Elections are like diagnostic fluid. You inject it into the body-politic, and notice new things, whether they are to your liking or not. Thus, the election of a Scottish National party (SNP) majority in the recent Scottish Parliament elections came as a shock to some, a delight to others. To be sure, no-one predicted it. After all, the Labour party in Scotland thought it had stymied the nationalists when the Parliament was designed in the late 1990s by adopting the additional member system which made it almost impossible for any party to get an overall majority. If you won on the constituency swings, you lost on the regional list roundabout; at least so the theory went. Not so, it turned out. The SNP won 45.4 per cent of the constituency vote (giving them 53 seats) and 44 per cent of the regional list vote (and 16 seats). Its nearest challenger, Labour, won 31.7 per cent (and 15 seats), and 26.3 per cent (and 22 seats), respectively. Thus, the nationalists have an overall majority in the parliament (69 out of 129), the first government ever to do so.

So why did it happen, and what does it mean? This is the greatest challenge to the British state since Ireland was partitioned in 1921, so it matters to the whole of the United Kingdom. How do we explain such an election outcome? First of all, there is the ‘keep calm and carry on’ tendency, who point out that Labour’s performance in United Kingdom elections held on the same day were encouraging but mildly disappointing. Thus, in Wales, Labour narrowly failed to get an overall majority, but was by far the biggest party. In English local elections, Labour had a net gain of 26 councils, but still had less than half the councilors the Tories had in England. This pan-GB explanation won’t wash. In fact, Labour’s vote share in Wales went up by 10 percentage points, and in England, by 9. In Scotland, it actually fell.

The ‘keep calm’ tendency in Labour offers another explanation. Scottish Labour ran an awful campaign, and its leader, Ian Gray, was a bit of a disaster. After all, they say, this was an election for the winning, because as recently as one month before the election, Labour was leading in the polls. In fact, it had been ahead for over a year, and had done very well at the British general election in May 2010 when it bucked the United Kingdom trend by winning 42 per cent of the popular vote to the SNP’s 20 per cent. So why lose in May 2011? It was, the conventional wisdom goes, a misjudged campaign which assumed that now the ‘auld enemy’ Tories (plus assorted friends) were back at Westminster, Scots would revert to type and embrace the Labour–Tory battle, with one predictable winner north of the border. The trouble was that by no stretch of the imagination could the local Scottish Tories be mistaken for the real English thing. They had won 16.7 per cent of the vote in 2010 while English Tories took 36.1 per cent—no contest. Once the penny

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dropped for Scottish Labour two-thirds of the way into the campaign that they were focusing on the wrong enemy, and that SNP were the real threat, it was too late. Labour in Scotland likes to call the SNP the ‘tartan Tories’, but it doesn’t wash. Nationalist voters share too many of the political values of Labour to be so tarred.

Then there was the leadership factor. The battle between Ian Gray for Labour and Alex Salmond for the SNP was no contest. Indeed, what is known in Scotland as the ‘Eck factor’ (as in ‘Al-eck’), the Salmond effect, had worked its charm in 2007 when the SNP won by a whisker with one more seat than Labour and set about forming a minority administration. Indeed, opinion polls during the 2011 campaign showed a widening gap between Salmond and Gray (by the end the gap was a massive 35 percentage points compared with 24 in late March). Back in 2007, Salmond was judged a better First Minister in the making than his Labour rival, Jack McConnell, by a ‘mere’ 9 percentage points. Relatedly, in the 2011 campaign about half of Scottish voters thought that the SNP would best stand up for Scotland, compared to less than one-third for Labour.

The failure of Gray, and Labour’s homespun Scottish-run campaign, led some to demand that the United Kingdom Labour party resume responsibility for running Scottish campaigns as it had done in previous devolved elections north of the border—most notably when Gordon Brown was the premier Scottish politician. There is a key point here. One can have fun teasing Labour party members in Scotland by asking who the leader of the Scottish Labour party is. No, it is not the ‘leader of the group of Labour MSPs at Holyrood’ (‘Holyrood Group Leader’—not a title which fits easily on a billboard or one which stirs the blood of the party faithful); it is the leader of the United Kingdom Labour party. Thus, the ‘correct’ answer has been and is: Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Ed Miliband. It may be correct, but it raises all sorts of more intriguing questions, such as why does Scottish Labour not have its own leader? Answer: the United Kingdom Labour party is not federated so whoever leads it leads Scottish Labour by default.

In fact, until a couple of decades ago, the party in Scotland was called ‘the Labour Party in Scotland’—not a title to set heather on fire, especially in a damp climate.

The ‘keep calm and carry on’ tendency has one other explanation for the ‘failure’ of Labour in the Scottish election. If you think we did badly, they point out, take a look at the Liberal Democrats. Their vote more than halved, from 16.2 per cent (2007) to 7.9 per cent (2011) for the constituency vote, and from 11.3 to 5.2 per cent for the regional list vote. They ended up with five MSPs, eleven fewer than in 2007—sufficient to fit into the proverbial taxi. And didn’t Liberal Democrat voters switch en masse to the SNP? QED. Wrong answer. In fact, it seems that deserting Liberal Democrat voters were just as likely to vote Labour in 2011 as SNP.

So one can conclude that keeping calm should in no way imply that carrying on is the thing to do. Labour did not lose the 2011 Scottish election simply because it didn’t do too badly at the end of the day, it fought a poor campaign with a poor leader, or it suffered collateral damage by deserting Liberal Democrat voters who flocked to the nationalists. All these explanations may have some truth in them, but there is something far more fundamental going on in Scotland, which takes us back to our diagnostic fluid. The danger for Labour is that it mistakes the embalming for the diagnostic variety.

**Charting electoral change**

In truth, there are fundamental shifts taking place in Scottish, and British, politics. It is something of a convention to say that British politics are by and large
uniform, historically structured around two (and-a-half) party politics, and suffused with, but not simply explained by, social class. After all, in Scotland and Wales in particular Labour is disproportionately strong, compared to England. While there are odd exceptions when the so-called ‘Celtic fringe’ hold the balance in House of Commons votes, especially on purely English matters like health and education, this only matters politically when Labour is in government at Westminster. The so-called ‘West Lothian Question’ has not been solved by the election of a Tory/Liberal Democrat government, but it has, for the time being, lost its capacity for political mischief. The serried rank (singular—there is but one Scottish Tory MP) makes no difference these days to anything very much.

There is also the complacent view that voting SNP was something of a protest vote, liable to erupt in fury at right-wing Tory policies, as under the unlamented Thatcher regime. Once safely dispatched, Scotland at any rate would revert back to British type. Except it hasn’t, for there is no type any more. Consider how Scotland and England behave politically in the longue durée. First, bear in mind how Scots have voted since the Second World War. Two related trends are clear: the decline of two-party politics and the precipitate

![Figure 1a](image1.png)

![Figure 1b](image2.png)
decline of the Tories north of the border. Indeed, compare the differential performances of Labour and Conservative in Scotland and England found in Figure 1a. We can see from this graph that while Labour’s performance in England and Scotland begin to diverge from the 1970s, it is the Conservatives whose vote in Scotland plummets compared with its performance in England (Figure 1b).

It is clear that in the elections postwar Scotland and England hardly differed at all; that the gap grows from as early as 1955; and with the exception of 1997 when England rediscovered the virtues of Labour voting, by 2010 the gap between England and Scotland had never been greater (standing at 37 percentage points). In point of fact, we have to go back to 1868 to find such a English–Scottish differential.

These data, of course, do not take into account voting for other parties, including the SNP, but that is the point. By comparing the two main unionist parties in Scotland and England, we find significant differences, and ones which are of recent provenance—that is, the last thirty or so years. And what is most striking is that it is the Conservative gap between England and Scotland (23 percentage points in 2010) which is much greater than the Labour one (14 percentage points).

It is clear that the SNP does much better at Scottish Parliament elections than it does at United Kingdom general elections. Thus, if we pair adjacent elections we find SNP vote share as shown in Table 1. If we do something similar for Labour, we find comparable differentials, if not quite so dramatic: 1997/99: –7; 2001/03: –9; 2005/07: –8; 2010/11: –10. In short, while Labour does better at United Kingdom elections in Scotland of the order of 7–10 percentage points, the SNP does better at Scottish Parliament elections of 4–25 percentage points, notably at elections where it is most successful (2007 and 2011).

Why is Scotland different?¹

Being able to show how Scotland and England have diverged is only part of the story. Why should this have happened, and in a relatively short period, at least since 1955? Sixty years, in the scheme of things, is a relatively short time in politics, especially in the context of three hundred years of union. And it is that union which is the key. When the Treaty of Union was negotiated between the Scottish and English parliaments in 1707 (signed in two separate acts in each parliament), it was something of a patrician compromise. It left Scots in charge of ‘low politics’, of domestic affairs institutionalised by separate systems of law, religion, education and local administration. High politics—matters of state—were the preserve of Westminster, and as long as the Scots did not rock the boat (which they did not, by and large, apart from the local difficulty of the Jacobite Rising in 1745) they were left to get on with their own affairs. This was, classically, a mariage de raison, a marriage of convenience, which suited both sets of ruling elites. It kept the Scots out of the

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<th>Table 1: Share of vote by SNP at United Kingdom general elections and Scottish Parliament elections (percentages)</th>
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<td><strong>United Kingdom general elections</strong></td>
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¹ David McCrone

clutches of the French, and it gave them access to burgeoning markets at home and abroad. English complaints about ‘Scots on the make’ testified to the success of the latter.

It left, however, a basic anomaly embedded in the British state. The Union was by and large an incorporating, not a federated, one, with a single legislature based at Westminster, while Scotland was governed at arms-length through distinctive institutional structures consolidated into the Scottish Office in 1886 under the auspices of a Secretary of State for Scotland. To be sure, as far as we can tell, Scots were, in Graeme Morton’s telling term, unionist-nationalists. In other words, they remained Scots in strictly national identity terms, while embracing Britishness as and when appropriate as their state identity. This distinction between national and state identity was never meaningful to the English because England was by far the largest partner of union, and British institutions, notably Parliament, doubled up as English ones. In truth, none of these constitutional niceties mattered very much in practice as long as high and low politics were kept separate while at the same time not clashing with each other. Democracy presented the greatest challenge. Universal suffrage gave legitimacy to the state, but contained within it the nub of a later crisis. Simply put, as long as Scotland and England voted more or less the same way, the constitutional anomaly whereby the United Kingdom always got a government the English voted for did not matter. As Linda Colley has pointed out, shared religion (Protestant, but with different ‘national’ churches) and a propensity for war (usually with France, and later Germany) forged the British together sufficiently that national differences were subsumed by state and imperial endeavours.

The modern political story begins in 1945 where, as we have seen, there was very little difference in voting behaviour between Scotland and England, and in those days Conservatives and Labour between them captured over 90 per cent of the popular vote. The year 1945 is an appropriate starting point for analysis because it marks the United Kingdom as a welfare state—the third institutional pillar of Britishness along with religion and warfare. More generally, the role of the state as an agent of economic modernisation had been given a fillip by war, aided and abetted by the Scottish Office under Tom Johnston as Secretary of State, who set about reforming Scotland’s outdated economic infrastructure. Given that the rationale for joining the 1707 union in the first place was to take advantage of economic opportunities afforded by empire, first English then British, membership of that union was always pragmatic and opportunistic. Much of the decades after 1945 seemed to confirm Scotland’s relative economic backwardness compared to England, reflected in much higher levels of unemployment and out-migration. Being British seemed a matter of common sense rather than commitment. From the late 1950s, the Scottish Office set about attracting a disproportionate amount of foreign (mainly American) capital into its high-tech Silicon Glen, to give multinationals a toehold in Europe.

All that began to change in the 1970s with the discovery of oil in the North Sea. The impact on political psychology was considerable. For the first time since 1707 it was possible to envisage an alternative future outside the British state, much along the lines of Norway, Scotland’s neighbour across the North Sea, with a smaller population but with control of considerable oil assets to the east of the median line. The emergence of the Scottish National party as a political force in the 1970s reflected this sea-change. ‘It’s Scotland’s Oil’ made a good slogan, if dubious law. Such was the panic among the unionist parties that the Conservatives under Edward Heath toyed with...
some modest form of devolved assembly, while the Labour government commissioned a white paper and a bill for devolution culminating in a referendum in 1979. This was fought under a curious clause which demanded that 40 per cent of those on the electoral list had to vote ‘yes’ for the bill to pass—a device designed to stall the process, and it worked. While 51.6 per cent voted in favour on a turnout of 63.8 per cent, too few voted to make the difference and the bill fell along with the Labour government in 1979. To be sure, Labour was divided, and it took the long cold Thatcher winter to persuade many socialists that ‘home rule’ was not simply a divisive nationalist ploy. Such a conversion was aided by the fact that the 1979 referendum had done for the SNP in electoral terms as well as Labour.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of the ‘democratic deficit’ entered Scottish political vocabulary, for Mrs Thatcher’s Conservatives were returned overwhelmingly on English votes. Scots were too few to matter. So it took until 1997 when Labour was returned at Westminster, and another referendum was held later that year with strong popular support for a parliament with lawmaking—and tax-varying—powers; a parliament governed in its first two terms by Labour/Liberal Democrat coalitions. Calling itself an ‘executive’ and not a ‘government’ as required by the 1998 Scotland Act, the hope was that devolution had become the settled will of Scots. Settled it might be, but not in the sense that the powers of the parliament were fixed in stone. The cliché was that devolution was a process not an event, confirming to those hostile to devolution that it might well be a slippery slope to independence. Some, like the last Tory Scottish Secretary of State, Michael Forsyth, took to claiming that devolution was always going to be the thin end of the wedge. This was despite the fact that he himself repatriated the Scottish colleges to avoid them being swallowed up under the English ex-polytechnic system. Forsyth also indulged in high symbolic politics on St Andrew’s Day 1996 by bringing home the historic Stone of Scone/Destiny which had lain under the coronation throne at Westminster Abbey since it was purloined by Edward of England in the thirteenth century. A few months later, he, and his party, were out of office, and wiped out in Scotland. The stage was set for a more familiar act, and the devolved parliament was elected in 1999.

It is tempting to think that the election of a majority SNP government in May 2011 is the inevitable consequence of devolution, but this is not so. Indeed, the election of successive Labour/Liberal Democrat coalitions from 1999 seemed to have seen off the nationalist threat, especially in 2003 when the number of SNP MSPs fell from 35 to 27, only to rebound to 47 in 2007. Support for independence since 1999 stands at 25–30 per cent, whereas well over 50 per cent support devolution, with only one in ten wanting no parliament at all. On the other hand, a majority of Scots want a more powerful parliament—notably supporters of devolution—focusing especially on powers over taxation and social security. It seems that most Scots are prepared to leave Westminster responsible for foreign affairs and defence, but think everything else should fall within the remit of Edinburgh. The Calman Commission, dreamt up by the unionist parties in 2007 and reporting two years later with modest revisions of the 1998 Scotland Act, has been made somewhat irrelevant by the election of the SNP in 2011. And there is consistent support for ‘fiscal autonomy’: the notion that Scots should pay for public services out of taxes raised in Scotland and an expectation that such taxes would be somewhat higher than they are at present. In other words, if we ask people to choose between constitutional categories (independence, devolution, no parliament) we get a different answer than if
we ask them where they stand on self-government—a more powerful parliament within the United Kingdom seems to be the answer.

Scots have consistently placed more trust in Holyrood than Westminster when it comes to running Scotland’s affairs. From the outset, well over two-thirds have thought the former should have more influence, while at most 30 per cent think it does have such influence—a figure which has grown steadily over the devolution decade. A similar differential between Holyrood and Westminster relates to trusting the Scottish level of governance all or most of the time, and in assessing its capacity to give ‘ordinary people’ more say in how the country is governed. Despite early controversy about the cost of building the new parliament, there is a ‘teflon’ quality in people’s assessment of its impact on their lives. Thus, those who think that the quality of health, education and even standard of living have improved are far more likely to credit Scottish government, whereas the pessimists, those who think things have got worse, are more likely to attach blame to Westminster, even, as in the cases of health and education, these fall firmly within the remit of Edinburgh.

Just as there has been no surge in support for independence since 1999, so there has been no sudden rise in the proportion of people saying they are Scottish. The point is not that having a parliament has made people feel more Scottish; they were Scottish enough to begin with. Over 60 per cent give priority to being Scottish over being British, with less than one in ten giving priority to be British, with the rest saying they are equally so. This has been the pattern since the 1990s, suggesting that the shift in identity occurred before the devolution decade and not during or because of it. Indeed, there is a rather complicated relationship between people’s national identity, their constitutional preferences and the political party they support. Only about half of SNP supporters say they are Scottish not British, and just over 40 per cent of these ‘ultra-Scots’ support the SNP. Similarly, half of those who say they want independence say they are Scottish not British, and less than half of the ‘ultra-Scots’ want independence. There is also an attenuated relationship between party support and constitutional preference such that a significant minority of SNP supporters say they prefer devolution to independence, reflecting what we said before about ‘self-government’ being a continuum rather than a category choice. The success of the SNP in 2007 lay in capturing a much higher proportion of those who were in favour of independence, as well as persuading many in favour of devolution that they would provide competent government, and be more likely than Labour to stand up for Scotland’s interests against Westminster. Something similar is likely to have occurred in 2011.

What we can say about 2011 is that the SNP received its highest share of the vote ever, whereas Labour’s share was the lowest in Scotland at a national election since women got the vote in 1918; and just when one thought the Tories could not fall lower than the miserable 16.7 per cent they got in 2007, they did just that in 2011 with 13.9 per cent. The Liberals were back to where they were in the mid-1970s before the SNP surge. None of this is inevitable, but it does suggest that support for greater self-government (so-called ‘devolution-max’) is the game in town, and if there were a referendum tomorrow, while the independence option might not win, there would be a clear majority for the two taken together.

The Scottish Parliament is more of an outcome than a driver of such forces. It has helped to embed the Scottish frame of reference, the setting in which issues of public policy are debated and decided upon. This is not because Scots are significantly more ‘left-wing’ than the English on matters of social inequality, income
and wealth redistribution, trades union rights and the like (the differences are marginal). Rather, it is because the system of party political competition north of the border is between two left-of-centre parties—the SNP and Labour—which cleave to social democratic politics at a time when in England the thrust is towards more individualistic, neo-liberal, market-oriented policies, notably on health and education. In other words, the systems of party competition—in England, between what remains of New Labour and the Conservatives; in Scotland, the SNP and Labour—processes which shape political debate and ultimately public policy. The Parliament has helped to create and expand a deliberative space for Scottish issues, a set of concerns about Scotland’s future in economic, social and constitutional terms, as well as debates about the national ‘we’. It has become, quite quickly, the obvious forum for such debates, leaving Westminster MPs somewhat bemused and ignored.

Having a Scottish parliament has made little difference to support for independence, and Scots are currently content to remain within the United Kingdom, but one which gives them greater autonomy and control over all matters short of defence and foreign affairs. There is nothing inevitable about Scotland leaving the United Kingdom any more than it is inevitable that it will not. Most depends on how political parties play their cards. For Labour, it is a matter of transforming itself into a ‘Scottish’ party, with significant autonomy in and of itself, reaching into its deep legacy of national identity, and worrying less, if at all, as to how ‘London’ sees things. For the Nationalists, the lessons are not to obsess about independence as an end in and of itself, but to relate it to self-government as a means of making a significant difference to material and social concerns. Symbols matter, but only as long as they connect with materiality. Was any of this predictable back in 1999? Perhaps, with hindsight, those who worried about where a devolved parliament might lead were on to something, that it would the slippery slope to independence (ironically, the hope of the Nationalists, although they used a different metaphor, that devolution would be the stepping stone to full autonomy). Scots themselves are more sanguine, and the largest number (c. 40 per cent) thinks that devolution is neither more nor less likely to bring about independence. It is, however, hard to disagree with the view that Scotland is a more semi-detached country than it has been throughout its history in the Union. That, of course, may be the result of England detaching from Scotland rather than the other way round, but that is a different story altogether.

Notes