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1 The downward spiral of Scottish Labour’s electoral scores since the introduction of devolution to Scotland has led to a long period of soul-searching as it has questioned its organisation, ideology and identity. Rather than reinforcing its stronghold in Scotland – as was widely believed in the late 1990s –, the devolution settlement introduced by the Labour party seemingly caused its own downfall: the Scottish Labour party was rapidly eclipsed by the SNP and Labour votes dwindled within the span of a few years. After failing to obtain more than a single seat in Westminster in the aftermath of the independence referendum of 2014, it failed to reverse that downward trend in the wake of the European referendum of 2016 and its electoral scores plummeted to 18.6 per cent at the December 2019 general election, its lowest score since 1918. An array of factors has played into the electoral demise of the Scottish Labour party and its troubles

have not been entirely disconnected from the broader difficulties experienced by Labour on the wider British political scene. Remarkably, it has been victim to the singularities of Scotland’s political landscape and the increasingly compelling force of Scotland’s independence movement.

2 In the late 1980s, Stephen Kendrick and David McCrone (Kendrick & McCrone 1989) argued that the establishment of Scotland as a separate unit of economic management in popular perception made Scotland an ideological category largely incompatible with Conservative English/British rhetoric as employed by Margaret Thatcher. This “cold climate” corresponded to a conflict between economic and ideological factors which failed to be acknowledged by the Conservatives and ultimately led to the collapse of the Conservative vote in Scotland in the late 1990s. The dominance of England in the UK political system – before it was mitigated by an asymmetrical system of devolution in 1999 – reinforced the belief that English voters and politicians were imposing right-wing economic policies ill-suited to Scotland’s needs, an argument which was repeated by both Labour and the SNP for many years. Scotland’s “cold climate” was thus embedded in a narrative that portrayed Scotland as being more left-wing than its southern neighbour. As it introduced devolution to Scotland, the Labour party – which was then dominant north of the border – did not, therefore, anticipate that it too would be caught in the storms of Scotland’s “cold climate”. Yet, New Labour’s rightward shift to the centre of the political spectrum in the late 1990s spawned the idea that Labour no longer represented the left or Scottish interests. Instead, the narrative of a left-wing Scotland that emerged during the Thatcher governments “helped to link together left-wing economic ideology with Scottish nationalism in the minds of Scottish voters”, thereby allowing the SNP “to define themselves as more effective defenders of Scottish interests than a Labour party they claimed focused on England” (Sobolewska & Ford 2020: 262). Despite a return to the left under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership, the Scottish Labour party was thereafter unable to overcome the shift in its political identity.

3 We shall argue that this trend was accentuated by the Labour party’s centralised organisation and its failure to adapt to the new devolved political landscape. Indeed, while the institutional landscape was re-

markably transformed by devolution, the structural organisation of the Labour party suffered few changes. This proved to be problematic as Scots’ two overlapping national identities (Scottish and British) were dissociated with devolution and thereafter expressed in two different political institutions (Holyrood and Westminster). Westminster and UK parties were increasingly associated with Britishness and UK-wide interests while Holyrood and the SNP became strongly associated with a Scottish identity and Scottish interests. This proved to be a valuable political platform for the SNP and ultimately led to the 2014 Scottish independence referendum which further entrenched these tends as it presented a conflict between a majority nationalism (British nationalism) and a minority nationalism (Scottish nationalism) (Hassan & Shaw 2019: 4).

4 Mitchell has argued that the “myth of the Westminster model” as an institution which refuses to reform itself as opposed to the “new politics” heralded by the creation of the Scottish Parliament was useful to mobilise opinion and project a strong sense of Scottish distinctiveness on the new institution (Mitchell 2010). Indeed, this has been noticeable in the much higher levels of trust in Holyrood found by successive opinion polls and Scottish attitudes surveys since the introduction of devolution. As a result, the New Labour governments which introduced devolution came to be strongly associated with Britishness and UK-wide interests despite two Scottish Labour coalition governments in Holyrood between 1999 and 2007. The party’s failure to adapt its centralised structural organisation to the new devolved environment became glaringly evident in the aftermath of the 2014 independence referendum: the much-publicized resignation of former Scottish Labour leader, Johann Lamont, in October 2014 for instance – who accused the Labour leadership of treating Scottish Labour as a “branch office” –, was widely regarded as proof that the party was no longer the best placed to defend Scotland’s distinctive interests as it was tied too closely to UK-wide interests. Scottish Labour’s role in the “Better Together” No campaign further damaged its image and its dithering unionism failed to capture the majority of No voters, increasingly attracted to the Scottish Conservatives’ more assertive brand of unionism in a now polarized political debate that was reinforced with the 2016 European referendum and Brexit.

5 In borrowing Kendrick and McCrone’s phrase, this article thus seeks to give a new definition of the “cold climate” generated by devolution with the emergence of a conflict between two competing versions of nationalism and an institutional dissociation of Scotland’s two overlapping Scottish and British national identities. We shall contend that Scottish Labour suffered from its centralised organisation as a result of this dissociation and that it failed to adapt to Scotland’s new devolved environment, before arguing that its ambivalent approach to both Scottish independence and Brexit – key issues associated with the defence of Scottish interests by the electorate on both ends of the spectrum – further hurt its ability to carve out a clear Scottish identity for itself.

1. Scottish Labour’s structural decline

6 Today’s Scottish Labour party is deeply rooted in Scotland’s radical history and the original party founded by Keir Hardie and Robert Cunninghame-Graham in 1888. The Scottish Labour Party was in fact rapidly absorbed by the Independent Labour Party in 1893 before merging with the wider trade union movement and other socialist bodies (such as the Social Democratic Federation and the Fabian Society) in 1900 to form the Labour Representation Committee. The latter, having changed its name to the Labour Party in 1906, was able to build a strong support base in Scotland where the development of the labour movement and the radicalisation of the Scottish working class occurred with the period of mass industrial unrest known as Red Clydeside, the anti-war movement and the Glasgow rent strikes. Labour came to dominate Scottish politics from the 1960s onwards and later drew upon the opposition to both Thatcherism and the poll-tax as well as the growing pro-devolutionist movement of the late 20th century to present itself as the party that spoke for Scotland and establish itself until 2007 as the dominant force in Scottish politics. The Thatcherite period contributed to feeding the idea of a more collectivist, egalitarian and radical Scottish political landscape, a narrative embedded in the “cold climate” described by Kendrick and McCrone (Kendrick & McCrone 1989) which ultimately cost the Conservatives all of their Scottish seats in the 1997 general election. It proved to be

fertile ground for the Scottish Labour party as it formulated its devolution policies and actively participated in the Scottish Constitutional Convention of the mid-1990s which ultimately produced the blueprint for Scotland’s new Parliament.

7 Although the Labour party was initially conceived as a conglomerate of affiliated bodies, it became a centralised body after the 1918 party conference when it adopted a national membership scheme and a constitutional framework for a network of constituency and branch parties. These regional branches of the Labour party lacked any real autonomy – despite enjoying their own conferences and executives – and operated more as branches of the central office in the regions rather than actual autonomous regional offices. They had few powers and were strictly discouraged from formulating, or even discussing, policies that touched upon the wider British national interest or international interests until 1972, when the ban was lifted and they were able to discuss wider British issues though not yet adopt an official position nor discuss international issues. Thus, for much of its history, debates within the Scottish Labour party were limited to framing advice on Scottish domestic policy and were further restrained by the need to support decisions made by the Labour party’s National Executive Committee and its national Conference (Hassan & Shaw 2012: 225).

8 Despite the constraints imposed by Labour’s centralised structural organisation, the Scottish Labour party succeeded in digging deep Scottish roots thanks to the key role played by its affiliated trade unions. The unions’ contribution was twofold: not only did they contribute to the radical history of Scotland and play into the party’s own narrative, but their involvement also meant that local interests and networks were highly influential despite the centralised organisation of the Labour party and the subordinate role of its Scottish Executive Committee. The Scottish Trades Union Congress is not a regional branch of the Trades Union Congress but an entirely autonomous body whose role in policy-making, candidate selection, leadership recruitment, campaigning and, more importantly, funding of the Scottish Labour party somewhat alleviated the control exerted by the Labour leadership in London. While the Scottish Labour party benefited from the generous funding supplied by union affiliation and the electoral time donations and staffing that the unions provided, union lead-

ers could regard their links with the party as a way to exert a more influential role in politics to defend their members’ interests. Indeed, not only did the unions pay affiliation fees, but they also frequently sponsored constituency candidates and sent officials to assist Labour in its campaigns for their entire duration, thus creating a relation of mutual inter-dependence between them and the Scottish Labour party’s officials and Scottish Executive Committee (Hassan & Shaw 2012: 227).

9 Material resources and funding play a key role in a party’s organisational power and more particularly in a regional party’s capacity to regulate its own affairs (Dych 1996). Labour’s primary source of revenues came from the affiliation fees it received from the trade unions until the 1990s, when the Labour party introduced reforms in the hope of attracting more individual and business donations and reducing its financial dependency on the trade unions. While affiliation fees accounted for some 80 to 90 per cent of the party’s budget before the reforms, they only came to constitute about half of the party’s income thereafter. This meant that the Scottish Labour party had to increase its share of revenue and lose much of the support it had heretofore enjoyed just as devolution was introduced. Moreover, control of party finances has remained the responsibility of the statewide Labour party. Although it fights different elections in a distinctive political environment, the Scottish Labour party is therefore still overwhelmingly dependent on funds allocated by the central party organization. Indeed, a majority of donors contribute to the statewide party rather than its substate branches and the statewide Labour party’s support is therefore essential for the Scottish Labour party’s electoral campaigns or daily management and organisation.

10 This dependency on the UK Labour party has been particularly salient in recent years as Scottish Labour suffered a sharp drop in donations during Kezia Dugdale’s (2015-2017) and Richard Leonard’s leaderships (2017-2021). While the party raised just under £600,000 in donations in 2015, fundraising stalled thereafter as donations fell to £100,000 in 2016 and to just £35,000 in 2018 (Gordon 2017; Green 2019). By 2021, Scottish Labour’s funds had become so dire that its new leader, Anas Sarwar, had to implement an emergency financial plan when he replaced Richard Leonard as leader on 27th February, admitting that the party had only been able to raise £250 through its

fundraising in the previous year (Nutt 2022). This suggests that the collapse of Labour votes in Scotland came with a deterioration of its finances and a sharp loss of confidence among donors, particularly after the European referendum and Labour’s ambivalent stance over Brexit. The party’s overall spending ahead of the May 2021 Scottish Parliament election was nevertheless not far below that of the Scottish Conservatives and the SNP, suggesting that almost all of these funds came from the statewide UK party. The Scottish Labour party is therefore highly dependent upon the statewide UK party and may have few opportunities or even incentives to diverge from the UK party line. There is hope for Scottish Labour however, as Anas Sarwar was quickly able to operate a sharp turnaround in the party’s finances when he became leader and soon announced that he had been able to raise over £1 million in donations (Nutt 2022; Chappell 2022). Nevertheless, the experience of the last few years underline Scottish Labour’s reliance on financial support from the UK party and its subsequent difficulty to become more autonomous in terms of policy and personnel.

11 Moreover, the reforms introduced by Labour in the 1990s and the abolition of block voting in favour of the One Member One Vote system (OMOV) considerably diminished the position of the affiliated organizations and their voting potential at party conferences, which was reduced to 50 per cent on a par with the constituency parties. There was a certain loosening of ties between party and unions which changed internal power balances significantly as the national party executive lost power to newly established policy committees dominated by the parliamentary leadership (Laffin *et al.* 2007). The impact of these changes was deeply felt in Scotland due to the strong influence of the unions north of the border. It meant that the Labour party’s centralised structure was no longer offset by the role played by affiliated organizations.

12 Indeed, Scottish trade unions had not only alleviated the impact of Labour’s top-down structure by providing financial resources, manpower and powerful local networks, but they had also compensated for the strikingly low membership of the Scottish Labour party. Contrary to what its past political strengths might suggest, the Scottish Labour party’s membership has been consistently lower than anywhere else in Britain since the 1950s. Membership declined from

19,703 members in 1993 and 30,770 members in 1998 to 13,135 members only in 2010 before rebounding to 25,836 in 2018 under Jeremy Corbyn’s UK party leadership and dropping back to 16,867 in February 2021 when Anas Sarwar became leader (so about 4 per cent of the UK total). This suggests that the ranks of activists needed for electoral canvassing and campaigning are often sparse and that, for many years, Scottish Labour may have overlooked the key electoral functions of local parties whose role in information dissemination, electoral targeting and voter mobilisation have a strong impact on electoral performance (Hassan & Shaw 2012: 229).

13 It has been argued that, for much of its history, the Scottish Labour party relied on its dominance of local politics and perhaps showed a degree of complacency as it entrusted a small number of popular and well-respected local figures of the Labour party, often councillors, to disseminate the Labour message rather than a large number of local party activists (Hassan & Shaw 2012: 239). This strategy largely backfired, however, when the Scottish Labour party’s stronghold over local government in Scotland brutally came to an end in 2007 with the introduction of the single transferable vote system, suggesting that the first-past-the-post system had been responsible for much of Labour’s strength in Scotland over the years. Hassan and Shaw have argued that the system had inflated the results of the party, particularly in urban Scotland and the West of Scotland, and created few incentives for Labour to strengthen its membership base and renew with a vibrant political engagement (Hassan & Shaw 2012: 239). It was unable to recover its losses thereafter and its share of seats further fell to 21.6 per cent in the local elections of May 2017, when it won just 20 per cent of the first preference vote and fell to third place behind the Conservatives (25 per cent) for the first time.

14 However, the more recent local elections of May 2022 showed some improvement for the Scottish Labour party, as it was able to regain the second place it lost to the Scottish Conservatives in 2017, securing 21.7 per cent of first-preference votes and an extra 20 seats. It would appear that the Scottish Conservatives have not been immune from the damage done to their party’s reputation with the Partygate scandals and that, like its UK counterpart, the Scottish Labour party is now benefitting from a rise in opinion polls. Almost every poll published since December 2021 has indicated that Labour was ahead of

the Conservative party in Scotland when respondents were asked which party they would vote for in the next general election. Nicola Sturgeon’s unexpected resignation as SNP leader in February 2023 could also provide an opportunity for the Scottish Labour party to become the SNP’s main challenger if it were able to appeal both to unionist voters unhappy with the scandals that the Conservatives have been embroiled in and nationalist supporters disillusioned with the SNP’s governance and independence strategies. If these trends were to be confirmed, Scottish Labour would be given an opportunity to replace the Conservatives as Scotland’s main unionist party and lead the charge against the SNP’s project for a second independence referendum. However, it would have to formulate a clear policy on Scotland’s constitutional future which could appeal to a range of unionist voters and perhaps some nationalist voters. Labour’s unionist stance represents a strategic dilemma because it emphasizes the party’s British identity and narrows the pool of potential voters to those opposed to Scotland’s independence. Herein lies the difficulty of assuming a strong Scottish identity and formulating broad church constitutional policies that could appeal to unionist and nationalist voters alike in a polarized political environment. In fact, Labour’s experience of devolution so far has shown that the party has struggled to affirm a clear Scottish identity and has subsequently been supplanted by the SNP as the party considered to best serve Scotland’s interests. Research on Scottish voting preferences in the last two decades has suggested that the core valence consideration in elections north of the border is an ability to stand up for Scotland (Johns *et al.* 2009; Johns *et al.* 2014).

2. Woes and throes of a unitary party in a devolved environment

15 As the sole Scottish party with no UK counterpart, the SNP has indeed benefited from a unique position in Scotland’s devolved landscape, which allowed it to argue that it was the only party that could speak for Scotland and defend its distinctive interests. This has been key to winning over voters in Holyrood elections which most voters view as elections primarily concerned with Scottish issues as opposed to Westminster elections where wider UK concerns determine

the basis of most people's votes (Curtice 2019: 35). Perceptions of parties as being able to specifically defend Scottish interests are therefore of paramount importance in Holyrood elections and this has considerably advantaged the SNP. Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys have shown that between 71 per cent and 75 per cent of respondents believed that the SNP looked after Scotland's interests 'very closely' or 'somewhat closely' between 2001 and 2010 when the question was last asked (WhatScotlandThinks, A).

16 Moreover, the SNP's parliamentary force in Holyrood has always been high profile, contrary to the main unionist parties' MSPs who were relatively unknown before they were elected. When devolution was first introduced in 1999, the vast majority of senior Scottish Labour figures – such as Gordon Brown, Robin Cook or Alistair Darling, for instance – remained in Westminster and the Labour benches in Holyrood were thus filled with relatively inexperienced and uncharismatic MSPs. In contrast, all six of the SNP's MPs decided to stand for a Scottish parliamentary seat in 1999 while only five of Labour's 56 MPs did so (one of whom, Donald Dewar, died the following year). This means that Scottish Labour figures and leaders have suffered from a lack of recognition while positive perceptions of SNP leadership and competence have been bolstered by the charisma and professionalism of senior SNP figures.

17 Since 1999, Scottish Labour has had to work within a distinct Scottish institutional landscape, shaped by singular characteristics that are a heritage of Scotland's past and the different parliamentary and electoral models that were set up with the *Scotland Act* 1998. The first hurdles met by Scottish Labour with the introduction of devolution came with the semi-proportional Additional Member System adopted for Scottish Parliament elections and the formation of coalition governments that had to be formed as a result of this system. Indeed, Holyrood's semi-proportional electoral system makes coalition governments more likely and Labour was forced into forming two coalition governments with the Scottish Liberal Democrats in 1999 and 2003. As a result, Scottish Labour was, at times, compelled to find agreements with its partner in government over policies that were at best unpalatable to the Parliamentary Labour party if not completely opposed. This would first be the case of the *Graduation Endowment and Student Support (Scotland) Act* 2001, a compromise reached with

the Liberal Democrats after their main requirement in the talks leading to Scotland’s first coalition government agreement was the abolition of tuition fees and which came just as the Labour government in Westminster was reintroducing top-up fees in England and Wales. However, within the context of devolution, Scottish Labour governments had little choice but to adapt to the new political landscape and take in consideration to at least some extent the opinions within Parliament and the wider Scottish public. This, for instance, led former Labour Scottish First Minister Henry McLeish to introduce free personal care to the elderly after the policy was rejected by the Blair government, or to refuse New Labour’s market-based strategy for education. Yet, despite these departures from the UK party’s policy line, Scottish Labour’s lack of autonomy remained obvious in the many instances when devolved and reserved matters overlapped, often through the budgetary repercussions entailed by the Barnett Formula. Such instances provided the SNP with the opportunity to exploit the issues and present themselves as the champions of Scotland’s interests.

18 Indeed, as it decentralised powers to a new Scottish Parliament, the Labour party failed to fully adapt to the new constitutional system it had created and resisted the emergence of a different Scottish Labour brand that risked undermining its credibility and coherence. The absence of reform in party structure and decision-making processes were central in the difficulties experienced by Scottish Labour after 1999. On the surface, partisan harmony and policy coherence were upheld as long as Labour was in power in both London and Edinburgh. The row over free personal care to the elderly was the most notable exception but the issue bitterly divided the Scottish Labour party itself and the conflict could therefore not be considered as one that characteristically opposed Westminster to Edinburgh but rather two factions within Labour. It was admitted that coalition politics in Scotland might lead to some degree of incongruence but that with the party’s political hegemony and the common political positions held overall by the leaderships of both the UK and Scottish parties, overt conflicts would be rare and the party structure could remain very much centralised (Laffin *et al.* 2007).

19 Perhaps conscious that the new constitutional set-up it had created required some degree of devolution within the party itself, Labour

decentralised some policy-making responsibilities to the Scottish Labour party in the late 1990s. A new Scottish Policy Forum was created in 1998 to mirror the responsibilities of the National Policy Forum in charge of UK policy development. Its remit included the elaboration of policy ideas in devolved matters which, after submittal to the decision of the Scottish Conference, could be added to the Scottish manifesto. The Scottish Conference itself was entrusted with more powers as it evolved from a mere advisory body to a sovereign body determining by a two-thirds majority which devolved policy item could form part of the Scottish Labour party’s programme and be ultimately included in its manifesto. However, the responsibility for the final drafting of the manifesto was invested in a committee equally drawn from the Scottish Executive Committee and the Scottish Parliamentary Labour Group, thus involving the party leadership. Furthermore, reserved matters were still the object of national policy procedures within the National Executive Committee. Scottish Labour’s modest contribution of 12 members out of a total of 180 in the National Policy Forum allowed it very little input in the elaboration of policies that pertained to reserved matters. Similarly, the Scottish Executive Committee was in charge of Holyrood constituency and list candidate selections, but the National Executive Committee – to which the SEC remained accountable – kept jurisdiction over all other selections, including Westminster selections in Scottish seats.

20 Unsurprisingly, Scottish Labour figures increasingly called for further autonomy. In 2007, Wendy Alexander argued that the post of Scottish Labour Parliamentary Group leader should be turned into that of a Scottish Labour leader who would have authority over MPs. Her calls were only met after the Review of the Scottish Labour Party (chaired by MP Jim Murphy and MSP Sarah Boyack and ordered by Ed Miliband after Labour’s defeat in May 2011) led to the creation of an elected leader of the Scottish Labour party in October 2011. The position, which had heretofore been occupied by the British party leader, was opened to all Labour parliamentarians elected in Scotland, thereby restructuring the Scottish Labour party on the basis of Scottish Parliament seats, not necessarily Westminster seats. The Review also prompted the establishment of a political strategy board and of a new political base in Edinburgh. It was followed by further measures of decentralisation to Scottish Labour after the party’s crushing de-

feat of May 2015, when it lost most of its seats to the SNP and was only able to save a single seat in Westminster. The electoral blow it then received precipitated new changes to the way leadership elections were held, with the adoption of the One Member One Vote method and a system of open primaries. These changes mirrored those that had also been adopted for UK leadership elections but their implications were perhaps more important insofar as they could potentially boost the Scottish credentials of the Scottish party leader.

21 The following Scottish Labour leadership election of August 2015, which returned Kezia Dugdale as leader, was therefore held on a One Member One Vote basis and included Scottish Labour party members, as well as affiliated supporters (from affiliated organisations and unions) and registered supporters (who had registered online as party supporters for a minimum £3 fee). As leader, Dugdale pursued a decentralising agenda and soon obtained full authority over all organisational and financial aspects, including the selection of Westminster candidates, and the right for the Scottish Labour conference to formulate its own positions on reserved matters.

22 However helpful these changes might have been for the party's attempt to affirm its Scottish identity, they perhaps proved a little late and certainly insufficient in the polarized political environment that was created in the aftermath of the 2014 independence referendum. Scottish Labour only won a single seat at two of the three last general elections and lost another two seats at the May 2021 Scottish Parliament election, totalling 22 seats. The party suffered from a weak leadership under Richard Leonard whom the public had trouble recognizing and who had poor opinion ratings throughout his leadership. Yet, the multi-layered dimension of statewide parties with substate branches questions the importance of leadership in the assessment of a party as it is not clear which leader most influences voters' behaviour. While Jeremy Corbyn was more popular than Richard Leonard ahead of the June 2017 general election, his popularity ratings plummeted in 2019 when up to 49 per cent thought he was "doing very badly as leader of the Labour party" and 28 per cent "fairly badly" in 2019 (WhatScotlandThinks, B).

23 Although Keir Starmer's personal popularity is still flatlining in Scotland (WhatScotlandThinks, C), the election of Anas Sarwar as leader

in February 2021 could nevertheless help the party improve its image. Although he has yet to make an impression on the public, he has managed to turn around the party's finances and is using the extra funds to improve the party's technological campaigning methods with a strong focus on the use of social media. A year into his leadership, he admitted in an interview to the *New Statesman*: "We didn't have a digital operation worth the name (…). Finally, after 22 years of the 21st century, we have got the Scottish Labour party into the 21st century" (Deerin 2022). In a bid to emphasize his party's Scottish credentials, Sarwar also changed the party's logo of the red rose to a stylized thistle, a change which he says is aimed at two audiences: the voting public who have come to consider the SNP as Scotland's natural party of government and the Scottish Labour party itself. In Sarwar's words: "It demonstrates that we are modern and fresh, an autonomous, future-looking party that is firmly on the side of Scotland. And it says to the party that we want to change the culture and the mindset. We have to believe we can win again" (Deerin, 2022). However, this has been made all the more difficult by the constitutional divide that cuts across Scotland's electorate.

3. Scottish independence and Brexit: Labour's two major hurdles

24 Indeed, Scottish Labour's position over the constitutional future of Scotland has plagued the party ever since the independence referendum of 2014. Scottish Labour's participation in the "Better Together" No campaign alongside the two coalition government partners at the time was damaging in two respects: firstly, because it stood on the same political platform as the Conservatives, and secondly, because of the negativity of the "Better Together" campaign. Although Labour launched its own initiative, "United with Labour" – in a bid to distance itself from the coalition partners and their so-called "bedroom tax" – the "No" campaign was still led by a senior Labour figure, Alistair Darling. Some Labour figures such as Jim Murphy attempted to keep a distance by refusing to share a platform with the Prime Minister, but the "Better Together" umbrella campaign nevertheless

became an easy target for the SNP. The Nationalists condemned it as a Conservative-led initiative, which gathered three British rather than Scottish parties and generally defended austerity policies and welfare cuts. Furthermore, given the position of the "Better Together" campaign, as the defender of the *status quo*, it had trouble departing from what could generally be considered a negative stance. As the challenger, the SNP was able to lead a much more inspiring campaign and deliver a positive message about the future of an independent Scotland. Inevitably, criticism formed the core of the No campaign as it sought to attack the SNP's project. It was soon accused of scaremongering and rebranded "Project Fear". This represented a clear change of tone for Labour as it was once associated with the positive case for constitutional reform. Constitutional change was New Labour's flagship policy in Scotland and it was a New Labour government that delivered a Scottish Parliament. As Henderson *et al.* note, it now stands as a party advocating against change (Henderson *et al.* 2020). Not only does this rarely lend itself to inspiring and impassioned politics, but Labour's added difficulty is that it has to vie with the competition of two other opponents of independence: the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats.

25 Labour's calls for change are perhaps less inspiring because they are less radical and cautiously incremental. In an attempt to revive its past reforming spirit and offer a midway solution between that of the SNP's independence and the Conservatives' *status quo*, the party has been renewing its calls to extend devolution and perhaps lead the UK to some type of federal constitutional arrangement, a solution often called "Devo Max". This is a usual reaction with the party as it has attempted to tackle the rise to power of the nationalists with gradual extensions to the Scottish Parliament's powers since 2007. This was the case for instance with the setting up of the Calman Commission which devolved further powers to Scotland's Parliament with the Scotland Act 2012, or even to Ed Miliband's commitment to the *Vow* published in the *Daily Mail* on the eve of the 2014 referendum which led to the extension of Holyrood's financial powers with the Scotland Act 2016. Gordon Brown has today taken the lead of a Labour commission on the constitution which "will focus on delivering real and lasting economic and political devolution" should a Labour government be elected (Labour.org.uk). Although Brown promises radical

reforms, these will inevitably fail to be as radical as those proposed by independence supporters in Scotland. Besides, Devo Max now enjoys little support in Scotland: Savanta polls published for *The Scotsman* between January and December 2022 showed that respondents were almost evenly split when it came to say whether Devo Max was a good or bad compromise (WhatScotlandThinks, D). Similarly, as many people polled were "strongly or somewhat opposed" to Devo Max as people who "strongly or somewhat supported" that option (WhatScotlandThinks, E).

26 The main problem encountered by Labour in Scotland is that the two main constitutional options (independence and the *status quo*) are owned by the SNP and the Conservative party as each represents one of the two competing nationalisms at play (a minority Scottish nationalism and a majority British nationalism). While only 7 per cent of Yes supporters trust Labour most to campaign for Scottish independence, only 20 per cent of No supporters trust Labour most to defend the Union as opposed to 55 per cent who trust the Conservatives most (Curtice 2022). This was amply demonstrated at the general election of 2015 when the salience and popularity of independence had dramatically increased following the independence referendum. Enthusiasm for independence trumped traditional loyalties to the Scottish Labour party and produced a massive swing and switch of partisan allegiance from Labour to the SNP. No voters, however, were less affected by the referendum and "continued to divide along traditional class, regional and religious lines between Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats" (Sobolewska & Ford 2020: 273). The first-past-the-post system therefore gives a major advantage to the SNP as a united independence vote is more likely to win over a divided unionist one. Brexit, however, has further complicated the situation.

27 Indeed, Labour's image has suffered because of the timidity of the party's pro-European stance under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership in the months leading to the referendum on British membership of the European Union. Its lukewarm campaigning effort was at odds with much of the electorate in Scotland (where 62 per cent of voters voted Remain) and gave the advantage to the SNP as the leading advocate of Remain. The Brexit vote has renewed calls for a second referendum on Scotland's independence and given credence to the SNP's long-

standing position on an independent Scotland in the EU. Now that continued membership of the Union and membership of the EU have become two mutually exclusive options, the Scottish Labour party is caught between the unionist and pro-EU positions of its electorate in Scotland. Labour has therefore found it difficult to provide a satisfactory solution to the majority of unionist and Remain voters in Scotland, not least because it has had to adapt its message to the contrary views of its electorate south of the border. Having accepted Brexit in the aftermath of the European referendum where large parts of Labour’s electorate in England and Wales voted Leave, the party was unable to formulate clear positions over Brexit which could appeal to all parts of its electorate. The disastrous results of the December 2019 general election came as a stark reminder that much of Labour’s electorate in the so-called constituencies of the Red Wall had voted Leave in 2016 and was ready to back Boris Johnson’s Conservative party to “get Brexit done”. Keir Starmer’s current promises to “make Brexit work” if a Labour government were elected aim to appeal to Red Wall voters but will undoubtedly come across as tone-deaf to an overwhelmingly Remain Scottish electorate.

28 Furthermore, although the Brexit vote has initially divided Yes voters as some of them have voted to leave the EU, this has not come as a particular advantage to Labour, as the Scottish electorate is now split in four rather than two groups. With Brexit and unionism being most closely linked to the Conservatives on the one hand, and independence and the EU associated with the SNP, both parties were able to accrue most of the votes in the issues they owned in the June 2017 general election: 77 per cent of Yes-Remainers voted for the SNP while 69 per cent of No-Leavers voted for the Scottish Conservatives. Additionally, the SNP were still able to collect 58 per cent of Yes Leavers’ votes as identification with the independence cause appeared to take precedence over their views of EU membership. However, the largest group of voters in Scotland corresponds to No-Remainers. These views represent the majority of voters in both the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and the 2016 European referendum and correspond to approximately one third of the electorate. In 2017, Labour was able to attract 42 per cent of votes cast by No-Leave voters and the rest were divided between the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and the SNP. However, the trends were

further entrenched by the December 2019 general election with a further polarisation of Yes-Remain voters flocking to the SNP (88 per cent) and No-Leave voters remaining in the fold of the Conservatives (67 per cent). No-Remain voters, however, were this time evenly split between the four main parties and Labour’s share of the vote in this group fell to 29 per cent (Fieldhouse *et al.* 2022). This suggests that the political divides created by both Brexit and Scottish independence have narrowed the Labour party’s electoral prospects in Scotland and severely limited the potential electorate that the party may tap into, suggesting that both issues will need to be addressed satisfactorily if Labour is to make up for the lost ground of the last two decades.

29 Labour fared worse in 2019 among all groups, and polls suggested that the main reasons were linked to the party’s leadership (Winters *et al.* 2022). The party may do better now that it has changed both its leaders, especially given that it scores rather highly in polls measuring the trust voters have in each party’s ability to manage health, education or social justice (WhatScotlandThinks, F). Yet, a more worrying sign is the number of people who voted tactically in the May 2021 Scottish election. Indeed, a certain amount of tactical voting was apparent with unionist voters who preferred to vote for the best placed unionist party in their constituency, and with pro-independence voters who favoured the Greens on the regional list vote. Tactical voting occurred in constituencies where the SNP was pitted against one of the main unionist parties in a tight race. Voters appeared to back a candidate from a party they would not normally support in constituencies such as Eastwood where the Labour vote fell and the Conservatives were able to hold on to their constituency, or in Dumbarton where the opposite pattern occurred, and Labour were able to hold on to their constituency. This suggests that the main driver behind votes was indeed the debate over a second independence referendum and that traditional partisan electoral strategies are no longer suitable for a Scottish Labour party having to survive in a polarised political landscape marked by deep divides over Europe and Scotland’s constitutional future. Electoral politics after devolution have gradually been reduced to a conflict between two competing versions of nationalism – a majority nationalism (British nationalism) and a minority nationalism (Scottish nationalism) –, thus

creating a new "cold climate" in which Labour's centralised structure and failure to adapt to devolution immediately has left it unable to carve out a true Scottish identity for itself. The party will have to renew its reforming spirit of the 1990s and formulate new proposals to strike a compromise between the increasingly conflicting views within its electorate if it is to become Scotland's leading party again.

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English

The downward spiral of Scottish Labour's electoral scores since the introduction of devolution to Scotland has led to a long period of soul-searching as it has questioned its organisation, ideology and identity. An array of factors has played into the electoral demise of the Scottish Labour party and its troubles have not been entirely disconnected from the broader difficulties experienced by Labour on the wider British political scene. Remarkably, it has been victim to the singularities of Scotland's post-devolution political landscape and the increasingly compelling force of Scottish nationalism. This article shall thus contend that Scottish Labour failed to carve out a clear Scottish identity for itself and adapt to the challenges posed by devolution. Its analysis shall first consider the structural reasons for Labour's decline in Scotland, before appraising the impact of devolution on the Scottish Labour party and arguing that Labour's ambivalent approach to both

Scottish independence and Brexit – key issues associated with the defence of Scottish interests by the electorate on both ends of the spectrum – has hurt the party’s ability to attract support.

Français

La chute vertigineuse des résultats électoraux du parti travailliste écossais depuis l’introduction de la dévolution en Ecosse a généré une longue période d’introspection et de questionnement structurel, idéologique et identitaire du parti. Un certain nombre de facteurs ont contribué aux déboires électoraux du parti travailliste écossais, dont certains sont liés aux difficultés rencontrées par les travaillistes de façon plus globale, à l’échelle du Royaume-Uni. Néanmoins, le parti travailliste écossais a tout particulièrement été victime des singularités du paysage politique écossais depuis l’introduction de la dévolution et de la montée en force du nationalisme écossais. Nous verrons que le parti travailliste écossais n’a pas été en mesure de s’adapter au nouveau contexte institutionnel et politique écossais après 1999, ni d’établir une identité écossaise qui lui était propre. Nous analyserons ainsi les causes structurelles du déclin travailliste en Ecosse, avant d’étudier l’impact de la dévolution sur le parti, et d’examiner en quoi l’ambivalence du parti travailliste écossais sur les questions de l’indépendance et du Brexit, considérées comme étant au cœur des intérêts écossais par l’ensemble de l’électorat, ont porté atteinte à l’image du parti.

Mots-clés

parti travailliste écossais, dévolution, indépendance de l’Ecosse, unionisme écossais, Brexit

Keywords

Scottish Labour party, devolution, Scottish independence, Scottish unionism, Brexit

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