4. Has it been inherently easier for the SNP to adapt to devolution than the Scottish state-wide parties?

Devolution was a process that radically changed the landscape of Scottish politics and the way in which policies could be developed for the nation. Such fundamental change of the Scottish political arena naturally required political parties to adapt themselves to compete in a new paradigm that had a different set of demands than Westminster politics.

This essay shall examine the ways in which Scotland's major political parties have adapted to the era of devolution, examining the different facets of party structure, policy and electoral success to determine how they have fared. In particular it will examine the dichotomy between the Scottish National Party's post-devolution experience and that of the other three major state-wide parties, namely Scottish Labour, the Scottish Conservatives and the Scottish Liberal Democrats, and explain why the SNP's unique status has made it easier for them to command the support of the Scottish electorate since 1999.

With the advent of Scottish-only policy making, the SNP have undergone a change in their internal structure to help them capitalise on the new opportunities that the Scottish Parliament have brought to them. The existence of a Scottish Government gave the SNP the opportunity to take control of the governance of Scotland, which they could never have realistically done in the UK Parliament, and this has changed their party campaigning strategies to becoming "more capable of exhibiting effective office-seeking behaviour." (McAngus, 2015: 4) The aim of this strategy is to reach out beyond their existing voter base by "construct[ing] a policy profile and political message that resonates" with them. (ibid.)

The way in which the SNP have done this is by adopting a more focussed national approach to their party structure and policy, with the goal of creating electoral success. This has meant that the SNP elites have been more influential in affecting the direction of the party than ever before, and this "centralisation and professionalisation" approach has been adopted to "to take advantage of, and insulate themselves from, change" brought into the political system in which they operate. (Mair in McAngus, 2015: 4-5) This has changed "the de facto locus of power in the SNP away from its internal structures to the elected representatives in the Scottish parliament." (ibid.: 13) The transformation of the role of the party convenor into that of a "leader" in the wake of the 2003 Scottish Parliament elections also "further compounded the process of the shift of power towards the leadership." (ibid: 15) These have helped created a clearer representation in the eyes of the electorate of who the SNP are and what they stand for.

In contrast, the state-wide parties have been less reformist since devolution and have all struggled to differing extents to find a balance between a cohesive national policy platform and an autonomous regional party structure.

Each of the parties had existing levels of regional autonomy that were expressed in different ways before devolution and these functions have not changed radically since 1999.

Labour's "Scottish and Welsh parties operated as regional units of the British party" but "personnel functions, party funding, appointments…candidate selection rules, campaign strategies and party policy were all ultimately under the control of the British leadership". (Hopkin & Bradbury, 2006: 137)

The Conservatives took a very similar approach to Labour, although doing so by centralising the existing Scottish Unionist Party through "reforms in 1965 and 1977" that brought them "constitutionally under the British party". (ibid.: 138) Their role in Scotland was defined to be that of "being in power alone at Westminster" and therefore they "acquiesced in the statecraft goals of the centre". (Convery, 2013: 4-5) In general, the centre party has been taken "a relaxed attitude at the centre towards the Scottish branch taking a different policy path" with the knowledge that the party's weakness in Scotland is not of concern as long as they can achieve their key goal of being in power at Westminster. (ibid.: 5)

The Liberal Democrats however were more federalised, with "their own offices, executive…internal procedures and policies", reflecting the party's ideological commitment to devolved, and even federal, power within the UK. (Hopkin & Bradbury, 2006: 138)

The reason for this being the case in the state-wide parties was that they were solely focussed on UK elections and "the dominant role of England" in those elections meant that it was reasonable for the parties to centralise key elements of party structure. The Liberal Democrats' divergence from this structure was largely because of their "margin[al] parliamentary position in Westminster" as much as their principle of decentralisation. (ibid.)

Devolution marked a real challenge to this rationale, but one that state-wide parties did not rise to. Conversely, despite being a Scotland-only party with an existing institutional structure that could well have coped, the SNP did. They did not have a new centre of power within their party structure to cope with, and this meant they had an advantage over other parties, one which they have adapted to well.

This centre of power idea is also borne out in terms of personnel. While key Scottish figures within the SNP, such as Alex Salmond who led the party at the time, sought election to the first Scottish Parliament, key figures such as Gordon Brown, Alistair Darling and Robin Cook for Labour and future party leaders Charles Kennedy and Menzies Campbell for the Liberal Democrats all maintained their focus on Westminster. This lack of political capital entrenched the ideology that Westminster was in charge of party politics across the UK and that has persisted throughout the devolution era.

The power that the state-wide Labour party exerts over its' Scottish counterpart was revealed spectacularly when Scottish Labour leader Johann Lamont quit in October 2014 with the claim that the UK-wide party treated the Scottish equivalent as a "branch office" rather than a semi-autonomous political party in its own right. The annihilation of the party's Scottish representation at Westminster in the 2015 General Election may have changed this balance of power, but institutional reform of Scottish Labour has not yet begun in earnest.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats, too, have been defined as suffering from "organisational weakness" and relying on the larger UK-wide party for "for assistance with policy development, funding and the general administration of the party". (Evans, 2015: 166) Rather than having a centralised and professional style as the SNP have adopted, the Liberal Democrats have continued to be "dependent on local activism and campaigning", which Evans argues has made them particularly vulnerable to UK-wide antipathy towards the party in the wake of their coalition agreement with the Conservatives after the 2010 UK General Election. (2015: 168)

This institutional analysis helps show why the SNP have been more effective in outlining a distinctive policy platform which has allowed them to be quicker to respond to changes in popular opinion and produce a stronger identity with which voters have identified and associated themselves compared to the state-wide parties.

Devolution can be considered to have changed the nature of Scottish political debate by bringing the parties "closer to the people". (Cairney & McGarvey, 2013: 248) This, combined with the focus on policies that affected the everyday life of the Scottish population, meant that the accountability between the Scottish people and their new Government in Holyrood was greater than ever and election results have shown that the Scottish electorate have placed value in parties creating specifically Scottish solutions to Scottish problems.

Policies such as the abolition of tuition fees, abolishing tolls on road bridges and a focus on introducing minimum pricing for alcohol have all been presented by the SNP as distinctly Scottish policies and the electorate have agreed with their assessment, although in their first term in office these would be considered the only "flagship" policies that they aimed to introduce that set them apart from their opposition. (ibid.: 210)

Despite undergoing institutional change to make the party more 'electable', though, the transformation of the SNP has been tempered by the party's core commitment of gaining independence for Scotland. (Mitchell et al. in McAngus, 2015: 6-7) This is still the defining policy of the SNP's existence and is seen as such by the public, and of course is, an inherently Scottish policy – despite being empirically rejected by the 2014 independence referendum.

In comparison, state-wide parties in Scotland have found it difficult to deliver the same distinct policies to the Scottish people, with devolution being an "evolutionary process rather than a revolutionary break" for them. (Keating in Cairney & McGarvey, 2013: 204)

The Labour Party particularly exemplifies how relations between the centre and periphery can be strained but the centre ultimately maintains control. As a party of government both in the UK and Scotland for eight years between 1999 and 2007, there were numerous policy tensions between the two that resulted in "coercive transfer" of policies from the top down, such as "pressure to adopt New Labour ideas about competition, contracting out and consumerism in public services" during the First Ministership of Jack McConnell and the imposition of the policy to "persuade Scotland not to adopt free personal care for the elderly", which was eventually introduced by the SNP when they took power. (Keating et al., 2012: 292) Recent electoral developments have renewed the party in Scotland's case for further autonomy with regards to policy, although it remains to be seen if and how they will diverge from the UK party's platform.

The situation for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats has been largely different from Labour's due to the relative electoral position of each party in both Scotland and the UK during the devolution era. As both parties entered into a coalition government from 2010 there was "no pressure at all" for either party's devolved wings to "to adopt the controversial health service reorganization" proposals the UK Government put forward. (ibid.) This laissez-faire approach has allowed the parties to try to address the Scottish identity question more strongly than Labour has been able to. The Conservatives and Lib Dems have been able to craft a different message in Scotland compared with the rest of the UK, with the Conservatives in

particular trying to create for themselves a centre-right ideological platform to cater to Scotland's (perceived) more left-wing electorate.

However this does not necessarily suggest that these parties are fully autonomous either, with institutional factors continuing to play a role in the policy development of these parties as well.

Particularly in the Liberal Democrats case, adoption of UK-wide policy "appears to be a consequence of a party which lacks the resource base to completely operate as a federal organisation", which hampers the ability of the party to convince the electorate of its' independent policy credentials. (Evans, 2015: 169)

Similarly until 2007, the Scottish Conservatives relied "heavily on financial support from London". (Convery, 2014: 311) This begs the question whether the UK party can justify its "hands-off approach it has hitherto adopted towards Scotland" further, with a change in stance on the SNP's issue of minimum pricing for alcohol being attributed to pressure from London. (ibid.: 321) If the input from Scotland into these parties' institutions and policy is really that minimal, the party cannot be classified as having a large degree of autonomy.

The state-wide parties are notably all unionist in their attitudes to the constitutional question of Scottish independence, although the degree as to which this is an autonomous choice of the Scottish branches is unclear. Regardless, the existence of a single state-wide view on Scottish independence for each of these three parties makes it more difficult to define themselves as uniquely Scottish – particularly in the current political climate still heavily influenced by the rhetoric of the independence referendum.

While a degree of "policy convergence" can be assumed between the UK and Scottish versions of Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats due to their shared principles, it can also be implied because of the "limits on variation in the broad parameters of economic and social policy" that are in place because of the limits on the Scottish Parliament's power and also because "public opinion supports much the same policies" across the UK. (Keating et al., 2012: 291) These can be identified by the "implementation gap" that appears between the ideals of a policy and how it is effectively put into practice and also by the fact that the Scottish Government's limited tax-raising power – that has not been exercised thus far – means that they have to "redirect money from one programme to fund another" which represents "the main obstacle to policy change". (Cairney & McGarvey, 2013: 214-18) Therefore it is difficult for parties to deliver their promises when they are limited in practice in doing so.

As the SNP has been most effective in producing distinctive policy for Scotland in the devolution era it has also been the party to have made by far the most significant electoral gains in the same time-frame.

No other Scottish party has managed to increase both their popular support, electoral vote percentages and number of seats in the Scottish Parliament and UK Parliament in the way that the SNP have since 1999.

The following graph shows the percentage of the regional list vote earned by major parties in each Scottish Parliament election to date:
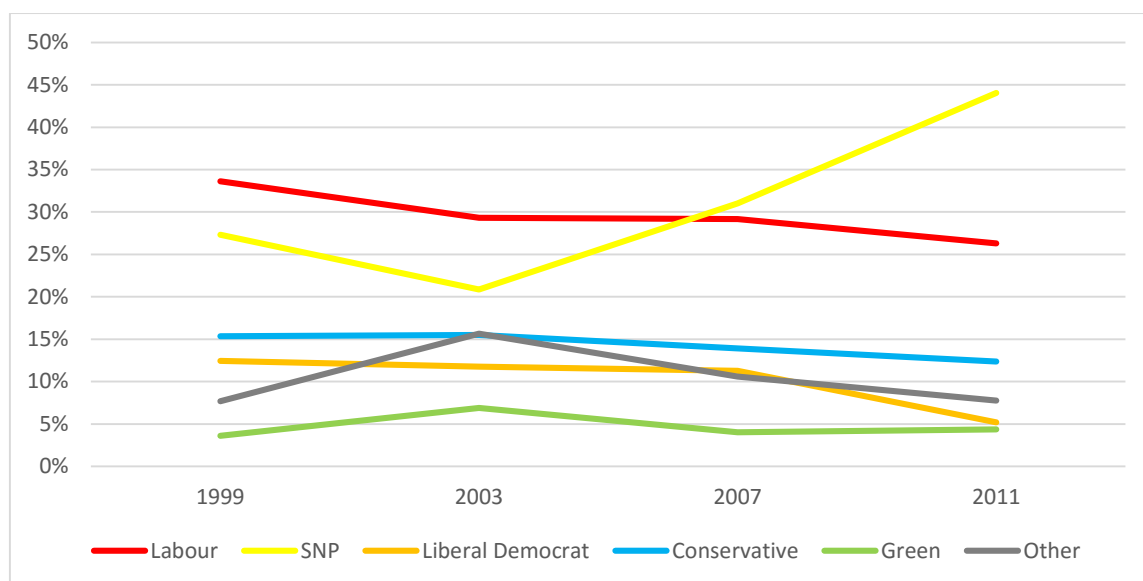
In contrast with all other parties, the general trend for the SNP has been growing support from 1999 to 2011, whereas most other parties have lost support – with the Labour party's vote share dropping considerably.

This can be attributed in part due to the effect of the Scottish Parliamentary elections being classed as second-order in comparison to UK Parliamentary elections, which gives the SNP an inherent advantage. Studies into second-order elections in other countries as well as the UK have shown that non state-wide parties are at an electoral advantage in devolved elections:

> "In [Scotland and Wales] the state-wide governing party and (in three of four cases so far) the opposition alike do badly in devolved elections, while the 'others' – dominated by non-state-wide parties of Scottish and Welsh nationalism – significantly overperform compared to the state-wide arena." (Jeffery & Hough, 2009: 229)

This gives credence to the idea that the SNP have a built-in advantage in devolved elections, as evidence does suggest that the "territorial cleavage" does indeed have an impact on voters' preferences in elections. (ibid.) This can easily be demonstrated by the fact that up until the 2015 UK General Election the SNP's vote share was higher in Scottish Parliament elections than in UK Parliament elections

while the opposite was true of the state-wide Labour Party. In this regard there has

been an important benefit to the SNP, but not one that fully explains the success of

the party, particularly in the last two Scottish Parliament elections.

Another of the key explanations as to why the SNP has succeeded electorally in the

most recent elections is related to the theory of "valence politics" which is defined as:

"broad agreement among citizens on the desired outcomes of policy, and political
competition is about which contender for office is most likely to deliver them."
(Stokes in Johns et al., 2009: 208)

The SNP is seen as the party that is best-placed to deliver outcomes that are

beneficial to Scotland by the electorate and they have done this by "persuading

enough voters that they were a credible party of government and that they offer a

more positive and Scottish-oriented agenda" than the alternative parties. (Johns et

al., 2009: 229)

The combination of positive institutional change and policy-making that resonates

with voters therefore combined to make the SNP the natural choice for the electorate

of Scotland, which has seen them returned as the party of government twice thus far

and on course to win a third term in office in May 2016's elections.

Other parties, beset by institutional and policy struggles, have failed to match the

SNP's campaigning ability. Labour's 2007 campaign was in particular cited for being

"somewhat misdirected in tone and content" which is a phenomenon that was

repeated in 2011, with the focus of their message being related to the constitutional

issue of independence rather than the SNP's "inexperience" at managing the

economy. (ibid.: 230) The state-wide parties have maintained their pre-1999 focus of

"bringing national identity and constitutional preferences rather than valence issues

to the fore" (ibid.: 208), and this has seen them lose out in the eyes of a Scottish

electorate that has changed its' political priorities and demands in response to devolution.

This, along with the proportional electoral system used in Scottish Parliament elections, have provided a perfect electoral storm for SNP success – as it has "diluted any impression of continued longer-term dominance" of the Labour party. (Cairney & McGarvey, 2013: 62) Indeed, for the time being it appears as though the SNP are entering a period of hegemonic success in Scottish elections.

The devolution era has shown the SNP to be most adaptive of Scotland's political parties in changing their nature and producing effective internal structures and policy platforms that have produced success in elections. By centralising and professionalising, the party has made itself electable to the Scottish public who have returned them as the party of Government twice so far.

The state-wide parties have struggled with finding a balance of institutional and policy autonomy with their over-arching UK entities which has hampered their ability to create a distinctive Scottish party image and led to either limited success or failure at elections.

The failure of UK-wide parties to adapt to the changing institutional nature and public expectations of devolved politics has left a vacuum into which the SNP have grown and become the dominant party in Scotland.

The SNP have had an inherent advantage from being a regionalist party for so long, but given the seventeen years since devolution and the wider resource base of the state-wide parties they have failed to successfully adapt to the political realities of Scottish politics and provide a real policy-based challenge to the SNP.

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