

# THE BREAK-UP OF BRITAIN?

## The left and Scottish nationalism

Ben Jackson

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The origins and implications of the left's dalliance with Scottish independence.

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Disappointments, defeats and disillusion have been the left's constant companions for many a year now. The electric shock therapy of Thatcherism followed by the various bitter pills administered by New Labour have led many principled socialists and social democrats to despair about what they see as a secular rightward drift in British politics. Faced with this seemingly gloomy outlook, the thoughts of the left naturally turn to escape routes: how to regain the initiative and recapture the idealism that was once the left's home territory? An influential section of the left intelligentsia in Scotland, and a significant group of sympathisers elsewhere in the UK, argue that they have found an answer to this dilemma in the shape of Scottish independence. In the face of the wider retreat of the left in Europe and North America, and the local manifestations of this phenomenon in British public life, these advocates of a 'radical independence' propose a tactical retreat into the socialist bastion of Scotland in order to keep alive the values threatened by the global march of neo-liberalism.

A number of left-wing individuals, organisations, websites, and publications have embraced this position. This rainbow coalition comprises such elements as the contributors to vibrant organs of online opinion such as *OpenDemocracy*, *National Collective* and *Bella Caledonia*; the capable organisers of the Radical Independence

Campaign; the thinkers and strategists behind the Common Weal project fostered by the Jimmy Reid Foundation; transatlantic celebrity endorsers of Scottish independence such as Brian Cox and Alan Cumming; a substantial section (although not all) of the SNP; the Scottish Greens and assorted alumni of the Scottish Socialist Party in its pomp; various left-leaning Scottish broadsheet columnists; radical English commentators such as John Harris of *The Guardian*; and even those traditional leftist warhorses, Billy Bragg and Tariq Ali (1). The common thread that can be traced across these diverse supporters of Scottish independence is a certain reluctance to declare that this case is founded on nationalism. Rather, they aver, it rests on a positive and inclusive decision to create the more egalitarian Scotland that will surely emerge once it is severed from the decrepit hulk that is the British state.

But while this proposition has been advanced with great fervour and certainty by its advocates, there have been surprisingly few voices on either the Scottish or British left willing to raise sceptical questions about it (for one honourable exception, see Morton, 2014). Instead, the proponents of independence have faced the more congenial task of railing against the criticisms of Labour politicians who, when measured by the left's unforgiving ideological litmus test, are invariably found to be lacking in the requisite radical credentials. This article therefore seeks to dispense with the uncritical stance that the left has generally adopted towards Scottish independence and to examine the left-wing arguments for it with a more sceptical eye.

## The case for left-wing nationalism

How did Scottish independence emerge as a plausible vehicle for the left's aspirations? The shrewdest SNP strategists have long recognised that a more conventional form of nationalism, founded on a nineteenth-century model of cultural or even linguistic revival, did not suit the Scottish case. A powerful early statement of this argument was made by Stephen Maxwell, one of the intellectual architects of modern Scottish nationalism. His 1981 pamphlet, *The Case for Left-Wing Nationalism*, was unflinching in its recognition that 'the historic sense of Scottish political and cultural nationality is too weak to serve as the basis for modern political nationalism.' Scottish history, Maxwell pointed out, lacked the grievances necessary to generate a potent form of cultural nationalism: Scotland's political union with the rest of Britain had largely been the result of bargaining between two national elites rather than coercion, while the subsequent economic benefits of, and relatively free cultural assimilation into, the British imperial project provided few clear-cut

examples of anti-Scottish oppression. This absence of despotism in the relations between England and Scotland, argued Maxwell, meant that a different sort of nationalism would need to be constructed, one that sought to channel the late twentieth-century social and economic grievances felt by the Scottish working class into a critique of the British state and a faith in the possibilities opened up by a Scottish state committed to socialism (Maxwell, 2013 [1981], 76-81, 99).

It is one thing to make programmatic announcements and another for them to gain any purchase on political reality. For a long time analyses such as Maxwell's seemed like hopeful aspirations destined to remain unfulfilled. Yet history did in fact eventually deliver to Maxwell's nationalist successors the conditions needed to generate a left nationalist discourse with a wide resonance. Indeed, as has only really become clear in the last few years, the trajectory of Scottish and British politics since the 1980s has cumulatively furnished Scottish nationalists with a promising context in which to prosecute their case.

The campaign for Scottish home rule during the 1980s and 1990s, which exerted an ever greater hold on the Scottish left the longer the Conservatives were in government, popularised a quasi-nationalist rhetoric that extended far beyond the confines of the SNP. A key element of this rhetoric was the claim that Scotland possessed a distinctive communitarian political culture at odds with the individualist agenda pursued from Westminster under the Conservative Party. A further and more far-reaching argument subsequently emerged from this discourse in the wake of the 1987 and 1992 general elections: the Conservatives had no mandate to govern Scotland because their electoral performance in Scotland was so weak. Scottish popular sovereignty, on this account, trumped the overall outcome of British general elections. This view became extremely popular, indeed hegemonic, among the various elements in Scottish society that coalesced around demands for greater Scottish self-government, including many if not most of the Scottish Labour Party (McEwan, 2004; Hassan and Shaw, 2012). Initially, this style of argument was turned to devolutionary purposes. Labour advocates of this case used it to suggest that a Scottish parliament could attenuate this problem by enabling the exertion of Scottish sovereignty over key areas of policy while ultimately Scotland still remained one part of a larger British electoral map. But in the longer run this argument was clearly capable of reaching a more full-throated nationalist conclusion, namely that, if push comes to shove, Scotland can only be legitimately governed in accordance with the wishes of the Scottish rather than the British electorate.

Such a conclusion was for obvious reasons not particularly relevant during the long period of Labour rule after 1997, but the New Labour years did feed the growth of left nationalism in one respect. The self-conscious presentation of 'New Labour' as offering something distinct from earlier Labour governments – something less radical – created an opening to dismiss the Blair and Brown governments as in essence the continuation of the Thatcherite project. The claim that there was, and is, an essential ideological homogeneity between the two major parties of the British state nurtured in some quarters the beguiling notion that ending rule from London would definitively disentangle Scotland from neo-liberalism's tentacles.

New Labour's partisans must undoubtedly bear some responsibility for the persuasiveness of this proposition to disillusioned leftists. The provocative definition of New Labour as opposed to Labour's own traditions was in its own terms a highly successful, though in some respects misleading, exercise in political marketing. But it demoralised traditional Labour support as well as winning over swing voters. On the other hand, it is difficult to see the SNP's political economy as constituting a radical break from neo-liberalism (Jackson, 2012), so a certain amount of wishful thinking must also have played a part in the story. At any rate, the ejection of Labour from office in 2010, followed by the SNP victory at Holyrood in 2011, created almost ideal conditions for the left nationalist case to gain a wider hearing. An independence referendum conducted while a Conservative-dominated Westminster government implements economic austerity inevitably places advocates of the union on the back foot. As a result of Thatcherism, and the continuity Thatcherism now being enacted by the Coalition, the Conservative Party lacks any political legitimacy in Scotland. But the seeming failure of Labour when in office after 1997 to repair the great social inequality inflicted by Thatcherism can also be brandished by the advocates of independence as evidence that, as far as the British party system is concerned, there is no alternative to neo-liberal orthodoxy.

The left-wing case for Scottish independence now stands at the heart of the referendum battle, because it is Labour's core support that offers the only route to victory for the 'yes' camp. Strategically, this reliance on left-wing nationalism is both a strength and a weakness for the proponents of independence. It is a strength because it creates cognitive dissonance in many of the opponents of independence. The arguments that left nationalists are deploying, after all, are very similar in their analysis of British society to those articulated by a wide range of Labour and progressive opinion. It is Labour, after all, who have under Ed Miliband made the very argument invoked by the Radical Independence Campaign, namely that the British

neo-liberal economic model needs to be fundamentally reformed (Wood, 2011). Left nationalists in effect claim that Labour aspirations of social justice and equality, and what the British left largely agrees to be the shattering experience of Thatcherism, logically lead to the endorsement of Scottish independence. The use of these arguments by Scottish nationalists has been very skilful and has indeed induced a certain amount of disorientation among social democratic unionists (see the classic, and widely discussed, example of the genre by *Observer* journalist Kevin McKenna (2013)). The Scottish Labour Party has in particular found itself thrown on to the defensive, wedged into an uneasy cross-party coalition that includes the despised Conservatives while the SNP remains free to attempt the larceny of Labour's political brand.

But the rooting of Scottish nationalism in the values of the left is also a source of strategic weakness for the advocates of independence, because it concedes (as Stephen Maxwell insisted it must) that Scottish history lacks the experiences of oppression and marginalisation necessary to generate full-blooded cultural nationalism. Left nationalism offers instead an instrumental case for independence, one that is more susceptible to counter-argument and empirical evidence than a nationalism founded on deeply entrenched collective memories and identities. So where in particular does the plausibility of this left-wing nationalist case look shakiest?

## Solidarity in the UK

The most self-serving and unlikely of the arguments made from the left for Scottish independence is that the creation of a new Scottish state will benefit the left in the rest of the United Kingdom. Why Scottish nationalists believe this to be the case is difficult to discern, but it seems to be based on the supposition that Scotland's departure will provoke a more introspective mood in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and thus catalyse wider progressive change in the remainder of the UK, possibly even some form of federalism (for a characteristic expression of this position, see Bragg, 2014). This is an implausible prediction, perhaps the product of a bad conscience, but wholly innocent of the political dynamics that would be triggered by Scotland's exit from the union. The removal of Scottish representation from Westminster, as with the removal of Irish MPs nearly a century ago, would simply remove one important anti-Conservative bloc from British politics and tilt the rest of the UK further to the right. While Ireland's departure from the union had many implications, it could not be said that a wide-ranging, introspective debate about the character of the British state and public policy was one of them. Imagine

an extra 80 odd non-Conservative Irish MPs in the House of Commons during the course of the twentieth century and we have a rough sense of the difference that might be made in the twenty-first by the absence of Scottish representation. Irish representation would likely have been sufficient to prevent close elections, perhaps most critically 1951, falling into the Conservative column (2).

But this is not simply a question of electoral arithmetic; it also raises the deeper issue of solidarity. The history of the British labour movement is the history of the intertwined fates of the Scottish, English, Welsh and (to a lesser extent) Northern Irish working classes. These ties are personified in the career of the Labour Party's founder, Keir Hardie. Hardie was raised and politicised in the Scottish working class in Lanarkshire and Ayrshire, first became an MP in England, for West Ham South in 1892, and then established himself in parliament as a Welsh MP, for Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare, from 1900. Hardie's political life embodied the solidaristic ties that wove together the British trade unions and Labour Party across national boundaries. Although far from perfect, and as a result the subject of much condescension from critics on the left, this movement has nonetheless been the sturdiest humanising and civilising force in modern British history. The links between Scottish, English and Welsh working people and their supporters, forged through common struggles and similar social experiences, created a powerful force for equality across all of Britain.

The left nationalist case invites Scottish supporters of Labour to cast aside their historic solidarity with their English and Welsh allies, on the grounds that it is impossible to achieve social progress at a British level; only in Scotland, they think, can a progressive politics gain serious political traction. The plausibility of this argument as a reading of the New Labour years is tenuous (the minimum wage, a revitalised NHS and the Scottish parliament itself stand testament to what can be achieved by a Labour government, even one to the right of Labour's traditions). But as a characterisation of the direction of travel in the Labour Party today it misses the mark by some distance. While the advocates of independence would prefer to be taking on Tony Blair, foreign policy adventurism and obeisance to the British establishment, instead they find themselves confronted by an avowedly egalitarian Labour leader who is explicitly challenging the Thatcherite settlement, has distanced the party from Blairite interventionism, and (unlike Alex Salmond) has actually put his neck on the line against Rupert Murdoch. Whatever one thinks of Ed Miliband's agenda, there is little doubt that it stands firmly in the mainstream of Labour tradition. If left nationalists aspire to something more radical than a social demo-

cratic Labour government, then they are of course correct to suppose that no such agenda will be forthcoming from any British government in the foreseeable future. But they are wrong if they think that such an agenda will emerge in an independent Scotland. There is insufficient popular support in Scotland for such radical politics, just as there is insufficient popular support for it elsewhere in the United Kingdom, which is precisely why the SNP has spent the last decade or more divesting itself of its radical baggage. The Scottish parliament election of 1999 – in which the SNP proposed to raise the standard rate of income taxation by 1p in the pound and was soundly defeated by Labour – was a chastening experience for the SNP, and for anyone who makes any easy assumptions about the socialism of the Scottish electorate.

Moreover, the model of independence which is to be realised after a ‘yes’ vote in the forthcoming referendum will in any case preclude the pursuit of such radical policies. The economic policy of Scottish nationalism possessed a certain clarity when it rested on the claim that running economic policy from London disadvantaged the Scottish economy compared to the South-East of England because British economic policy was tightened as the South began to overheat but slack still existed in Scotland (and, we might add, in other parts of England, Wales and Northern Ireland). Scottish control of monetary and fiscal policy, nationalists argued in the 1980s and early 1990s, would avert this problem. But, as has been extensively ventilated in the last few months, this is precisely what the advocates of independence do not now want. There would be no independent Scottish monetary policy under the currency union that the SNP propose and limits on Scottish fiscal policy. In order to avoid the apparently undesirable consequences of signing an independent Scotland up to the euro, Scottish nationalists plan to re-enact on a smaller scale precisely the same political dynamic between Scotland and the rest of the UK as exists between the smaller members of the EU and Germany (a point well-discussed by James Stafford in this issue of *Renewal*). While much ink has been spilled on the controversy over whether this would be an arrangement that the rest of the UK would sign up to, an equally pressing question is whether this would in fact be beneficial for the politics that the left would seek to advance in an independent Scotland. The new Scottish state would find its fiscal policy constrained in a currency union by exactly the sort of undemocratic, technocratic, neo-liberal rules that left nationalists stringently oppose. A balanced budget rule and moves towards further fiscal integration of member states have been the upshot of the European fiscal pact; the same would no doubt apply to the British fiscal pact that nationalists

desire (Wolf, 2014). In short, an independent Scotland would find itself drifting back towards the sort of economic union that it had recently departed from, but without any democratic representation in the decision-making councils that would determine Scotland's economic destiny.

## 1979 and all that

In spite of their strong views about contemporary British politics, for left nationalists the ideal moment for Scottish independence would actually have been 1979 rather than 2014. For one thing, Scottish independence at that time would have maximised the flow of oil revenues to the Scottish exchequer. But a more fundamental reason is that left nationalists, in common with many on the wider left, yearn for the prelapsarian era before the advent of Thatcherism, when the industrial working class still exercised power, the service sector knew its place, and feral finance capital was safely chained up. A Scotland that departed the UK in 1979 may well have evaded some of the more pernicious social consequences of Thatcherism, but Scotland in 2014 must squarely face the new social landscape formed by the casual political vandalism of the 1980s. Scotland, like the rest of the UK, no longer possesses powerful trade unions and staple manufacturing industries. Scotland is now largely a service economy, including, like the rest of the UK, a very significant finance sector. Scottish independence will not enable Scotland to evade Thatcherism; Thatcherism has already happened to Scotland. The question that left nationalism raises is whether the slow, difficult task of building a more social democratic Britain out of this new economy is best served by the creation of a new Scottish state – a state that would have an overwhelming incentive, like Ireland, to cut business taxation to gain a competitive advantage over its larger neighbour – or whether, as the Labour tradition suggests, collective action co-ordinated across all of the nations of the United Kingdom presents the left with the best prospects of success.

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## Notes

1. See for example Ali, 2014; Bragg, 2013; Foley and Ramand, 2014; Harris, 2013; and the websites <http://www.allofusfirst.org/> and <http://radicalindependence.org/>. I have traced the origins of some of these ideas in Jackson, 2014.
2. In the early twentieth century Irish nationalists regularly returned around 80 (non-Conservative) MPs to a House of Commons with 670 members. It is also worth observing that the counter-argument to this point often made by supporters of independence, namely that historically Labour governments have not in fact required the support of Scottish Labour MPs to hold office, misunderstands the history of Scottish electoral behaviour. Scotland voted in a broadly similar pattern to England until the rise of the SNP in the 1970s and the Conservative Party retained significant representation in Scotland until 1997. It is therefore unsurprising that the absence of Scottish MPs would have made little difference until the late twentieth century. It is in fact only since 1997 that Scotland's parliamentary representation has featured either 1 Conservative MP or none. If Scottish MPs had not been returned to Westminster in 2010, the Conservatives would have enjoyed an absolute majority in the current parliament.