reassure the fundamentalist faction. On the other hand, it had to keep clear of the accusations that it blocked self-government in Scotland in order not to antagonise the pragmatist faction. In the end, a compromise was reached between the two factions. Although the SNP would support the Labour Government's proposal to establish an assembly with limited powers as a first step towards achieving independence, it would not actively join forces with Labour and other pro-devolution parties in the referendum campaign (Levy 1986).

The devolution referendum in March 1979 produced unfortunate results.

While the majority (51.6% of total votes) supported devolution, it was not enough to establish an assembly. Because 51.6% support for the proposal, on a turnout of 63.8%, represented 32.9% of the eligible voters, it failed the special condition on the referendum stipulating that at least 40% of the electorate would have to vote 'Yes' to implement devolution. This special hurdle was attached to the devolution proposal by the rebel Labour MPs who were hostile to the whole devolution ideas (Lynch 2002, 152).

The failure of the devolution referendum led the SNP to withdraw its support for the minority Labour Government. Following a subsequent vote of no confidence, a general election was held in May 1979 and the Conservative Party led by Margaret Thatcher was returned to government. As shown in Table 1, the SNP lost nine of its eleven seats that it had held in the prior election, and its share of the vote was almost halved. The double defeat both in the referendum and in the general election was a devastating blow for the SNP and especially for its pragmatists. In the aftermath of the traumatic events in 1979, the internal balance of power within the party tilted to the fundamentalist wing (Umekawa 2000, 668).

Independence in Europe

As the SNP grew from a fringe party to a major political force in Scottish politics in the 1970s, debates on European integration necessitated a re-examination of its goal of independence. Formerly, rather like the Labour Party, the SNP's attitudes towards European integration had been more or less sceptical during post-war periods. The European Communities (EC) were viewed as distant, bureaucratic and elitist institutions which were comparable with the UK. The SNP feared that within the EC, Scotland's interests would be sidelined by the major member states, including the UK.

It also feared negative impacts of the EC membership on the Scottish economy, particularly fisheries, agriculture and traditional industries, which would be aggravated by the market liberalisation of the EC (Hepburn 2010, 72-73).

Therefore, the SNP campaigned against EC membership in the 1975 referendum. However, it seemed to misjudge the mood of the Scottish people. They voted in favour of EC membership by 58.4%, which was a slightly less enthusiastic endorsement than the UK voters as a whole (Yes: 67.2%, No: 32.8%). The EC referendum result forced the SNP to re-evaluate its policy on European integration in the 1980s (Ichijo 2004, 75).

The first half of the 1980s was a difficult time for the SNP. In the 1983 general election, its share of the vote dropped even further, from 17.3% (1979 general election) to 11.8%, although it managed to keep its two seats. Because of worsening electoral performances, intra-party conflict between fundamentalists and pragmatists grew increasingly severe. However, in the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s, things seemed to change for the better. In the 1987 general election, the SNP's share of the vote rose to 14.0%, and it increased its seats to three. In the 1992 general election, although the SNP did not gain extra seats, its share of the vote increased greatly, to 21.5%, which was close to the result it had achieved in the February 1974 election. The SNP accomplished a remarkable comeback from its nadir in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

To coincide with its electoral recovery in the late 1980s, the SNP adopted an 'Independence in Europe'⁽²⁾ policy at the 1988 annual party conference.

(2) Before the adoption of the 'Independence in Europe' policy, the SNP softened its hostility towards EC membership. At the 1983 party conference, the party accepted Scotland's continued membership, if it was supported by a referendum following Scottish independence (Lynch 2002, 186).

This policy was conceived by a former Labour MP, Jim Sillars, who left the Labour Party in 1976 and joined the SNP in 1980. Sillars had been a hard-line Euro-sceptic and campaigned against EC membership in the 1975 referendum. However, during the first half of the 1980s, he began to articulate the idea of 'Independence in Europe'. In his view, it was impossible for a state to maintain absolute sovereignty in the increasingly interdependent world. The sovereignty of a modern state had to be relative, because of the close interconnectedness among the states. But it was important for Scotland to gain this 'relative' sovereignty, because it could use its sovereignty according to its own national interests, which had been ill-served by the UK government. According to Sillars, one of the daunting obstacles for independence was the Scottish peoples' fear of isolation, especially their fear of losing the entire protection provided by the UK state. His 'Independence in Europe' policy was devised as a formula that could alleviate people's fear of isolation, as well as a type of political and economic support system which would remove the threat of massive disruption in the case of independence (Fukuda 2002, 196-200; Ichijo 2004, 46-50).

It should be noted that the conversion of Sillars and subsequently the SNP itself from Euroscepticism to pro-Europeanism was a result of strategic calculations. The SNP's view on Europe was not an enthusiastic commitment to further integration in Europe, but a pragmatic acceptance that the European framework was useful as a means of fulfilling its goal of independence. Membership in the EC and subsequently the EU seemed to reduce the transition costs of independence through guaranteed access to the European market, various financial supports such as structural funds and a ready-made institutional system in which newly independent Scotland would be given equal status to other member states. Within the political and

economic framework provided by the EC/EU, gaining independence would seem to be a relatively smooth affair (Lynch 2002, 187). The 'Independence in Europe' policy also made it possible for the SNP to escape from an accusation of narrow separatism as well as to find a way out of the country's practical and psychological dependence on England (Gallagher 2009, 541).

Conversion to pro-Europeanism and the adoption of the 'Independence in Europe' policy raised questions about the relationship between an independent Scotland and the EC/EU. To what extent could Scotland manage its own economic and social affairs, given that many policy fields were largely affected by European regulation? There has been intense intra-party contestation about a desirable relationship between an independent Scotland and the EC/EU, as well as the future direction of European integration. When the policy of 'Independence in Europe' was adopted in the late 1980s, there was a certain amount of ambiguity as to whether the SNP would support further integration leading to a federal Europe or the status quo representing an intergovernmental Europe. On one side, there were supranationalists who would be prepared to accept greater European unification, in which European institutions would increase control over economic, social and even foreign policy fields. On the other side, there were intergovernmentalists who would uphold the primacy of member states and disapprove of the transfer of powers from the national to the European level (Hepburn 2009, 194).

The SNP leadership took the intergovernmentalist stance and made clear that the party would strive for the creation of a European confederation, in which member states would pool sovereignty in certain areas but not in other areas in which they would like to maintain control at national level. In addition, the SNP would like to have a good deal of influence even in the policy fields currently under the European competence, by making

decisions reached through an agreement among member states (Hepburn and McLoughlin 2011, 388-390). However, considering that the EU has developed into a multi-level governance system, the SNP's intergovernmentalist stance could face difficulties. Especially, with its view on the EU as basically a confederation of states, the SNP might not be able to adequately grasp the changing nature of European integration and to adjust its policies to suit the emerging multi-level governance system (Hoppe 2007, 77).

Recently, the SNP's European discourse has shown a tinge of a critical aspect. For example, as its criticism on the Common Agricultural Policy and the Common Fisheries Policy of the EU has increased in intensity, the SNP has given serious thought to opting out of these policies in order to protect Scotland's agricultural and fishing interests. In addition, despite supporting the idea of establishing a European Constitution, the SNP decided to oppose the actual Constitutional Treaty, criticising its insufficient emphasis on the principle of subsidiarity and its arrangement which awarded exclusive competence to the EU over marine resources. After the failure of the Constitutional Treaty and its reformulation as the Lisbon Treaty, the SNP continued to oppose its ratification and called for a referendum, arguing that unacceptable contents were retained in the Lisbon Treaty (Keating 2009, 59).

In light of the growing scepticism among the Scottish people towards European integration, the SNP's increasingly Euro-critical attitude is fairly understandable. However, although it shows that the SNP tries to swim with the flow of strengthening Euroscepticism, it also shows that its 'Independence in Europe' policy is based mainly on strategic calculations rather than on genuine commitment to the European ideal.

There is another episode which shows the strategic nature of the SNP's

European policy. Since the introduction of the euro, the European single currency, the SNP has committed itself to bringing an independent Scotland into the euro zone. However, as the global financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent sovereign debt crisis in the euro zone hit the market confidence in the euro, the SNP suddenly changed its policy on the currency for an independent Scotland. In the 2009 party conference, it was decided that an independent Scotland would keep the current British pound for the time being, and that to adopt the euro, there should be a referendum on the issue (The Times, 17 October 2009). It seems that a certain enthusiasm for Europe which the SNP displayed in the late 1980s and the early 1990s has definitely cooled down.

Devolution and the Party of Government

As mentioned earlier, after the defeat of the devolution referendum, the SNP came to display a more fundamentalist position on the issue of independence. In contrast, its attitude towards devolution became antagonistic. However, around the mid-1980s, the party began to move gradually back towards a pragmatist stance which accepted devolution as a first step to independence. At the 1983 party conference, a resolution was carried confirming support for independence while promising a constructive approach to devolution (Lynch 2002, 180). In Scotland, support for devolution had been steadily increasing during the 1980s and 90s under the unpopular Conservative Government, with little electoral support within Scotland. The Conservative Party was unable to get more than 30% of Scottish votes and seats in the general elections during this period (see Table 1).

Riding a high tide of devolution, the Labour Party and Liberal Democrats,

with the support of various civil society and religious groups, set up the Scottish Constitutional Convention, whose main aim was to build a consensus on the framework for Scottish devolution. Although the SNP at first participated in the discussion for setting up the Convention, it decided to withdraw from the talks because independence was not on the agenda and Labour might dominate the Convention (Wilson 2009, 239-243).

Thus, while the SNP was not involved in the long preparatory work for making a blueprint of Scottish devolution, it could be said that the party played a crucial part in giving a momentum for devolution. The SNP took a safe Labour seat in the Glasgow Govern by-election in 1988, with Jim Sillars as its candidate. This surprise by-election victory for the SNP undoubtedly strengthened Labour's commitment to devolution, just like the 1967 Hamilton by-election result triggered the process for the 1979 devolution referendum.

Once the Labour Party won a landslide victory in the 1997 general election, it became certain that a referendum on devolution was to be held in Scotland. The issue for the SNP was whether it would support the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in the referendum. The SNP, under the leadership of the pragmatic leader Alex Salmond, decided to campaign for a 'Yes' vote and cooperate with other pro-devolution parties. In the end, a large majority voted in favour of the Scottish Parliament with wide-ranging powers, including some taxation powers (Lynch 2002, 221-225).

Before the 1997 general election, Labour's shadow Scottish Secretary, George Robertson, famously said, 'devolution will kill nationalism stone dead' (The Sunday Times, 27 April 1997). In hindsight, it seemed that just the opposite had happened. The SNP kept its potential as a serious challenger to Labour in the 1990s and prospered in a favourable post-devolution environment (Brand, Mitchell and Surridge 1994). The Scottish

Table 2 Scottish Parliament election results, 1999–2011

	Constituency		Regional List		Total Seats
	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	
SNP					
1999	28.7	7	27.3	28	35
2003	23.8	9	20.9	18	27
2007	32.9	21	31.0	26	47
2011	45.4	53	44.0	16	69
Labour					
1999	38.8	53	33.6	3	56
2003	34.6	46	29.3	4	50
2007	32.1	37	29.2	9	46
2011	31.7	15	26.3	22	37
Conservative					
1999	15.6	0	15.4	18	18
2003	16.6	3	15.5	15	18
2007	16.6	4	13.9	13	17
2011	13.9	3	12.4	12	15
Liberal Democrat					
1999	14.2	12	12.4	5	17
2003	15.4	13	11.8	4	17
2007	16.2	11	11.3	5	16
2011	7.9	2	5.2	3	5

Sources: House of Commons Library, *Research Paper 11/41 Scottish Parliament Elections: 2011* (London: House of Commons Library, 2011).

Parliament breathed new life into the party by providing it a political platform and status which it could never expect to gain in the Westminster (UK) Parliament. In the first Scottish Parliament election in 1999, the SNP got 35 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) and firmly established itself as the second biggest party in Scotland (see Table 2).

However, the period of the first term (1999–2003) and second term (2003–2007) of the Scottish Parliament was somewhat disappointing for the SNP.

Although it kept its status as the main opposition party against the Labour and Liberal Democrat coalition, its electoral fortunes either in the Scottish elections or the general (UK) elections did not improve but instead slightly faltered. For example, although there had been some optimism in the run-up to the 2003 Scottish election, the party could not live up to the expectations and ended up with just 27 MSPs, eight seats fewer than the previous time. In addition, in the general elections, its share of the vote declined steadily, albeit by a few percentage points (1997:22.1%, 2001:20.1%, 2005:17.7%). While the SNP succeeded in becoming a major political force in the Scottish Parliament, it seemed to have come at a cost in the Westminster Parliament.

The 2007 Scottish Parliament election brought about the very first change of government in Scotland. The ruling Labour and Liberal Democrat coalition lost their majority, and the SNP emerged as the largest party with 47 seats, just ahead of Labour's 46 seats. As Table 2 shows, the SNP beat Labour in terms of the vote share both in constituencies and in regional lists. The party, under the effective leadership of Salmond, has become a type of 'electoral professional party', a highly competent party in terms of winning elections (Leith and Steven 2010, 263). The SNP formed a minority government with the support of two Green Party MSPs. As opposed to the dire prediction made by George Robertson, the SNP did not suffer but rather prospered in the devolution environment.

It can be said that devolution altered the opportunity structures for the SNP in two ways.

Firstly, the particular electoral system adopted for the Scottish Parliament was favourable to the party. The Additional Members System (AMS), which has been used for the Scottish Parliament election since its establishment, translated votes into seats more proportionally than the first-

past-the-post (FPTP), which has been used for the UK general election. Compared with the Labour Party whose support was concentrated in the metropolitan areas, especially around Glasgow, the SNP's support was spread evenly across Scotland, which made it difficult to win many seats under the FPTP. Even in the 2007 election, the SNP struggled to win constituency seats. Thanks to the fact that it was significantly compensated with regional list seats under the AMS, the SNP succeeded in gaining one seat more than the Labour Party.

Secondly, devolution created a more advantageous political space for the SNP. Although the SNP experienced a brief electoral breakthrough in the October 1974 general election, it has been an uphill struggle for the party to win Westminster (UK) seats. On top of the familiar argument about a 'wasted vote' for minor parties under the FPTP, voting for the SNP looked like a less rational choice for the voters than voting for the major parties such as Labour, because the SNP contested only in the Scottish constituencies, so that it had virtually no prospect of forming a government at the UK level. In contrast, in the new political space exemplified by the Scottish Parliament, the SNP not only became a major party, almost comparable to Labour, but also had a reasonable prospect of forming a government in Scotland (Mitchell, Bennie and Johns 2012, 11). In addition, it effectively monopolised its status as the guardian of the Scottish national interests, arguing that all other major parties were London-based English parties which cared only for English interests.⁽³⁾

One of the first actions by the newly elected SNP Government was to publish a white paper to start a discussion on the options for possible

(3) According to cross-national studies, there is strong empirical evidence that nationalist parties tend to perform better in sub-state elections rather than in general (statewide) elections (Detterbeck 2012). The SNP seems to represent this pattern.

constitutional change, including independence. In publishing this white paper, the SNP launched a national debate on the future governance for Scotland (Scottish Executive 2007). On the one hand, it seemed that as the party of government, the SNP was in a strong position to influence the Scottish people on the merits of independence. On the other hand, devolution might have created new obstacles to independence, which partially echoed Robertson's prediction. Firstly, under the AMS electoral system, it was thought difficult to gain majority seats in the Scottish Parliament, and the SNP certainly failed at that in the 2007 election. As the other main parties were totally opposed to Scottish separation from the UK, there seemed to be little prospect for holding a referendum on independence. Secondly, devolution might have lessened people's appetite for independence. Indeed, even when the SNP beat the Labour Party to become the largest party in the Scottish Parliament, opinion polls showed no improvement in support for independence, which was stuck at well below a third of the population (McCrone 2009).

Furthermore, the SNP's development as a mature party of government might have made the road to independence harder rather than easier. While the ultimate goal of the SNP has always been to achieve independence for Scotland, the party had to demonstrate that it was able to govern Scotland effectively within the framework of devolution as the governing party in the Scottish Parliament. That necessitated compromises with the unionist parties, which included downplaying its demand for Scottish independence. Therefore, although the SNP pledged in the 2007 manifesto to have an independence referendum in 2010, it did not push it very hard as the government, because there was little possibility of having one at the time (The Scottish National Party 2007, 8). Instead, the SNP Government began to emphasise devolution rhetoric, trying to use the existing framework to its

full by demanding more powers from the UK government. However, there was a danger attached to that rhetoric, as expanding the powers of the Scottish Parliament would actually undermine the need for full independence. For the Scottish people at large, the dividing line between devolution and independence seemed to be increasingly blurred (Hepburn 2009, 197).

In the run-up to the fourth Scottish Parliament election in 2011, the Labour Party had high hopes for returning to power in Scotland. Although it lost the general election in the previous year, its Scottish vote increased from 38.9% in 2005 to 42.0% in 2010, bucking the UK trend, and gained one more seat. In contrast, the SNP's share of the vote was less than half that of Labour (19.9%). In addition, Labour had been ahead in the opinion polls just before the start of the Scottish Parliament election campaign (McCrone 2012, 69).

Then, an electoral earthquake struck Scottish politics. The SNP achieved an overall majority in the Scottish Parliament (69 out of 129), the first party ever to do that. As Table 2 shows, the party won 45.4% of the constituency vote and 44.0% of the regional list vote, which produced 53 constituency seats and 16 regional list seats. In marked contrast, Labour trailed the SNP by a large margin. It got 31.7% (15 seats) in the constituencies and 26.3% (22 seats) in the regional lists (The Guardian, 7 May 2011). This was a truly remarkable result for the SNP, while quite a miserable one for Labour.⁽⁴⁾

Why did this SNP landslide victory happen? First of all, with hindsight, Labour's election strategy was based on completely wrong understandings

(4) In fact, Labour's result was not as miserable as it seemed. Its share of the vote decreased just a few percentage points from the previous election. It had received 32.2% in the constituencies and 29.2% in the regional lists in 2007.

of the devolved politics in Scotland. It was assumed that now that the Conservative Party was back in power since the 2010 Westminster (UK) election, Scottish voters would return and support Labour. It was thought that many anti-Conservative Scottish voters would naturally back the Labour Party, because it was the main opposition to the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government (Hassan 2011, 371-372). In Labour's manifesto for the 2011 Scottish Parliament election, while there were many attacks on the UK coalition government, any mention of the SNP was deliberately avoided, as if the SNP Government did not exist (The Scottish Labour Party 2011). When Labour became aware in the closing stage of the campaign that they were focusing on the 'wrong enemy', it was too late, and Labour's belated attacks on the SNP did not have much impact.

There was also a leadership factor. The SNP leader, Salmond, was more trusted than the Labour leader, Ian Gray, by a large margin. Indeed, it could be said that Salmond's popularity had been crucial for the SNP's narrow victory in the previous 2007 election. In the 2011 election, there was a huge difference in popularity between Salmond and Gray. The gap between them reached a staggering 25 percentage points (Scotland on Sunday, 17 April 2011). The Salmond effect certainly contributed to the landslide victory for the SNP in the 2011 election.

Then, there was a competence factor as well as the factor of Scottish interests. The SNP minority government had acquired a reputation for competence in the previous four years. In opinion polls, when asked to evaluate the SNP Government, 56% rated it very or fairly good, compared with 20% who rated it very or fairly bad. This was a stark contrast with the Labour Party, which was evaluated as very or fairly good by only 33% of the respondents if it had been in government, whereas 45% rated it very or fairly bad. In terms of the party which would best stand up for Scotland, a

large number of Scottish people chose the SNP rather than the Labour Party (Hassan and Shaw 2012, 219; Wheatley, et al. 2012).

Independence Referendum and Soft Nationalism

The second and majority SNP Government announced that it would hold an independence referendum in autumn 2014 and issued a consultation paper setting out its argument for independence (The Scottish National Party 2011). Unlike the last minority SNP Government, this time it seemed certain that there would be an independence referendum in 2014, because the SNP gained majority seats in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election. Although the unionist parties, the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats all demanded an early referendum, Salmond refused to give in, so as to play a long game.

The main reason for the SNP and Salmond for not holding an early referendum was that it would be certainly lost, because of the tenacious opposition against independence among the Scottish people. Although the SNP's re-election in 2011 increased support for Scottish independence to a certain degree, it has rarely crossed the crucial 50% threshold. This shows that the SNP's landslide victory in 2011 was not based on the growing support for Scottish independence. It was a victory mainly based on the competence of the SNP as the governing party. The support for independence has usually fluctuated approximately 30%, whereas well over 50% of the electorate have preferred devolution (McCrone 2012, 74). To win an independence referendum, the SNP has to win over the undecided as well as the sceptics on the independence issue, which is a difficult and daunting task.

Given the low level of public support for independence, the SNP has

started to soften its rhetoric on independence to reassure the Scottish people, who are anxious about the separation from the UK state (Preston 2008). This softer and less dramatic rhetoric, so-called 'independence-lite', was already noticeable during the period of the first minority government. The rhetorical softening process intensified after the SNP was re-elected and effectively in a position to conduct an independence referendum, irrespective of other parties' opposition.

One dimension of this softening process is the SNP's effort to highlight its commitment to maintaining a series of close ties between an independent Scotland and the remaining parts of the UK. Whereas the SNP's rhetoric on independence formerly underscored the merits of breaking free from 'English Rule', it now emphasises that independence is not tantamount to 'separation' and that Scotland would not be wholly detached from the UK state, even after its independence.

For example, in the 2007 white paper, the SNP elaborated some institutional arrangements between an independent Scotland and the UK state. The Queen or her successor would remain as the 'Head of State' in Scotland with a ceremonial role. The current political union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland would become a monarchical union, as well as a monetary union until Scotland adopts the euro. That means the existing UK would transform itself into the 'United Kingdoms', which were forged in 1603 by the Union of the Crowns between England and Scotland. The white paper also emphasised the co-operative nature of this relationship within the prospective United Kingdoms. It argued that a broad range of cultural, social and policy initiatives would continue between an independent Scotland and the remainder of the UK. It also envisaged that an independent Scotland could develop close working relationships both with the remainder of the UK and Republic of Ireland through a strengthened

British–Irish Council⁽⁵⁾ (Scottish Executive 2007, 24).

The SNP is also considering whether to keep its pacifist orientation in defence and security matters. Its long-standing policy commitment has been to negotiate a phased withdrawal of an independent Scotland from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It was said to be difficult for the SNP to accept the continued participation of an independent Scotland in nuclear alliances such as NATO, because of its principled opposition to nuclear defence (The Scottish National Party 2001, 15-16). However, even on this crucial policy commitment, a softening process can be detected. The SNP's defence spokesman hinted that the party was considering scrapping opposition to NATO membership as part of a radical shakeup of its defence strategy. The rationale for this U-turn was said to be that the SNP was seeking to forge close ties with Scandinavian countries such as Norway, Denmark and Iceland, which were all NATO member states. The SNP seems to reckon that staying in NATO makes sense. However, it could be seen as yet another strategic manoeuvre by the SNP to placate and reassure a sceptical electorate that Scottish defence will be secure after independence. An opinion poll shows that continued membership in NATO is supported by a majority of SNP members, let alone ordinary voters (The Guardian, 1 March 2012).

Another dimension of the SNP's softer nationalism is its growing

(5) The British–Irish Council was established by the Good Friday Agreement (Belfast Agreement) of 1998 for facilitating co-operation among the governments within the British Isles. It is made up of ministerial representatives from the British and Irish governments, as well as the governments of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The SNP envisages that the British–Irish Council will evolve into a framework somewhat akin to the Nordic Council, which is represented by the five Scandinavian countries, after a Scottish independence.

(6) This policy U-turn on defence is expected to be debated at the SNP annual conference in October 2012. As to nuclear defence, the SNP is still committed to remove Trident nuclear submarines from Scotland (The Guardian, 1 March 2012).

flexibility in terms of a new constitutional alternative to a full independence. Although the party keeps arguing for the establishment of an independent Scottish state, it now accepts that demanding significant increases in the powers of the Scottish Parliament, a so-called 'devolution-max', would be a more realistic strategy than the one based on independence through a referendum victory (Lynch 2002, 257). Therefore, the SNP wishes to expand the Scottish Parliament's powers over various areas which have been kept under the jurisdiction of the UK government, such as European relations, energy, transport, social security and immigration matters. The party especially wants to achieve fiscal autonomy for Scotland, in which the Scottish Parliament would exercise full financial powers concerning tax and borrowing (Hepburn 2009, 196-199).

The pragmatism of the SNP can also be seen in its flexible attitude towards referendum questions. The 2007 white paper set out plans to hold a referendum on Scotland's constitutional future, but the choice was not just a straightforward one between independence and the status quo but rather a multiple-option one. Although the SNP Government made clear that it favoured independence, it acknowledged there was a fairly strong demand for strengthening the Scottish Parliament and hinted at holding a multi-option referendum, including the third choice of 'devolution-max' (Scottish Executive 2007). Furthermore, in the consultation paper on the future of the Scottish economy, published in 2009, the SNP Government once again reiterated its preference was full independence, but considered a range of options for the fiscal powers of the Scottish Parliament, including 'devolution-max', which would make 'the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government responsible for raising, collecting and administering all (or the vast majority of) revenues in Scotland and the vast majority of spending for Scotland' (Scottish Government 2009, 29).

In the first term of the SNP Government (2007–2011), it was understandable for the SNP to offer a ‘devolution-max’ option as well as a choice on independence, because it was a minority government, and hence, it could not hold a referendum by itself. It had to get at least Liberal Democrats’ support for the referendum bill to pass. Therefore, it offered a ‘devolution-max’ option, which the Liberal Democrats favoured the most. In the end, they did not accept the SNP’s offer, and there was no referendum during the first term of the SNP Government. It is interesting that the SNP Government has again sent a positive signal for a ‘devolution-max’ option, even after it formed a majority government in 2011. In the 2012 consultation paper, the SNP Government acknowledged that ‘there is considerable support across Scotland for increased responsibilities for the Scottish Parliament short of independence’ and expressed its willingness to include a question on ‘devolution-max’ on the ballot paper of the referendum (Scottish Government 2012, 5-6).

There is no need for the SNP to seek other parties’ support to get the referendum bill to pass, because it has secured majority seats in the Scottish Parliament. Then, why is the SNP trying to include the ‘devolution-max’ option in the ballot paper? One possible answer is that it is natural for the party to respond to the majority view among the Scottish people, which supports increased powers for the parliament and not independence. If the referendum were held in the format of a straight ‘Yes’ or ‘No’, it would be extremely difficult to muster enough votes for independence. However, if the referendum were held in the format of multiple choices, including the ‘devolution-max’, the likelihood of that option to be endorsed would be reasonably high. It could be said that the SNP would like to keep the ‘devolution-max’ option for an independence referendum as a type of insurance policy. Because of this insurance, the party could minimise

devastating damage, which would certainly follow a defeat in an independence referendum. Even in the case of a referendum defeat for Scottish independence, the SNP could at least claim that it had made some contribution to strengthening the devolution framework by adding an extra option in the referendum, if that option prevails.

In a way, the SNP's adoption of soft nationalism could be seen as a type of skilful effort by the party to adapt to the new environment created by the devolution.

On the one hand, it has been quite successful in electoral terms. The SNP established itself as the major opposition to the Labour Party in the first two elections of the Scottish Parliament. Then, it succeeded in becoming the party of government in the 2007 election and majority party in the 2011 election. One reason why the SNP has been so successful in the Scottish elections is its ability to gain some votes from the people who prefer devolution to independence by softening its rhetoric on independence.

On the other hand, so far, electoral success has not drawn its ultimate goal of Scottish independence any nearer. As already stated, the support for independence has usually been approximately 30%. For the moment, the Scottish people seem to prefer devolution or enhanced devolution (‘devolution-max’)⁽⁷⁾ to independence. In the face of this unfavourable atmosphere, the SNP has been pursuing a dual strategy. While the party is committed to having an independence referendum, it is trying to alleviate anxiety among the Scottish people about a separation from the UK by stressing the continued relationship between an independent Scotland and remainder of the UK. It also tries to include the ‘devolution-max’ option on the ballot as an insurance policy, which would enable the party to shield

(7) Ben Saunders argues against the notion that non-Scottish UK citizens should be enfranchised in any referendum on the issue of Scottish independence (Saunders 2012).

itself against fallout from a devastating defeat in a prospective independence referendum.

Conclusion

During the last several decades, there have been huge changes to the structure of the modern state, influenced by the process of globalisation. In Europe, the dual processes of supranational European integration and decentralisation have been further accelerating this transformation of the modern state. As a consequence, the meaning of independence and sovereignty has also been changing, whereby the state is no longer the only source of ultimate authority. Nowadays, the idea that modern states are not so much 'independent' as 'interdependent' and that they do not possess 'exclusive' sovereignty but 'shared' sovereignty is widely accepted among political scientists and politicians (Keating 2001).

In response to these developments, nationalist parties at sub-state level have come to adopt a subtle approach in order to realise their goals of self-government. Many of them have been seeking unique forms of autonomy within state and supranational structures, which are different from full sovereign statehood. In other words, contrary to a widely held view, many nationalist parties are not 'separatist' but 'autonomist', and they seek to achieve self-government within larger political structures such as states and supranational institutions (Tierney 2005, 162).

As we have shown in this study, the SNP is committed to independence for Scotland. It argues that independence is the best choice for Scotland, which will become more successful by unlocking its full potential (The Scottish National Party 2011, 28). However, it does not mean that the SNP disregards the on-going structural changes of the modern state, or has the

SNP been dogmatically committed to a particular notion of statehood based on indivisible and unitary sovereignty. Since its inception, the SNP has supported not just one type of independence but various forms of independence for Scotland within larger political frameworks, such as dominion status within the British Empire, self-government within a confederal British Isles and independence in Europe (Hepburn 2009, 190).

The SNP has constantly changed its rhetoric on independence and the means to achieve it, in response to structural transformation at the sub-state, state, supranational and global levels. Its flexible rhetoric on independence has been useful for the party to exploit the unique opportunity structure presented by the devolution. The advent of the Scottish Parliament changed the political context in which the SNP pursued independence. In accordance with the changed political context, its strategies have shifted from espousing 'harder' forms of independence to pursuing 'softer' forms of independence ('independence-lite') or even 'devolution-max'.

The SNP's flexible rhetoric on the independence issue has enabled the party to have a strong appeal to the Scottish people, who are generally reluctant to accept complete separation from the UK. The SNP's recent rhetorical emphasis has been on continuing the breadth of partnership with other parts of the UK after independence. The SNP hopes this rhetorical practice will persuade sceptical voters to back Scottish independence, or to put it bluntly, 'independence-lite'. Another example of the SNP's rhetorical flexibility is that it purports to keep an open mind on the form of an independence referendum. Although the SNP prefers independence to devolution, it is willing to have a multiple-choice referendum in which voters can choose not only from 'Yes' or 'No' to independence but also from a 'devolution-max' option. As we have seen, 'devolution-max' is not

only the second-best scenario for the SNP but also an insurance policy which would protect the party from the enormous shock of defeat in an independence referendum.

Since the SNP has the majority in the Scottish Parliament, it is almost certain that there is going to be a referendum on the issue of Scottish independence sometime in 2014. Probably, it will be difficult for the SNP to overturn the present majority who do not support independence. However, the result most depends on how the party plays its cards. The SNP once achieved the apparently impossible task of winning majority seats in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election. Nobody can deny that the party might achieve another seemingly impossible feat and make Scotland independent again.

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