Changed Utterly: Scottish Politics After the 2015 British General Election

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Résumé
La victoire écrasante du *Scottish National Party* aux élections législatives britanniques est sans précédent : aucun parti politique en Écosse n'a jamais conquis 95% des sièges (56 sur 59). En outre, le pourcentage de voix recueillies par le parti (50%) était en lui-même notable et a confirmé, si tant est que l'augmentation massive du nombre de ses adhérents n'en ait pas été une preuve suffisante, que le référendum sur l'indépendance n'avait pas réglé la question de la place de l'Écosse au sein du Royaume-Uni une bonne fois pour toutes, comme l'affirmaient les défenseurs de l'Union.
Cet article analyse les résultats du référendum écossais et des élections législatives britanniques de 2015 en Écosse dans une perspective historico-sociologique, avec pour objectif d'expliquer à la fois l'origine politique et socio-démographique du vote nationaliste, et l'absence de symétrie entre un vote pour le SNP lors des élections à la Chambre des Communes et l'adhésion au projet d'indépendance de l'Écosse.

Abstract
The landslide victory of the Scottish National Party in the 2015 British General Election is unprecedented: no party in Scotland ever won 95% of the seats (56 out of 59). The share of the vote obtained by the party (50%) was remarkable in itself and confirmed – if further proof was needed beside the four-fold rise in party membership – that the independence referendum had not settled the question of Scotland's place in the Union once and for all as it was argued by the Unionist parties.
This article analyses the Scottish independence referendum and the 2015 British General Election results in Scotland from a historical-sociological perspective, aiming at explaining where the SNP vote came from in political and socio-demographic terms, as well as accounting for the lack of alignment between support for the SNP in the General Election and the notional pro-independence vote.

Mots-clés : L'Union entre l'Écosse et l'Angleterre – le référendum écossais – le vote nationaliste – la question anglaise – préférences constitutionnelles – autonomie politique

Keywords: The Union of Scotland and England – the Scottish referendum – The SNP vote – The English question – constitutional politics – self-government

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Introduction

It is difficult to appreciate just how much Scottish, and British, politics has changed in the year 2014-15. The description, *Changed Utterly*, would seem to apply. The allusion is to WB Yeats' poem *Easter 1916*, and while the parallels are quite different – Scotland remains part of the UK at least for the moment, and it does not involve violent struggle – the sense of fundamental change abounds. It is unprecedented for any party in Scotland to win 95 per cent of the seats (56 out of 59) in the 2015 British General Election, and if critics point out that this was only on 50 per cent of the vote, that simply reinforces the degree of change. In the first place, it is 60 years since any party in Scotland won such a proportion of the vote, and ironically the last party to do so was the Conservative and Unionist Party and its allies. Furthermore, the imbalance between seats and votes, almost a 2:1 ratio, simply shows how unfit for purpose the British electoral system has become.

Understanding the Union

In this article, I will set the result in context, and seek to account for it in historical-sociological terms, rather than simply according to the changing fortunes of political parties such that in due course we wait for the pendulum to swing back. Politics in Scotland may superficially resemble those in the rest of the UK, notably England, but appearances are not what they seem. True, parties with the same political labels – Labour, Conservative, Liberal-Democrat – operate on both sides of the border, but they are not 'the same'; we should not mistake labels for substance. It is the Union of 1707 which makes them different. This was a *mariage de raison*, a marriage of convenience, between two sovereign states, Scotland and England. The Union gave Scotland access to markets, capital and technology in what started out as the 'English Empire' and rapidly became the 'British' one. For the English state, the Union secured the northern border, and finally saw off the 'auld alliance' between Scotland and France which dated back to the 13th century, but which had fallen into abeyance long before 1707. Nevertheless, binding Scotland into England's interests was important to the bigger state. The Union was one of unequals, but whatever it was it did not represent the colonisation of Scotland by England, nor the desire of Scots to become English. Scotland retained control of key civil institutions, notably the legal system, education and religion, plus a different system of 'low' politics, the administration of councils and local welfare.

On reflection, the remarkable feature was that the Union system has lasted as long as it has, but that was because it was adaptable, aided by the fact that Britain had no formal written constitution, and hence change could be introduced relatively easily without legal impediments. What mattered was what worked, especially in a burgeoning imperial context.

Remarkably, Britain had no 'Minister of the Interior' unlike most continental European states, and internal oppression such as followed the Jacobite rising in 1745, and the Peterloo Massacre in 1819, were the exceptions not the rule. Democracy in the form of the universal franchise came slowly and grudgingly to the British state, fought for by the disenfranchised in the teeth of vested interests and power. Because it did not involve (much) armed insurrection did not mean that the franchise was freely given. Ireland was an example of how not to govern a territory, and *force majeure* sounded the loss of most of the island in 1921 when the British overplayed their hand in 1916: changed utterly.

Politics in the Union

Scotland was reasonably secure in the Union because it was largely self-governing (lower-case), autonomous in its institutions. Nevertheless, there was a key anomaly at the heart of the British state: it was 'unitary' in having a single Parliament (with two Houses), but it was also 'multinational' (comprising England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales). What would have made most sense was for the UK to be a federal state, but that was never to be, and even less likely today. Furthermore, England was bigger than the rest, and it was always possible that the non-English countries would get a government England wanted, and indeed, this happened most of the time.

Scotland and England had quite different electoral profiles for much of the middle years of the 19th century, especially between 1841 and 1857, and between 1865 and 1885. At that point, Scotland and England converged, as the graph shows:
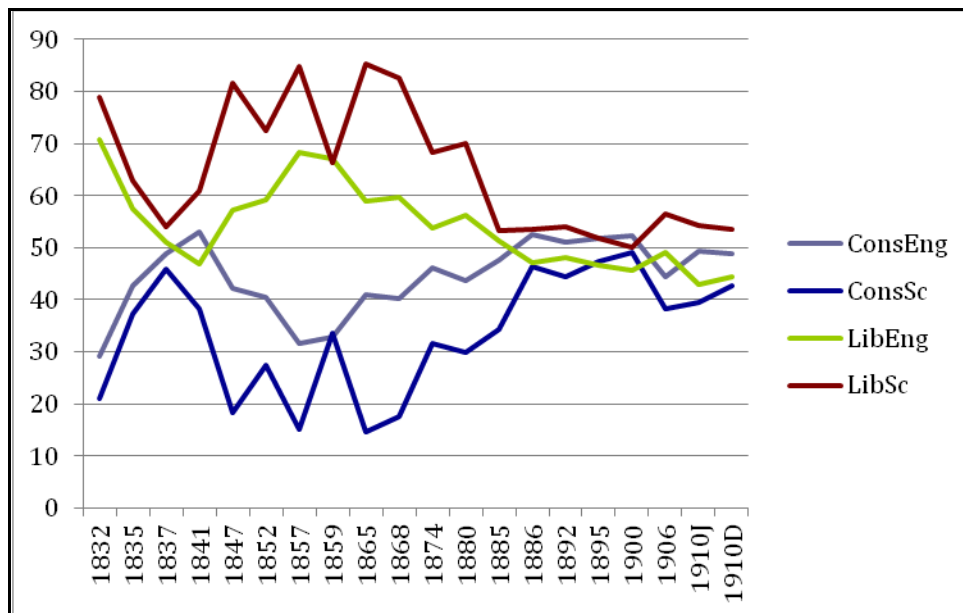
Graph 1: Percentage share of vote in Scotland and England, 1832-1910

When the Liberals did well in Scotland, they did well also in England, but to a lesser extent. By and large, Scotland was more Liberal; England more Conservative. Following the split in 1886 over Irish Home Rule, the splinter group of Liberal Unionists did well in Scotland, especially in the west of Scotland where the Protestant 'Orange' vote was strong. The electoral success of the Right reflected the 'religious' question, although arguably it was more about defending the Union than defending the Faith.

In the interwar period, the Conservatives did better electorally in England than in Scotland (by about 7 percentage points), and the Liberals were replaced as the alternative by Labour. Only in the postwar period did the Tories in Scotland challenge Labour, and the two main parties garnered over 90 per cent of the popular vote between them.
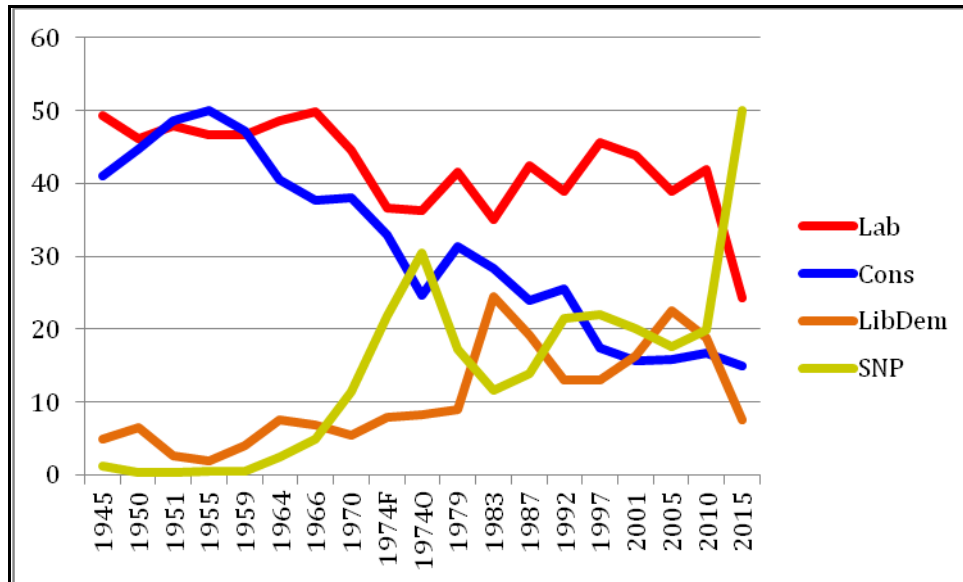
Graph 2: Percentage share of vote at British General Elections in Scotland, 1945-2015

We can sum up the broad electoral trends in Scotland as follows:

- In the 19th century, Scotland was disproportionately Liberal, and if anything, the differential between Scotland and England was greater than it became a century later;
- In the first half of the 20th century, Labour replaced the Liberals, and the Conservatives received an average of 37 per cent of the popular vote in the inter-war period (in England, 40 per cent);
- Since the Second World War, the electoral history of Scotland divided into two parts. Between 1945 and the early 1970s, Labour and Conservatives took about 9 out of every 10 votes, splitting them more or less equally. By the mid-1970s, it was obvious that the Tories had entered steady decline in share of the vote, that multi-party politics were significant, and the emerging divergence between Scotland and England began as early as 1955.

Surely, one might say, Scotland was simply one part of the United Kingdom, around 10 per cent of it, and thus in numerical terms no more entitled to object to Conservative Governments than northern English regions. That would be to miss a key point: Scotland was a nation which had administrative devolution and had signed a Treaty of Union with England in 1707, governed from The Scottish Office by politicians from the ruling Westminster party. There was no doubt, even among Conservatives, that Scotland had national status: it was no 'region' jurisprudentially or constitutionally. The former Thatcherite Secretary of State for Scotland, Michael Forsyth, now a member of the House of Lords told his peers: "We are not one nation, we are a United Kingdom", by which he meant that the British state was a union of nations (reported in *The Herald*, 2 June 2015).

The politics of the Union unravel

When North Sea Oil began to play a major part in economic and political life in the 1970s, the rise of the Scottish National Party was inextricably linked to it. This was because 'oil' allowed Scots to imagine an alternative future outside the Union. The contrasts with Norway, which had a smaller population than Scotland, across the North Sea were obvious. Labour's devolution plan failed because while a majority voted in favour, it was insufficient to meet the gerrymandered conditions imposed on a minority Labour Government in the late 1970s by a motley collection of dissidents including unionists in Labour's own ranks. Creating a 'Scottish Assembly' in 1979 was largely a device supported by the middle mass of Labour politicians to see off the SNP. There were a few true believers in devolution (such as Donald Dewar and Gordon Brown), a few heretics (like Tam Dalyell) who believed that devolution was the 'slippery slope' to full independence and hence had to be opposed at all costs, and a middle majority of Labour agnostics who simply judged it as a useful political device to counter 'nationalism'.

The election of Mrs Thatcher's Conservatives in 1979, and the long political winter of the following twenty years, converted a number of Labour MPs to devolution. The SNP, which had achieved 30 per cent of the vote in the October 1974 election (and did not reach such a figure again for thirty years), was challenged by Labour which took on the 'nationalist' mantle to speak for Scotland and defend its interest against an 'English' Conservative Government. One effect of that was to push the Tories into steady electoral decline in Scotland, although the divergence of Scottish and English politics had occurred long before Mrs Thatcher came to office. It was not her doing, but she became a useful personification of what Scots were against. It came to matter politically because, as a nation, Scotland was being governed by a Government it manifestly had not elected. Under majoritarian democracy ('first-past-the-post'), Mrs Thatcher had little need of Scottish votes: she became the best recruiting sergeant nationalism ever had, all the while not understanding why this was the case. After all, Adam Smith, she considered, was a 'jolly good Scot'.

The SNP meanwhile climbed steadily back from its nadir of 1979, and by the time of Scottish parliamentary elections post-1999 was challenging Labour for supremacy in Scotland.
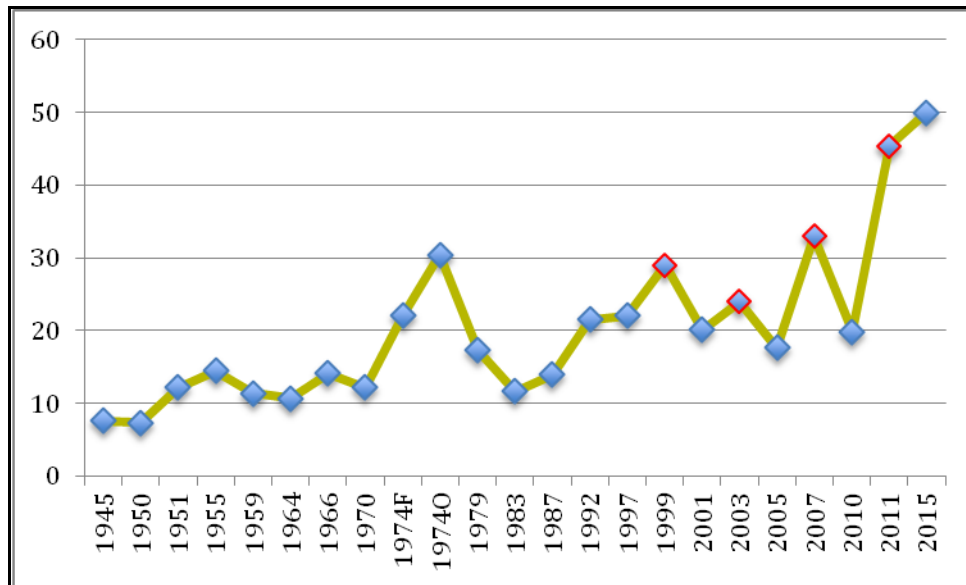
Graph 3: SNP share of vote at British and Scottish elections, 1945-2015:
Note: Percentage share in elections fought. Scottish Parliament elections in red.

It became a feature of Scottish Parliament elections that the SNP did proportionately better, and Labour worse, compared with British General Elections, because the SNP stood virtually no chance of being in government in Westminster, while at Holyrood, it was the alternative government to Labour (with or without the Lib-Dems). This was the conventional wisdom until the 2015 British General Elections when the Conservatives and the right-wing press made much of the possibility that the SNP could enter a 'progressive alliance' with Labour (and the Greens). Hence, the election poster:

Even a Unionist like Gordon Brown observed that this amounted to an *English* election manifesto, not a British one:

It intensified with their poster campaign – the Ed Miliband puppet on strings pulled by Nicola Sturgeon or tucked into the pocket of Alex Salmond – which conjured up the idea of the Scottish menace and was designed to whip up English nationalism against Scottish nationalism. Even more

> insidious is the little-known Carlisle principle enunciated by David Cameron: that each year the
> UK Government would scrutinise and, in effect, second-guess the work of the Scottish Parliament.
> (Brown, 2015b)

The point made was that the SNP had no mandate in England because it did not stand south of the border. Hence, to keep Labour in power was deemed illegitimate. This was both constitutionally and historically untrue. There is no constitutional barrier to any political party supporting or helping to form a government at Westminster if it has the seats there. Indeed, in 1892 and 1910, the Irish Party had done exactly that, rendering the Liberals their support in exchange for 'Home Rule' for Ireland within the UK. Such horse-trading was a perfectly reasonable political ploy, and had been used for decades by Conservative Governments who enlisted the support of Ulster Unionists, usually on an informal basis, as and when the need arose. No-one, in those days, complained that a 'foreign' party was aiding and abetting, probably because the Ulster Unionists saw themselves as 'ultra-loyal' to the Union. In any case, playing the Orange card had a long history in British-Irish Unionist politics. In 2015, if the opinion polls had proved correct, and a hung Parliament had been in the offing, then a coalition Government between the Tories, the United Kingdom Independence Party (Ukip), and the Ulster Unionists (UUP plus or minus the DUP) would have been likely as an alternative to a 'progressive' alliance. The irony is that such constellations and alliances would seem perfectly feasible if some form of Proportional Representation had been in operation at Westminster. The fact that the Lib-Dem stratagem for some (weak) form of PR, the Alternative Vote (AV), had been rejected early in the 2010-15 Parliament merely added nuance to likely outcomes.

Implicit in right-wing complaints that the SNP would have undue influence on a minority Labour Government implied that what was sauce for the goose was certainly not sauce for the gander. In fact, England – because this was essentially a debate about England's right to dominate – had been governed by a political party it had not voted for on only *three* occasions between 1945 and 2015, or 9 per cent of the time (at the 1964 election, and again in February 1974 and October 1974), whereas Scotland had been governed by a political party it had not elected on *ten* of the nineteen elections, that is, for 50 per cent of the time. The reasons for this were quite obvious: England is much bigger than Scotland, and provides 533 MPs to Scotland's 59. Only when the Conservatives and Labour are neck and neck does the possibility of smaller parties holding the ring become a factor. That is why the Irish party was able to do that at the turn of the 20th century, when Conservatives and Liberals were evenly matched at Westminster. The objection that 'Scots' should have undue influence at Westminster simply by playing by the rules revealed an ideological-constitutional split implying that England had the right to govern the rest of the UK come what may. In fact, Scotland plus Wales muster less than 100 MPs (99) to England's 533. As former Prime Minister Gordon Brown observed, in the British electoral system, it is minorities (like Scotland and Wales) which are at the mercy of the majority English, rather than the other way round, and only in exceptional circumstances. The fact that the Conservatives and their supporters in the media were prepared to play the English card in the form of 'English votes for English laws' (EVEL) spoke volumes about the tenuous state of the United Kingdom. Brown commented:

> […] *Evel* does nothing to grapple with the more basic problem the UK has always had to deal
> with: the population imbalance between the minorities – Scotland with only 8% of the UK
> population, Wales 5% and Northern Ireland 3% – and the majority, the 84% in England. If

anyone's interests are under threat, it is not England's but those of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales that are permanently at risk of being outvoted. (Brown, 2015a)

That there was such a febrile atmosphere in the early months of 2015 reflected a reading of the opinion polls which put Labour and the Conservatives neck-and-neck. As it turned out, most of the polls were inaccurate, leading to an inquest by the polling organisation the British Polling Council[1]. Its early findings showed that far too many pollsters relied on telephone or internet polling where the representativeness of the sample could not be ascertained. The British Election Survey (BES) which had used tried-and-tested doorstep sampling got the result correct. Why did the commercial companies fail? – because proper sampling is a more expensive methodology, and newspapers, who are the main customers for polls, want quick (and dirty) results. As the saying goes: today's newspapers are tomorrow's fish-and-chips wrappers.

The exception, ironically, to polling error, was Scotland. Here is the 'poll of polls' published by the estimable Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotCen) for the period up to the beginning of May 2015.
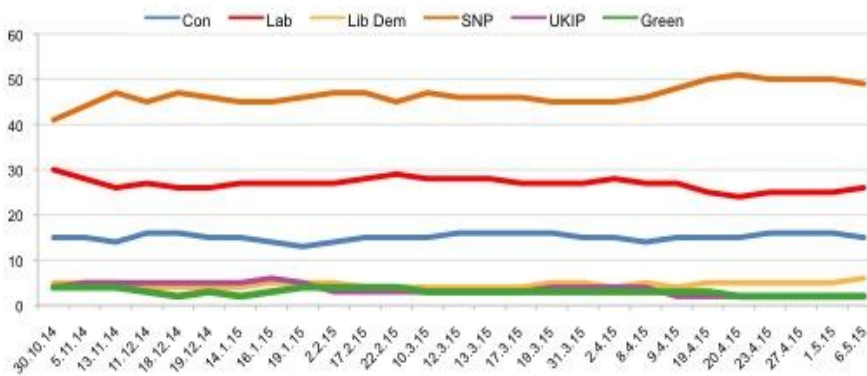
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[1] <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/general-election-7-may-2015/>
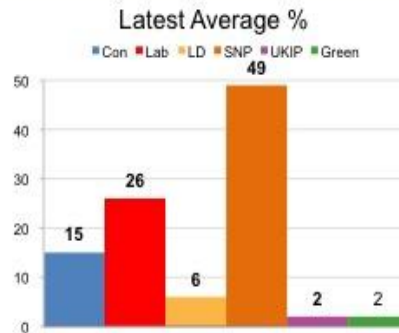
There could be little doubt that a landslide was on the cards north of the border. Commentators could not quite believe it. The smart money was on Labour pulling back on the SNP lead. After all, first-past-the-post is always something of a lottery, and even a few percentage points make a considerable difference to the outcome of seats. The Electoral Reform Society produced the following graph comparing actual seats won, with what would have happened under PR:
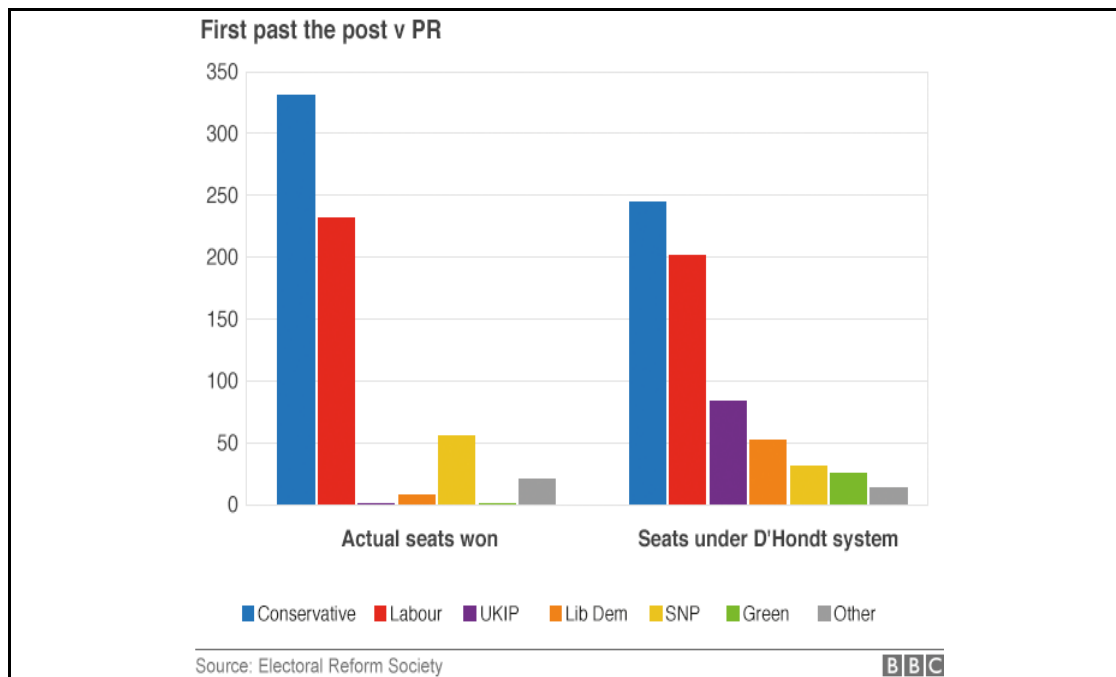
The major losers at a UK level turned out to be Ukip (who would have won 80 seats, and got nothing) and the Greens (who would have won 20, and got one seat). The SNP would have won 30. Nevertheless, first-past-the-post is the system preferred by Conservatives and Labour, even though – or because – it produces disproportionate returns on votes. The other imponderable was how voters handled the crudities of first-past-the-post so as to vote, not for their preferred choice, but their least-worst one. Thus, the only successful 'hold' for Labour in Scotland, Edinburgh South, is probably because of tactical voting by Tory and Lib-Dem voters to keep the SNP out[2]. In bourgeois south Edinburgh there were sufficient numbers of Tories and Lib-Dems to make this happen. Furthermore, the assumption of a Holyrood/Westminster voting gap, that Labour did much better at British elections, and SNP worse, was still a political truism. What shocked the Unionist parties was that the gap had been reversed. The SNP was now doing 8 percentage points *better* at Westminster than they had done at the Holyrood election in 2011, and Labour was 11 points worse. As far as Conservative and LibDem differences were concerned, there has not been a historic Westminster/Holyrood divide for these smaller parties.

Why the SNP won in 2015

Why did the SNP do so well at the 2015 British General Election? We will explore this in two ways: where the SNP vote came from in political, social and demographic terms; and by looking at the wider context framed by the Scottish independence referendum in May 2014, and the forthcoming Scottish parliament elections in 2016. It is the remarkable constellation of political events which help to explain the 2015 British General Election outcome.

In socio-demographic terms, the SNP did well across all social classes, genders and age groups. Thus, while 53 per cent of the working classes voted SNP, a significant minority of the middle classes (43 per cent) did so too. The Nationalists continued to appeal more to men

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[2] An inexperienced SNP candidate also helped.

than to women (52 per cent, and 44 per cent respectively), although the gap had narrowed on previous elections. Age was more complicated. While, broadly speaking, young people were more inclined to vote SNP than older people, the picture was not straightforward. Forty-eight per cent of 18-24 year olds, compared with 39 per cent of people over 60, voted SNP. However, the SNP's greatest appeal was to people aged 25 to 39 (52 per cent) and 40 to 59 year olds (53 per cent).

The SNP also benefited from considerable voter retention, with 86 per cent of people who voted SNP in 2010 (the previous British General Election) doing so in 2015, and 80 per cent of those voting SNP in Holyrood 2011. The SNP also benefited from vote-switching. Forty-four per cent of those voting Labour in 2010 – and 29 per cent of 2011 Labour voters – switched to the SNP in 2015. Among former Liberal Democrats, the figures were 40 per cent and 22 per cent respectively. Only Conservatives remained loyal to their party, but this reflected their weakness, not their strength, for they had been reduced to a loyalist core.

The 2015 General Election in context

The real story of the 2015 General Election was not the event itself, but the context in which it took place, and above all, the independence referendum in September 2014. The outcome is reasonably well-known; the implications are not. Ninety-seven per cent of the electorate registered to vote, including anyone over 16 years of age, on the grounds that if you can get married, and die for your country, you can vote for its future. The referendum saw the highest turnout, at 84.6 per cent, at any election since at least 1950. Fifty-five per cent voted No, and 45 per cent Yes. The strongest No votes occurred in the Borders (67 per cent), Orkney (67 per cent), and Shetland (64 per cent); among the over-65s (73 per cent), Conservatives (98 per cent), Lib-Dems (77 per cent), Labour (69 per cent), and those born elsewhere in the UK – mainly English incomers – (74 per cent). The strongest Yes voters were people who lived in Dundee (57 per cent), Glasgow (53 per cent), West Dunbartonshire (54 per cent), North Lanarkshire (51 per cent), 25-34 year olds (59 per cent), and SNP supporters (80 per cent).

The composition, in party political terms, of the Yes and No votes was important. The ballast of the Yes vote came from people who had voted SNP in 2011 (69 per cent), but almost a quarter (24 per cent) of Yes voters were Labour, 7 per cent LibDems and 1 per cent Tory. The political composition of the No vote was: 42 per cent Labour, 29 per cent Conservative, 16 per cent LibDem, and 14 per cent SNP. That latter figure might seem puzzling, given that independence is the *raison d'être* of the SNP, but it reflects a consistent view in Scottish politics that the SNP is the party which is best able to stand up to Westminster on Scotland's behalf. As many as 60 per cent of Tories in Scotland trust the SNP to work in Scotland's long-term interests, and just over half of that proportion trust a UK government to do the same. In other words, if you believe in Scottish interests being defended, and yet you are not in favour of independence, then it is quite logical to vote SNP. Strong and competent government was one of the key reasons people gave for voting SNP in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election.

We can draw some implications from the party political compositions of the Yes and No votes. The Yes vote was much more cohesive in that almost 7 out of 10 voters were Nationalists. On the other hand, the SNP had to be careful not to treat the Yes campaign simply as its own political property: hence, the arms-length Yes campaign run and financed

separately. The No campaign ('*Better Together*') was divided: no party dominated, which can be seen as an advantage, with Labour voters representing 4 in 10 of No voters. The problem for Labour was working with the Tories (who represented 3 in 10 of No voters), a political gift for the SNP who used the jibe 'in bed with the Tories' to constant and good effect. The Conservative Party remains toxic in Scotland, especially as they had been the dominant party in the Westminster Coalition Government since 2010, and had pursued a serious 'austerity' programme along with the hapless Liberal Democrats. The tainted association with the Tories did Labour no good at all in the 2015 General Election campaign in Scotland, even though politicians like Gordon Brown, now out of formal party politics, eschewed any such connection.

Plainly, the No side won, but the consensus subsequently was that having won, they lost the peace. The long two-year referendum campaign consistently put No at over 60 per cent, and Yes at 30+ per cent, roughly corresponding to the support shown for independence in previous surveys. So why did Yes get 45 per cent? What made the difference? The short answer is that a simple Yes/No on the matter of independence does not describe Scottish public opinion on the issue of self-government. A Yes/No divide was something of a straightjacket for those who wanted further powers for a parliament within the United Kingdom. If, for example, you supported 'devolution-max' whereby the Scottish Parliament and Government control everything apart from foreign affairs and defence, did you vote No on the grounds that you did not support independence, or did you vote Yes on the grounds that you wanted a far more powerful parliament than the current one at Holyrood? We will explore how the range of views on Scottish self-government expressed itself in the Yes/No vote later in this chapter.

The real achievement of the independence referendum was to energise Yes campaigners, and nationalist politics in particular. In any case, what 'nationalism' means is ambiguous. It can mean voting for the SNP (upper-case Nationalism), or simply believing that people in Scotland have the right to self-determination (lower-case nationalism). At public meetings, it was common to hear people say: 'I'm not a Nationalist, but I'm voting Yes'. The SNP knew it could not simply rely on people who were in the habit of voting for the party: the campaign had to be broadened.

The Yes campaign had three key effects. First, it energised nationalist politics in such a way that the 2015 British election campaign became an extension of the referendum one. It pulled people into politics in unprecedented numbers, and in particular energised the disenfranchised in peripheral housing schemes who had previously withdrawn from politics and voting. In the referendum aftermath, there was a minor row when some local government officials noticed that some people had re-appeared on the electoral register and hence were liable for unpaid Poll Tax dating back to the 1980s. The Scottish Government put a stop to such claims by creating and then invoking a statute of limitations. Second, the referendum was a 'bridge' across which many people crossed from voting Yes, to voting SNP in 2015. It turned out to be the best recruiting sergeant the party had ever had. Third, the referendum had brought a surge of new members into the party, more than four-fold. This had two implications: it meant there were far more party members to canvass round the doors, and it meant a huge increase in membership fees. The normal practice for the SNP had been to hold back financial resources in order to fight the Scottish Parliament elections, which meant that in 2010 it conserved its money in order to fight the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary elections. In 2015, this was no longer

required, and it was able to fight a highly professional and expensive campaign. One might have imagined that the failure to win the referendum would have been a demoralising setback, but instead there was seamless continuity from September 2014 to May 2015.

The success of the SNP in 2015 was of stunning proportions. The fact that there were solitary Labour, Tory and LibDem MPs reflected the first-past-the-post electoral system, but that was little consolation for Labour in particular who had shown no signs of wishing to introduce PR for Westminster, following Tony Blair's rejection of the Jenkins Commission proposals back in the early years of 2000. Chickens had come home to roost, and still Labour could not grasp the obvious. The veteran Labour politician Margaret Beckett commented: "In 2010 they didn't like any of us and didn't give anyone a majority. But in 2015 they said, hang on a minute, we would rather have a majority government of one or the other than a mess" (Mason, 2015). There are none so blind as those who will not see what is obvious. Katie Ghose, head of the Electoral Reform Society, said that the problem was the UK "[…] 'trying to cram multi-party politics into an old fashioned electoral system', which led to many people frustrated at not seeing their choices reflected in parliament" (*ibid*.). The problem for Westminster politicians is that when they are in power they believe the system which got them there has served them well; and when they are in Opposition, it is not in their power to change the system. *Plus ça change…* Looking at the experience of Social Democratic Parties elsewhere in Europe would make it obvious that the days of homogeneous Left (and Right) blocs are over. Coalitions are the norm, especially on the Left, notably between the Social Democratic and Socialist Parties, the Greens and possibly Liberal fractions. Persuading the British Left that they should look at experiences of similar parties elsewhere falls on deaf ears. Learning from the rest of Europe is rare. As the old joke goes: "Fog in the Channel: Europe [not Britain] Cut Off".

Following the sweeping SNP victory in the 2015 British General Election, we might have expected major shifts in constitutional politics. Not so. Post-election polls in August/September 2015 put the Yes/No notional vote at 50/50. Eighty-seven per cent of Yes voters said they would still vote Yes, and the same proportion of No voters would vote No (Curtice, 2015). There is not likely to be another referendum vote in the next few years, and 43 per cent (and almost three-quarters of SNP supporters) want another one within five years. Plainly, there has to be a trigger for such a thing to happen, and we will discuss that later in this article.

Politics and self-government

Nevertheless, there is something of a puzzle which needs to be explained. Why, if the SNP almost swept the board in 2015, and if it is the case that the pro-independence vote was energised in 2014, is the gap between Yes/No not greater? To answer that, we return to the point we made earlier: Scottish public opinion cannot meaningfully be divided into a simple Yes/No to independence. If, for example, we use a conventional three-way distinction between 'independence', 'devolution' and 'no Scottish Parliament', we get a consistent picture. Support for 'devolution' has been consistently above 50 per cent since the turn of the century, support for 'independence' is about one-third, and for no parliament at all, that is, rule from Westminster, less than 10 per cent. This division has been a consistent feature of opinion polls and surveys since at least the 1990s, but it has been somewhat overtaken by events. Thus, in 2010 ScotCen began to ask another question (Curtice, 2014): "Which of the

statements on this card comes closest to your view about who should make government decisions for Scotland?"

- The Scottish Parliament should make all the decisions for Scotland (independence)
- The UK government should make decisions about defence and foreign affairs; the Scottish Parliament should decide everything else (devolution-max)
- The UK government should make decisions about taxes, benefits and defence and foreign affairs; the Scottish Parliament should decide the rest (status quo)
- The UK government should make all decisions for Scotland (status quo ante 1999)

The new question has been asked in annual Scottish Social Attitudes surveys since 2010, and we can put these surveys together to give a more comprehensive picture. Averaged out, between 2010 and 2014, support for independence is at 35 per cent, devolution-max on 31 per cent, the current devolution status quo at 24 per cent, and no parliament at all at 7 per cent. In other words, 'devolution' needs to be split into a 'devolution-max' option and the 'status quo', and furthermore, the wording of the question suggests that not using the term 'independence' but 'make all decisions for Scotland' makes independence easier to support. As we mentioned above, the dilemma for supporters of 'devolution-max' is the greatest: should they support independence to get a much stronger Parliament; or should they gravitate towards the status quo even although it is well short of granting more powers to the Scottish Parliament? Further analysis suggests that 'devolution-max' supporters split 2 to 1 in favour of no independence, but that helps us to understand why in the 2014 referendum the vote for Yes was 45 per cent. If even as many as one-third of devolution-max supporters voted Yes, then we can understand why the Yes figure was as high as it was. Furthermore, we uncover an intriguing variation by party political support.

It comes as no surprise that almost 8 out of 10 SNP supporters are in favour of the Scottish Parliament making all decisions for Scotland ('independence'), but the views of supporters of the 'Unionist' parties make intriguing reading. One-third of Conservatives say they are in favour of devolution-max, and even 11 per cent support 'independence', making just under half (44 per cent) in support of greater self-government among supporters of the most dyed-in-the-wool Unionist party. Only 1 in 7 Tories favours no parliament at all, which was party policy as late as 1999. Two-thirds of Labour supporters are either in favour of 'independence' (29 per cent) or devolution-max (36 per cent), and we can understand better why a simple Yes/No choice in September 2014 caused such problems for Labour. Just over a quarter (26 per cent) were happy with the devolution status quo. Lib-Dems were half-way between Tories and Labour, with just under half in favour of either the status quo (39 per cent) or no parliament at all (7 per cent), and in those respects more resemble Conservatives than supporters of other parties.

We can also understand better why there was pressure for a multi-option referendum, one which more closely resembled the four-choice options and also asked people for their first and second choices. In that event, it is clear what would have happened: three-quarters of voters would have opted for devolution-max, either as their first choice or their second. This would have created a new consensus which extended self-government in Scotland, but it was one ruled out by the Westminster Government who argued that it was too hypothetical (as if 'independence' Yes or No was not also highly hypothetical in terms of what the implications were). Given that constitutional matters were formally reserved to Westminster, and the

Scottish Government won the battle (a) to have worded the question much closer to what they wanted ("Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?"), and (b) to give 16-year-olds the vote for the first time, they had to settle for a Yes/No choice. However, this was a political compromise, and cannot be understood as a proper reflection of what people in Scotland actually want. It also helps to explain 'The Vow'.

'The Vow' entered the Scottish political stage in September 2014, following one opinion poll showing that for the first time, the Yes vote was marginally ahead. Until then, the No ('*Better Together*') campaign had assumed that they would win, although by how much was unclear. The poll (in the *Sunday Herald* on 7 September 2014) set the cat among the pigeons. Labour MPs were dispatched north to sort out 'their people', and there was much merriment when a phalanx of such MPs marched up Buchanan Street in Glasgow to the ridicule of the substantial Yes campaign. A man on a rickshaw blasted the iconic *Imperial Death March* from *Star Wars* and announced, "*People of Glasgow, your imperial masters have arrived*", as he stalked Labour MPs in a city which was about to vote Yes. This led the Labour-supporting *Daily Record* to cobble together 'The Vow', decked out in suitable vellum:
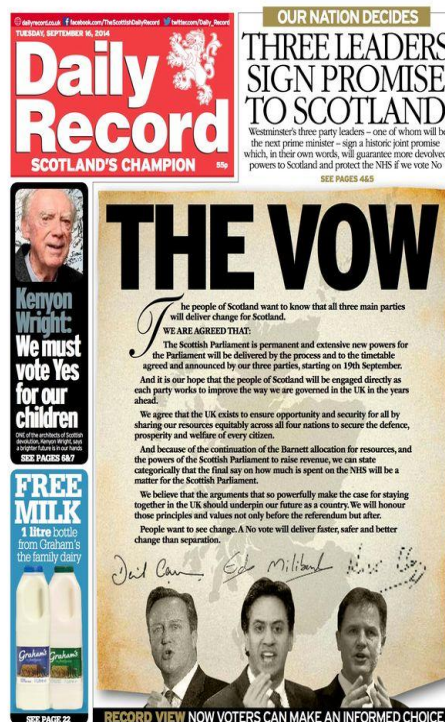
Daily Record, 16 September 2014

It turned out later that no-one 'signed' anything, and Ed Miliband, a few months later, denied ever having seen it ahead of publication. It was, to all intents and purposes, a journalistic forgery. In any case, the three party leaders at the foot of the document were hardly very popular in Scotland, and that included Miliband whose stock never rose above the mediocre. That this was a last-minute 'bounce' cannot be denied, although one doubts whether it had any major impact on how people voted. Gordon Brown, who also entered the fray, and published a more meaningful book on why Scotland should stay in the Union, rubbished 'The Vow'.

The English question

On the morning after the Referendum result was declared, the British Prime Minister David Cameron announced that, now that the Scottish question had been settled with a No vote, it was time to address the 'English question', what became known as EVEL, English votes for English laws. Brown and others considered this a political error of considerable magnitude. Writing in *The Guardian* newspaper, he commented:

> There is a myth that the union can easily survive this new polarisation between Scotland and England because it is held together by longstanding bonds and traditions. But what may have been true in the aftermath of two world wars has given way to a new century where none of our ancient institutions are strong enough or popular enough on their own to bind us together. […]
> The former Prime Minister Lord North (1770-82) is remembered for only one thing – losing America. Will history remember David Cameron for just one thing too – that on the morning of 19 September 2014 he lit the fuse that eventually blew the union apart? (Brown, 2015a)

There was bad blood between Brown and Cameron, but this does not explain Brown's fear for the Union. He said:

> There is no good reason why the United Kingdom should fall apart. But if it does – and sadly many Scots now seem to believe it will – it will not be because of what happened during the Scottish referendum, but because of what went wrong in the aftermath (*ibid.*).

The jibe about Lord North would undoubtedly have hit home.

Cameron had set up the Smith Commission on the steps of Downing Street on 19 September 2014, and Smith reported quickly, by St Andrews Day, 30 November, 2014, a mere six weeks later. Many thought that it was driven more by speed than substance, and that it left too much still to be worked out. The Westminster Government, however, pressed on, and a bill had just about made it through the House of Commons by St Andrews Day 2015, a year later (BBC News Website, 2015). Its critics, notably in the Scottish Government, are leery as to what is on offer, seeing it as having more to do with granting responsibilities than new powers, and at the time of writing it is unclear what it will mean for Scotland. It is fair to say that the Smith Commission has not had a good press (Ipsos-Mori, 2015; MacWhirter, 2015). If it is a device for cutting public spending in Scotland, as many think, or getting the Scottish Government to fill in the spending gaps in the context of the UK Government's 'austerity' programme, it will have achieved little, and may actually make things worse. So intertwined are budgets north and south of the border under the so-called Barnett Formula, that simply passing spending responsibilities over to Scotland, such that the Scottish Government has to make cuts and/or raise taxes to compensate for the withdrawal of resources is unlikely to lead to a new political settlement.

In any case, people in Scotland do not believe that the 2014 No vote is the end of the matter. Shortly after the 2014 referendum, a survey reported that 31 per cent thought that the question of Scottish independence would be settled for the next five years, and a further 17 per cent for the next ten. So almost half of Scots think that there will be another one along within a decade. Only Tories thought that the question would be off the agenda for at least a generation, or forever. They wish. What drives self-government is a belief in the principle that "all decisions about Scotland should be made in Scotland" (70 per cent gave that as main reason for voting Yes). On the other hand, the main reason for voting No was that the risks

(the currency, the economy, jobs and prices, being thrown out of the EU) were too great (47 per cent). Only 27 per cent had voted No because they had a strong attachment to the UK, its shared history, culture and traditions, a reason with disproportionate appeal to Conservatives. Furthermore, only 25 per cent had voted No because they thought it would mean extra powers for Scotland, so 'The Vow', perhaps, did not play as strong a part as journalists believe. This is reinforced by the fact that the majority of No voters (62 per cent) claim that they 'always knew' how they would vote, while about 40 per cent of Yes voters claim to have decided within four weeks of the vote, twice the proportion of No voters. This does convey something of the flavour of the campaign, that Yes was a much more visible campaign on the streets, while No was almost invisible, and certainly not on the streets.

The election aftermath

One might conclude from afar that the 2015 British General Election was some kind of re-run of the referendum campaign a few months before. It was not as simple as that, but it did change in a major way the tone of the election campaign. Indeed, the turnout in Scotland was significantly higher than in the rest of the UK, 71 per cent compared with 66 per cent, suggesting that the spill-over was significant. There is sense in which *all* General Elections in Scotland are about Scottish issues, that 'what is best for Scotland?' is the key question. Perhaps it was ever thus, in a state in which Scotland has long been autonomous, a process reinforced by a Scottish Parliament which is not about 'devolution' (that is, devolving powers to Scotland to carry out Westminster's wishes: power devolved is power retained, said Enoch Powell) but about 'self-government', which by definition is a continuum along which Scotland has been moving, and shows no sign of stopping.

This is not, however, simply about Scotland. We have a remarkable new political geography in the United Kingdom as we can see from the post-2015 electoral map:
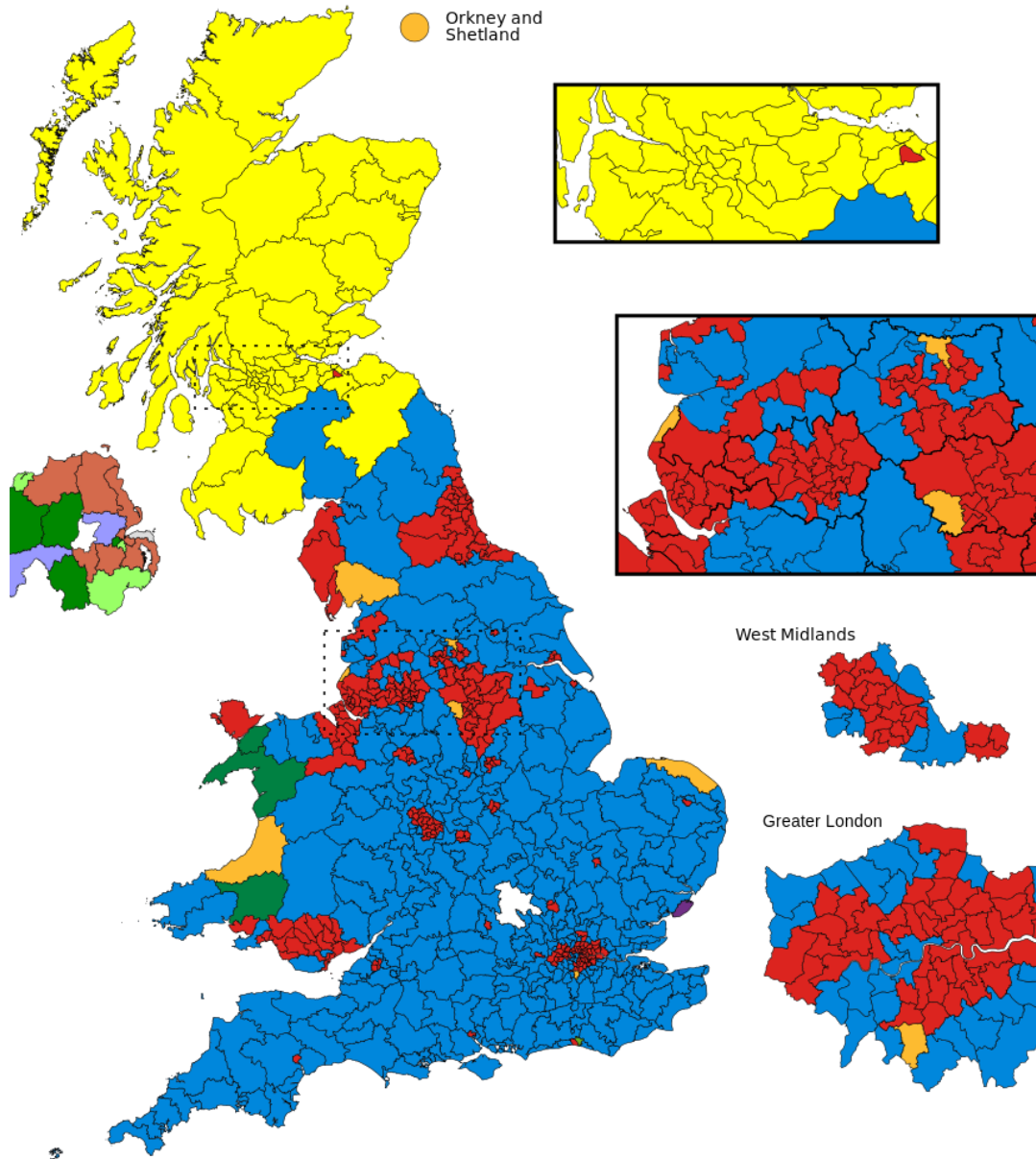
In all four territories of the UK, different parties are in command. In Scotland, the SNP has 95 per cent of seats, on 50 per cent of the votes cast. In England, the Conservatives have 62 per cent of seats, on 41 per cent of votes. In Wales, Labour has 62 per cent of seats, on 37 per cent of votes cast. In Northern Ireland, Unionists (DUP or UUP) have 56 per cent of seats on 42 per cent of votes. It is an irony that a refusal to countenance proportional representation for Westminster (the self-styled mother of all parliaments) on the grounds that it requires 'strong government' has made the United Kingdom more, not less, fissiparous. There is a Bourbon tendency among the British political elite, notably the Conservative Party. As Talleyrand allegedly commented of the Bourbons: they have remembered nothing, and forgotten nothing.

Conclusion

We began this article by pointing out that the United Kingdom (of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to give it its full title) had an anomaly entrenched at its core: it was a unitary state seeking to govern a multi-national one. This anomaly has never been resolved, and has become worse. Arguably, most of Ireland left the United Kingdom in 1921 not by design but by accident, and the British state had a number of opportunities to follow through on Gladstone's promise of 'home rule all round', starting with Ireland. Its failure to read the writing on the wall meant that Ireland left the Union by default, not intention. The Bourbon tendency of the Conservatives was reflected in opposition to modest devolution for Scotland and Wales in the 1990s, on the grounds that 'Great' Britain could not be broken up. David Cameron's decision after the No vote to address his version of the 'English' question, showed similar obtuse tendencies, at least according to his fellow Unionist, Gordon Brown. Belated and half-hearted proposals that the UK should be a federal state are also too little and too late. The political moments have passed; its best chances were at the turn of the 19th/20th century, and in any case, nowadays England is too big and too dominant. Breaking England into self-governing regions is simply not on the agenda. There would be little support for an English Parliament, and in any case, the UK version doubles up as both English and British. Those who like tidy constitutional arrangements should not inhabit these islands.

So where will all this lead? Truth to tell, no-one knows. Will there be another Scottish referendum in the foreseeable future? Time will tell, but it needs a catalyst to bring one about. One such might present itself in the next few years. Cameron has promised one on British membership of the EU, which might instigate Brexit, the UK leaving the Union. Why is that a possible catalyst? Opinion polls show that Scotland would vote to remain; England, on the other hand, shows a small majority supporting Brexit. That would almost certainly invite another Scottish independence referendum, adapting the 2014 question to read: "*Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country **within the EU**?*"

Even if the UK votes to stay in the EU, given the fissile state of territorial politics within and outwith the British state, we can never be sure that the law of unintended consequences will not apply at some stage. The EU referendum will take place in 2016, and in the meantime, there is another Scottish Parliament election in May 2016, having been postponed to accommodate the 2015 British General Election. Opinion polls suggest that the SNP will win a majority, made more difficult by the PR system nonetheless, but as 2010 showed, perfectly achievable, especially as its main rival, Labour, continues to languish in the doldrums. The SNP managed to win a majority of seats in 2011 when they got 45 per cent to Labour's 37 per cent (on the constituency vote). Current polls put the SNP on over 50 per cent and Labour has less than 30 per cent, which, even allowing for the vagaries of the regional list system, should be enough to confirm another majority for the SNP. There are two relevant sayings in politics: 'be careful what you wish for'; and 'never say never in politics'. Either or both might apply. Whatever the outcome Scottish, and British, politics have rarely been so interesting.

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Notice biographique

Professeur de Sociologie de renommée internationale, David McCrone est co-fondateur de l'Institute of Governance créé en 1999, et membre de la Royal Society of Edinburgh ainsi que de la British Academy. Il a coordonné de nombreux programmes de recherche, parmi lesquels deux programmes de grande envergure financés par la très prestigieuse fondation Leverhulme, « Identité nationale et réforme constitutionnelle » (1999-2005), et « Identité nationale, citoyenneté et intégration sociale » (2006-2012).
Sa recherche a pour objet d'étude la sociologie du nationalisme et de l'identité nationale. Ses publications, très nombreuses, portent sur la construction de l'identité nationale et le nationalisme en Écosse, dans une perspective européenne. Son dernier ouvrage, *Understanding National Identity*, en collaboration avec Frank Bechhofer, est paru aux Presses Universitaires de Cambridge en 2015.

Biographical Information

Professor David McCrone is Emeritus Professor of Sociology. He was a co-founder of the University of Edinburgh's Institute of Governance in 1999, and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and of the British Academy. He coordinated the research programme funded by The Leverhulme Trust on Constitutional Change and National Identity (1999-2005), and on National Identity, Citizenship and Social Inclusion (2006-2012), and has been awarded a number of research grants over the years from ESRC, Leverhulme, Rowntree, and Nuffield. He has written extensively on the sociology and politics of Scotland, and the comparative study of nationalism. His latest work, *Understanding National Identity*, co-authored with Frank Bechhofer, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2015.