
The changing shapes of Scottish politics

Malcolm Petrie in conversation with Mike Makin-Waite

Over the last few years, the dynamics of politics and society in Scotland have been subject to stimulating investigation and sometimes surprising perspectives by a rising generation of Scottish historians with socialist commitments, including Ewan Gibbs, Jamie Maxwell and Rory Scothorne. Amongst these, Malcolm Petrie has provided fresh reassessments of key developments in his books *Popular Politics and Political Culture: Urban Scotland, 1918-1939* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018) and *Politics and the People: Scotland, 1945-1979* (EUP, 2022). Petrie is now Senior Lecturer in Late Modern Scottish History at the University of St Andrews: he complements his academic work with contributions to a wider range of publications including *Scottish Left Review* and *London Review of Books*. He spoke to Mike Makin-Waite for *Socialist History* in February 2024.

Communist appeal

MP: The bulk of the first book, about the 1918 – 1939 period, was done as a PhD five years or so before it was published, and so I'm thinking back to stuff I wrote ten years ago ... when you do that, you go back to what you have written with a different perspective ...

MMW: The book explores different conceptions of representation, of what political identity involves, and contrasting views about the way that politics should be conducted. Do you still see those as useful frameworks for understanding political behaviours in that period?

MP: I think so ... I came to it from the tension between the 'local' and the 'national', and a question about whether national politics is straightforwardly the aggregate of a lot of local politics or whether it is something different and distinctive, something qualitatively different from local politics rather than being simply bigger in scale.

Originally my PhD was about the Communist Party, looking at why it had appeal in particular places and not others. In the course of the research, looking at the four major cities of urban Scotland, it morphed into something different. It became about the political context in which the Communist Party was founded and, I suppose, about why it 'failed'. I mean this in the sense of why did it fail, in its own terms,

to reach the masses and become a large party on the scale of the French, or Italian, or German model?

I'm wary of British exceptionalism in a lot of ways, but there is something distinctive about the British experience in the European context of the 1920s ... and so I ended up thinking about what the fate of the British Communist Party tells us about the broader context in which it was operating.

Scottish communists and British communists more generally had this understanding of politics that was *direct*, in the sense that workers should represent workers, that people from a locality should represent that locality in parliament ... there was a genuine authenticity (the term is used in slightly different terms now) ... a sense that the Communist Party *really* represented the workers in a way that other parties didn't ... that the CP put forward candidates who were *really* of a place or of the people ...

This led me to get interested in candidate selection, and the thesis and the book that came out of it became more about the Labour Party than it had initially started out, because communists wanted to work with the Labour Party, in a lot of cases – but they were blocked. I'm not wanting to let the Communist Party off the hook for its own failings and missteps – but they had a sense in which there was a local working class which had a collective identity, which might at first have been Labour, or communist, or shaped by people being in the trade union, and which the communists wanted to speak for and take control of ...

The other conception, the non-radical left conception, is a more top-down, bureaucratic, managerial one. If you want the most straightforward narrative that comes out of my book, it is that that conception wins. In the contest between the radical left's more local understandings of representation and democracy and Labour's kind of national, more structured, more clearly delineated party politics, the latter one becomes stronger, it carries the day ...

A long chronology of radicalism

MMW: I see the distinction, but are you not overdrawing it? You're presenting the communists as seeing themselves as being rooted in very specific local situations – but the cadre, at least, would have conceived of themselves as internationalist, they would have had views on what was going on in Germany, and in Russia ... they would not have seen their politics as just being about this little village in Fife, or that mining area in Lanarkshire ... They might well have articulated a politics at local level, in ways that were grounded in local experiences, but these were people with broad ambitions ... world revolution!

MP: Yes, I wouldn't disagree with that ... the classic example would be the response to the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s ... that sense of being part of something international, the understanding that 'all of this is linked' ... I quote a communist in Aberdeen who talks of fighting with British Union of Fascists members in Aberdeen and he says, 'I thought that once I had beaten them, I should go off to Spain'. For him, it was completely the same: 'these people are here, they are also in Franco's armies'. His view was that once you had done your bit locally, you then go and do your bit internationally ... I don't think there's a contradiction between the local conception of politics which I am describing communists as having and this kind of international outlook ...

MMW: You also argue that the way that the communists did politics was – if not rather backward looking – an attempt to sustain familiar, traditional forms of class mobilisation, but that these forms were not 'taking' anymore: the communist style of politics did not 'fit' with the changed context.

MP: I would stand by that. 'Backwards' is a kind of loaded term in some ways – what I mean is that the communists see themselves as continuing a radical tradition that goes back to the reform demonstrations, to Chartism. They are adopting a kind of lineage, and that becomes explicit in the 1930s with the Popular Front, when they say that the communists are the inheritors of the Levellers ...

MMW: And the Covenanters?

MP: ... yes, in Scotland it's the Covenanters, in England it's the Levellers, Tolpuddle, that long chronology of radicalism – communists present themselves as the current version of this long tradition. It's there in the methods, in that they adopt the rallies, the demonstrations, the public speaking model – there's a tradition of radical agitation that the Communist Party embraces.

There's obviously a gendered aspect to that: it's physical bravery, confronting your opponents ... battling with the BUF if they have a presence in your town, making sure they can't hold their meetings. That kind of occupation of space is quite important to communists.

MMW: The Labour Party leave them to it, they vacate that space on the streets?

MP: Certainly by the 1930s: there's a danger in overstating it, but for Labour there is a politics of respectability and moderation that gets stronger post the first Labour government, which collapses partly to do with allegations of relations with communism – the Zinoviev letter, the Campbell case – and post the General Strike which is framed by the Conservatives and much of the media as a threat to constitutional government.¹ From then, I think, Labour is extremely careful about not being portrayed as having anything to do with anything that isn't electoral and respectable. As I put it in the book, the more the communists become the party of

public demonstrations, marches, disruption at election meetings, the more there is a desire on the part of the Labour leadership to abandon those methods, and this is accompanied by Conservative allegations that these disrupters are the *real* Labour supporters.

MMW: How does that then shape the space within which the Labour left operate, the ILP, the Jarrow march?

MP: The space is restricted in that it is difficult to engage in those kinds of campaigns without being accused of working with the communists when you are not meant to be working with the communists. There are obviously moments in the Popular Front period, and particularly over Spain, where there is a kind of potential for co-operation, but certainly in the Scottish context it is quite sharply shut down by senior Labour Party figures – Arthur Woodburn, for example, going to local constituency parties and reading out the rule book about associating with the CPGB.²

MMW: Your book describes the wider determinants of the context within which the communists and Labour Party people were deciding on their methods. The extension of the franchise is very relevant here: 1910, seven-and-a-half million men, and twenty years later, thirty million people. What's the interplay between that big shift in who the democratic subjects are and these changes in political style by the parties?

MP: There's quadruple the number of voters by the end of the 1920s, and they are majority female and majority working class: it's a completely different electorate compared to 1910. This material fact means that the parties have to campaign differently in order to reach those voters ... you are using the media more, you've got the arrival of radio, these changes affect how parties have to campaign, elections become different ... the thing that interested me is how that changed how people thought about the electorate. You could, in the pre-1914 context, argue that public opinion is something different than election results. I am exaggerating it a little bit, but before the First World War there were important elements of public opinion that weren't represented politically – and this fits with the question of methods and tactics, because the demonstrations and going to shout abuse at politicians at public meetings was a way of expressing the fact that there were people who weren't being heard at elections, and who were entitled to be heard ...

Drawing on the work of people like James Vernon and Jon Lawrence, this is to say that there's a culture in the nineteenth century that survives the early franchise reforms where you've got people who are entitled to make themselves heard and politicians kind of have to put up with it ... there's an element of the politicians having to listen because young men who are excluded from the franchise, and

women, it's understood that they have a right to make their voices heard at certain times and in certain places ...³

Once you get to 1918, and certainly by the end of the 1920s, you can't really make that argument anymore, so if you are on the left and you want to do a demonstration, it's quite hard to argue against the elected representatives who say 'the electorate have made their opinions clear and who are you, as a small sectional groups, to come along and say "we want this, or that, or the other"?' By the end of the 1920s, the qualitative difference is that arguments about representation and constitutionality are feeding into the case for moderation and respectability, because there is now an avenue open to all strands of opinion to be heard electorally and politically ... and this understanding is one that the Labour leadership embraces ... by the late 1920s, the idea of Labour as the party of the British nation overlaps with the idea of British democracy having fully evolved, so that there's no need for all these old methods of demonstrations and protests ... so this is where I am coming from, when I am saying that the Communist Party was kind of backward looking, it's in that sense ...

After the Westminster consensus

MMW: Your second book has much broader optics than the first ...

MP: When I finished the first book, it seemed to me that the story I had told was about the extent to which there was a consensus in Britain that Westminster was all right, that it was a form of representation that worked. You had had the extension of the franchise, you had Labour's emergence in the wake of that as the second party, as the main progressive, left-wing challenger to the Conservatives, you had mass membership of both major parties, by the 1940s you have high turnout at elections with Labour and Conservatives getting 90 to 95 per cent of the vote between them ... yes, there's a contest over particular policies, but in terms of the legitimacy of the system, it feels like the electorate buys into it, they feel that they've got two big parties which are coalitions of interest which are broadly representative of people. There's a sense in which the system is producing a contest and a government for which there is a legitimacy and a popular constitutional endorsement.

It felt to me that the 1960s marked an end point for that, on all those measurements in terms of voter turnout, party membership, the share of the vote held by the two major parties, the Liberal revival in parts of Scotland and England, and then the emergence of nationalism in Scotland and Wales, the breakdown of devolved government in Northern Ireland ...

In the first book, I was thinking about how the Westminster system got popular endorsement. In the second, I was thinking about how that ended.

MMW: What's your explanation for these developments of the 1960s?

MP: There are a lot of reasons ... I am not an expert on Northern Ireland, and I am not going to pretend to have a great level of insight on that ... for me, that's more of a correlation thing, as something that is happening at the same time ...

If I was to put it in a somewhat glib way, there's a loss of faith in government, and that then plays out in different ways in different contexts. Economically, there are perceptions about British failure, decline. There's the perceived failure of the Wilson government and the National Plan. There's devaluation in 1967 and deflationary budgets under Jenkins in the late 1960s, and so there's a sense that the 1940s vision of national Labour Party reform hasn't fulfilled its promises.

Alongside this, you've got questions around Empire, which are difficult for historians to measure, in the sense in which the decline of the British Empire leads to political consequences domestically ... you have questions of race, and of immigration.

The re-emergence of nationalism in Scotland as something politically credible draws on that sense of a loss of faith and a lack of trust in central government ... I became interested in the ways in which that critique of government, which is often seen as a right-wing rhetoric and language, is used differently by different people.

MMW: Your book notes the co-incidence of the breakthrough of the Scottish National Party in Scotland and Powellism in England. This needs to be discussed very carefully, because of course they were very different, but in what senses were Enoch Powell and Winnie Ewing channelling similar concerns?

MP: I am not saying they are the same. Their politics are not the same. But, the depiction of Westminster and Whitehall as not having the best interests of the people at heart ... if there's a tiny bit of overlap between those politics, that's where it is ...

There's a language that's been used a lot recently in relation to Brexit, of 'populism', but it is there in the 1960s in a specific sense, which is this belief that elected representatives at Westminster and, even more so, the unelected civil servants in Whitehall, do not understand the 'real people' of the country and do not understand what it's really like for people.

In Scotland, those feelings are relatively easier to accommodate within a more progressive framework which is about democratic reform, that decision making must be brought closer to the people, that people must be better represented. For the SNP, that means independence, but for a broader swathe of the community some form of devolution is a way of bridging that gulf between electors and their representatives: 'government has become too disconnected from the people, and devolution could fix that'.

For Powell, there's obviously the racism, but on the particular question of representation, it's more negative and nihilistic ... it's not like he's arguing for devolution. There's really good work on Powell by Camilla Schofield and Bill Schwarz, which does not overlook all of the other things we associate with Powell, but lays the emphasis on the way in which he frames his populist critique of government, that these elites are ignoring your concerns, and are not representative of the people out in the 'real country', emphasising that gap between elected representatives and the electorate.⁴

Back in the 1920s and 1930s, that gap wasn't there then, because franchise reform had generated a sense that this was now really a much more connected and representative system.

The Eurosceptic SNP

MMW: You show how SNP positions on particular issues have changed over time ... in the 1960s, Scottish nationalists advanced critiques of bureaucracy that were later absorbed into Thatcherism ... and the SNP were strongly against the European Union in the 1970s.

MP: One of the bigger arguments of the book as it took shape was that there was a quite strong anti-bureaucratic or anti-state tradition in Scottish politics, which was a Conservative, Unionist trope in the 1940s and 1950s, quite easily expressed via anti-nationalisation, anti-Labour themes ... but I think it was always there with the SNP.

Sometimes I wondered whether I was over-emphasising this, but then I came across the *Scots Independent*, a pro-SNP newspaper, and in 1946 they were just reproducing whole chunks of Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* in the editorial column ... so they do have that element to them, and it is comfortably accommodated on the right a lot of the time.

Where the SNP are interesting, in the late 1960s and 1970s, is that the same language begins to be used from a left-wing perspective, there's a sort of New Left strand to this ... there's a concern with participatory democracy, workers' control, these kinds of things are feeding into a new generation of SNP activists ...

MMW: How important were contributions from the left in shaping contemporary Scottish nationalism?

MP: The late 1960s, early 1970s is the moment when that language begins to take shape, a left-wing version of that critique which is concerned with liberty, constitutional reform, but from a progressive perspective. This anti-bureaucratic, anti-Whitehall, anti-Westminster language can be used to argue for Scottish constitutional reform, whether that is independence as the SNP want, or something else ...

the SNP is a mixed bag, there's some right in there, and there's some left, but that wider left, particularly in the trade unions and the Communist Party, they are arguing in similar terms that people have to be brought into decision making, they cannot be simply on the receiving end of decisions taken 500 miles away. That can't be socialism, would be the left-wing argument, it cannot simply be 'we have nationalised these industries, we have taken over the management structures from the private sector and you're now going to be on the receiving end of decisions from the National Coal Board, or whatever'. There has to be some degree of input from the people affected.

The question of Europe, the Common Market, was framed in this context. For the SNP, the argument was 'if you thought it was bad when it was London, how is it going to be any better when it is Brussels? Scotland is just going to be subjected to decisions from even further away than it currently is'.

There was also a restructuring of Scottish local government in the early 1970s, as there was in England. You get this two-tier system of regions and districts. The SNP says, 'this is just more bureaucracy, it's trashing these historic Royal Burghs which are much more locally focused on particular towns and replacing it with faceless regions, this new tier of bureaucrats ...'.

There is an overlap between this critique and views on the left: in Jimmy Reid's 1972 'alienation speech', when he is elected as Rector of Glasgow University, he talks about 'when they were coming up with this new structure, where did they think about people and individuals and a sense of a community?'⁷⁵ He is asking rhetorically, because he says 'och, I don't know why I am even asking? These things don't even come into it'. So you've got a left-wing communist using this language of the individual to critique the creation of regional councils by the then Conservative government, which was also supported by the Labour Party.

MMW: You have explained how, at the point your first book ends, in the 1930s, the Westminster structures enjoyed some legitimacy. Your second book ends with the 1979 Scottish devolution referendum in which most people who vote say 'yes' - but Jack Cunningham's amendment, requiring a 'yes' vote from at least 40 per cent of the eligible electorate, means that devolution does not in fact proceed at that point. In the UK elections, Thatcher is elected. How does the moment of 1979 look in retrospect?

MP: One of the things you're trying to wrestle with when you're writing history is that, to an extent, you know how the story ends, you know where this is going ... but at each point in the narrative, the contemporary actors in the story don't know where things are going. There's a version of 1979, if you are a Conservative in Scotland, where you think 'we've got away with that one. The SNP have declined. We've got a majority in the UK, and although Labour is the biggest party in Scotland, the Conservative vote has recovered quite substantially, and we've won some seats back

from the SNP which we lost in the north east'. In that context, the Thatcher response is understandable in the sense that they think 'this might just go away'. In the devolution referendum, basically a third of the people vote 'yes', a third of the people vote 'no', a third of the people don't bother to come out, so if you are looking at the issue from the right's perspective, they think, 'well, actually, there's no great popular enthusiasm for this, we can probably just ignore it and it will decline'.

In the final chapter of the book, I try to trace these arguments about democracy and representation, and the way in which they coincide with arguments over Europe ... and then the use of the referendum in the 1970s creates this language of popular sovereignty in Scotland.

This might not be a view which gets me a lot of support from independence-minded people in Scotland, but I think the argument of Scotland having 'a tradition of popular sovereignty' is a relatively new one. Obviously there are arguments about the nature of the union, and 1707, but this very sharp sense that parliamentary sovereignty is an English tradition and that Scotland has had 'popular sovereignty' and that this somehow goes back to George Buchanan and to the declaration of Arbroath⁶ ... that is quite new, for it to be a popularly understood concept that Scotland has this different constitutional tradition ... this is a creation of the 1960s and 1970s. It's partly to do with intellectuals, but I think that the referenda are really important. The European one is significant, because there's a big panic in the Labour government about whether they are going to declare the result as a national, flat, UK result, or whether they will do it nation by nation or region by region, because they are worried about differential results. Scotland at that stage is more Eurosceptic than the rest of the UK, and Labour is worried that it is going to benefit the SNP if the Scottish result is made public.

Even more so, the devolution referendum generated a range of long-term issues. There is this basic point that, if you concede the referendum on Scottish devolution, even if it is all just for House of Commons manoeuvring, and to keep onside the back benchers from the north of England who hate devolution, what you are implicitly saying is 'ultimately, this is up to the Scottish people'.

The Cunningham amendment, this rule that any 'yes' vote has to amount to forty per cent of the registered electorate – quite a high bar to clear, and obviously it doesn't, the 'yes' vote comes in at about 33 per cent of the electorate – that Cunningham amendment in some ways even strengthens that case for the legitimacy of a referendum, because it says 'even if we *hate* devolution, if a sufficient number of Scottish voters endorse it, then we will swallow our pride and say, "fine, you can have it"'. The logic is to make MPs into delegates, because they would be saying 'if the Scottish people endorse it in sufficient numbers, even if I hate this policy, I will vote for it'.

So, by 1979, you do have this very strong sense emerging of a kind of popular sovereignty on constitutional matters in Scotland. There's this interesting memo written by Margo MacDonald, who had won the Govan by-election in 1973 for the SNP, losing her seat in 1974. She makes this really explicit, saying 'a referendum is brilliant for us, because it once and for all accepts Scotland's right to leave the UK'. The SNP were very happy with the 1979 referendum in that sense, even though it wasn't offering independence, and it didn't then even lead to devolution, because it conceded the right of Scotland to change its constitutional status, if a majority of Scots vote for it. That sense then shapes the politics of the 1980s, because the referendum leaves a legacy of 'we're being stopped from doing something'.

Notes

- 1 The 'Zinoviev letter' incident remains relatively well-known, still cited as evidence that disinformation and the dishonest promotion of political lies are nothing new. The 'Campbell case' concerned an unequivocally anti-militarist article published in the communist paper *Workers' Weekly* in July 1924. The Labour government determined not to prosecute the author and editor J R Campbell, even though the Attorney General had advised that this should happen. There was a political backlash to this decision and, after losing a vote in the House of Commons which the government had characterised as a vote of confidence, Ramsay MacDonald dissolved parliament and Labour left office: the Conservatives won the subsequent general election, with the fake letter purportedly from the chairman of the Communist International adding to the supposed evidence that a second Labour government would leave Britain vulnerable to 'the Soviet threat'.
- 2 Arthur Woodburn was Secretary of the Scottish Council of the Labour Party from 1932 to 1939; served as MP for Clackmannan and East Stirlingshire from 1939 until 1970; and was Clement Attlee's Secretary of State for Scotland from 1947 until 1950.
- 3 The works being referred to include James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A study in English political culture 1815 – 1867*, Cambridge, 1993 and Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914*, Cambridge, 1998.
- 4 Bill Schwarz, *The White Man's World (Memories of Empire, Volume One)*, Oxford, 2011; Camilla Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain*, Cambridge, 2013.
- 5 James Reid, *Alienation*, University of Glasgow Publications, Glasgow, 1972.
- 6 The Declaration of Arbroath of 1320 was addressed to the Pope and asserted the antiquity of the independence of the kingdom of Scotland; George Buchanan was a sixteenth century scholar and historian.