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Rhetoric and the rise of the Scottish National Party

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Political parties and movements associated with 'nationalist' aspirations provide fascinating case studies for rhetorical analysis. The success of their oratory depends crucially on pathos, drawing on the evocative idea of the nation. Nationalism also tends to spawn leaders who exemplify ethos, either through their record of commitment, their personal charisma, or both. The chief difficulty for nationalist movements relates to logos. Nationalists can certainly impress their audience through their detailed knowledge of the evils that currently beset the nation. However, even if a nationalist orator has a feasible plan to overcome these evils, it is much more difficult to unveil a convincing strategy for the long-term future. At that point, the successful nationalist is confronted by questions about (for example) the accumulation and allocation of national resources. These are the questions which threaten to cause divisions even before the nationalist movement is in a position to deal with them, and to leave an audience thinking that the nationalist prospectus provides excellent material for oratory, but would never work in practice.

Even if the Scottish National Party (SNP) was an insignificant force in British politics, this long-established party (founded under its familiar name in 1934) would be an interesting subject for rhetorical analysis. In the 1960s, when the party had only one Westminster MP, it was capable of

attracting considerable publicity across the United Kingdom as a whole. After the 1997 general election the SNP had become Scotland's third party, thanks to the electoral demise of the Conservatives; it held six seats compared to ten Liberal Democrat and 56 Labour MPs. Its subsequent rise was dramatic, even sensational. Contrary to the hopes of the 'New Labour' champions of devolution within the UK, the SNP received a considerable fillip from Scottish self-government. In the first Scottish Parliament, elected in 1999, it returned 35 representatives, and in 2007 it became the largest party in the Parliament (47 MSPs compared to Labour's 46). The SNP leader Alex Salmond became Scotland's First Minister, and his party formed a minority administration. In the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary elections it secured a comfortable overall majority (despite an electoral system which had been chosen to prevent this eventuality); and in the 2015 Westminster elections it won all but three of the 59 Scottish seats.

The rhetoric of nationalism always merits scholarly attention, and the SNP is undoubtedly a successful and significant exemplar. However, the question remains whether the party deserves inclusion in a volume devoted to 'voices of the left'. Much research has been conducted into the ideological flexibility of the SNP. It claims to be 'civic nationalist' rather than 'ethnic nationalist' – that is to say, its members and activists are portrayed as being interested in the politics and economics of the territory of Scotland, and not in the ethnic, racial or religious backgrounds of people who identify as 'Scots' (see Keating 2001; but c.f. Mitchell 2009). This would suggest that the party should be considered as a legatee of the 'progressive' political tradition associated with the French Revolution (or the earlier Scottish Enlightenment). However, while intellectually clear the distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism can sometimes become more blurred when played out in the lively arena of modern party politics.

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SNP politicians are usually careful to avoid using any rhetoric associated with ethnic nationalism, yet it is difficult to deny that to some extent they are the product, and the beneficiaries, of an outlook which defines England (and in particular the Westminster Parliament) as an alien 'other' (see Mitchell et al 2011; Mycock 2012). In particular, there is a tendency to project an 'imagined' (and almost invariably heroic) Scottish past, which conveys an idea of ethnic continuity. Thus, for example, for many years the SNP played a prominent role in annual celebrations of the (1314) Scottish victory over the English at Bannockburn, near Stirling, although it edged away from official involvement after it became the governing party in 2007; and Alex Salmond (party leader 1990-2000 and 2004-14) was not only an enthusiastic speaker at the Bannockburn Rally, but also hailed the comic-strip depiction of the period in the film *Braveheart* (1995) as 'truly important' (Lloyd 2012). Moreover, the SNP invokes the poet Robert Burns as if he was the exclusive property of a single nation, whose belief in a common humanity should really be translated as 'A Scotsman's a Scotsman for a' that'.

Despite this evidence of ambiguity, the SNP has been formally a party of the 'left' since the February 1974 General Election when its leadership characterized its manifesto as a 'programme of social democracy' (see Hassan 2009; Hepburn 2010). Today, the party's rhetoric entrenches that position with a commitment to 'fairness' and equality – as it argues, '[g]iving everyone the support they need to get on, while protecting the most vulnerable in our society and tackling poverty, is crucial to delivering a fairer society' (Scottish National Party 2016b). Whatever its original rationale, the SNP's preferred designation nowadays is that of a social democratic party which is also campaigning for 'self-determination', rather than a 'nationalist' party *per se*. Indeed, its leadership sometimes even appears to shy away from the term 'nationalist', arguing

that full independence (rather than any form of devolution) is the only viable option when the Conservative Party is so often in power at Westminster (see Scottish National Party 2016a). This can often come across as a type of 'instrumentalist nationalism' – justifying the break-up of the United Kingdom on utilitarian grounds rather than as an end in itself. However, for the SNP there is no conflict between utilitarian considerations and other moral imperatives; its approach has come to rest upon the contention that social democracy and nationalism are essentially one and the same within the context of Scottish politics. In other words, the usual question which nationalists face in relation to logos – namely, 'What principles would govern the nation if we secure the independence we want?' – seems to have been resolved to the SNP's (considerable) advantage. As suggested above, few nationalist movements enjoy this luxury – and when they do, it is usually because of improbably favourable circumstances. This chapter explains how 'events' have operated to make life relatively easy for SNP orators and examines the use they have made of their favourable circumstances. Since it is impossible to analyse current SNP rhetoric without an analysis of the process which produced it, the chapter also serves as a critical account of the party's ideological development, illustrated by utterances in various party documents as well as speeches by prominent figures.

SNP rhetoric before New Labour

Opponents of the SNP have long argued that the party's obsessive priority has always been Scottish independence, as an end it itself which can be made to justify any unprincipled tactical manoeuvres. They can cite the party's constitution in support of their case, since the creation of an independent Scotland is the subject of its first article. That order of priorities is not surprising

in a document of this kind, since independence was the main objective of the party's founders and is implied by its name. However, the wording of the constitution echoes many distinctly *un*progressive nationalist movements by alluding to a lost (betrayed?) nationhood: thus, independence is defined as 'the restoration of Scottish national sovereignty by restoration of full powers to the Scottish Parliament, so that its authority is limited only by the sovereign power of the Scottish People' (Scottish National Party 2016d).

As recently as the late 1970s, the party was nicknamed the 'Tartan Tories' – a sobriquet which probably reflects the prevalent political outlook in rural areas of Aberdeenshire and Perthshire that provided the SNP with its most reliable support at that time, but was given added piquancy by the fact that the votes of 11 SNP MPs helped to bring down the Callaghan Government in 1979, ushering in 18 years of Conservative rule. Throughout the Conservative-dominated 1980s Gordon Wilson was the SNP leader (more properly, 'Convenor'). A former solicitor in Paisley, Wilson represented Dundee East at Westminster from 1974 to 1987. While Wilson could not be faulted in his commitment to the cause of Scottish independence, and was exercised by evidence of economic decline during the Thatcher years, under his leadership the SNP was unable to mount a convincing ideological challenge either to the Conservatives or Labour. Indeed, an unkind critic could argue that his greatest contribution to the independence movement was his coinage of the slogan 'It's Scotland's Oil'.

Whatever his personal views, Wilson was alarmed by any suggestion that the SNP should establish a distinctive 'leftist' identity through its policy positions and its rhetoric. This was shown most clearly in his backing in 1982 for a 'purge' of left-wing members of the party,

notably the '79 Group' which was influenced by a Marxist analysis of Scottish politics, depicting the working class as the key to an independent Scotland. Tactically, Wilson's approach seemed sensible. Since the Conservative Party's fortunes in Scotland were declining under Thatcher, a 'political opportunity structure' (see Davis et al 2005; McAdam 1996) had opened up, allowing the SNP to position itself as a viable option for disillusioned Tories. This opportunity would be put at risk if the party tried to outbid Labour on the left. However, despite the steady decline in Conservative support in Scotland the chief beneficiary was Scottish Labour, rather than the SNP. In the medium term this proved to be an invaluable boon to the SNP, since it encouraged Labour's London-based leaders to take the support of Scottish voters for granted. The SNP could not afford to lose talented supporters even if their ideas were a little wayward; and members of the '79 group' were allowed to rejoin after a brief interlude. One of their number, Alex Salmond, was elected MP for Banff and Buchan in 1987 (defeating a Conservative incumbent), and quickly drew attention to himself by interrupting Nigel Lawson's 1988 budget speech, resulting in a suspension from parliament. This incident established Salmond's ethos in two respects: he had attracted media coverage for his party out of all proportion to its parliamentary strength (just four MPs in 1988), and, for those who shared his outrage at the 1988 budget, it suggested that the SNP was more passionate than Labour in defence of social-democratic ideals. Far from using the occasion to publicize the case for independence, as other nationalists have done, Salmond had directed his disruptive comments against the perceived social injustice of Lawson's budget.

In accordance with Wilson's approach rather than that of the insurgent '79 Group', SNP manifestos of the 1980s tended to concentrate on the issue of independence without attempting to present a coherent 'left' perspective on key domestic issues. For example, the 1989 manifesto for

the European Parliament elections was entitled *Scotland's Future - Independence in Europe*, and emphasized the opportunities offered by resources such as oil and gas to empower the country as well as the need for Scotland to adopt a more positive view of its role within the European Community. While the document signalled a new focus on the practical implications of independence, augmenting the logos of party rhetoric, this seemed to have been introduced at the expense of pathos. Wilson's Foreword referred to the need for Scots to 'rid ourselves of the millstone of London rule', but given that the EC Parliamentary elections were taking place just two months after the introduction of the so-called Poll Tax in Scotland, the relative absence of radical rhetoric is telling. Indeed, the feeling that the SNP was obsessed with constitutional issues and unable to develop a clear ideological alternative to Thatcherism at a crucial time raised the possibility that it would be outflanked on the left by a new movement arising from the anti-Poll Tax campaign. Wilson stood down from the party leadership in 1990, opening the possibility of a new direction. The ensuing contest to replace Wilson suggested as much, since both candidates were on the left of the party. Alex Salmond won, comfortably defeating Margaret Ewing, a much less divisive character whose campaign had been conducted with far less vigour and efficiency. Salmond was now faced with the task of keeping his forces united, and his rhetoric reflected continuity with the recent past rather than any dramatic change. In his victory speech he promised that, whatever his own views, 'the SNP needs to campaign for all Scotland'. He was happy to call himself a socialist, but recognized that the party he led was not itself socialist. There was, though, a 'progressive' label he could use without upsetting too many SNP supporters, while recognizing the party's new attitude towards the EC. Thus, at the 1991 SNP conference, he spoke of 'evolving a party programme which would be recognizable to any of the great Social Democratic parties in Europe' (Torrance 2015: 88, 97).

Despite Salmond's public ebullience, his immediate impact on the SNP's electoral performance was limited. In the 1992 General Election, the number of Scottish Conservative MPs actually went up (to 11) while the tally of SNP MPs stayed static (only three, albeit on an improved share of the national vote). The party's 1992 manifesto – entitled 'Independence in Europe: make it happen now!' – showed considerable continuity from the Wilson era in terms of its language and rhetoric: it was essentially the same message, furnished with an exclamation mark. The document contains a list of points, starting significantly enough with 'independence' followed by the 'constitution'. Next comes 'jobs', but much of this section is expressed in bland language which eludes contestation, omitting sustained references either to social justice or social democracy. However, this contrasts with Salmond's characteristic Foreword, which features the first piece of tangible evidence of a new approach. Salmond wrote that 'the policies of the Tartan Tories, whether led by [the Conservative] Ian Lang or [Labour's] Donald Dewar, are the policies of Scotland's past'.

This phrase was particularly significant, since it took a slogan often used against the SNP in its days of ideological ambiguity and threw it back at the party's critics. Nevertheless, Salmond continued to reflect the old ambiguity in his rhetoric. Asked at a public meeting about the shape of an independent Scotland under the SNP, he replied that local people would do a better job than the current 'Government by remote control'; that an independent Scotland would make a distinctive contribution in international discussions; and that the country would make the most of opportunities offered by the emerging European Union (EU). With an authority based on his earlier experiences in the oil industry, he claimed that lower business taxes could generate greater prosperity for an independent Scotland. This position could (just about) be defended from

a social democratic perspective, on the grounds that it would result in higher overall tax yields to fund progressive public services. Yet as Salmond's biographer has suggested, his approach 'amounted to a Third Way between Thatcherite and left-wing orthodoxies, something Salmond chose to call "social democracy"' but which was difficult to square with the kind of radical "revisionism" associated with Anthony Crosland (Torrance 2015: 108-109). As such, it was highly reminiscent of an approach being developed within the Labour Party at the time, by Salmond's fellow Scot Gordon Brown and his ally Tony Blair.

SNP rhetoric in the era of New Labour

Political opportunities ultimately lay at the heart of the New Labour project – communication, framing and messaging became as important as party policy content and direction (see Gaber 2000). When he (rather than Gordon Brown) succeeded John Smith as leader in 1994, Tony Blair realized that in order to win power, he needed to modernize his party and make it appeal to a wider cross-section of the British electorate than had been the case in the 1980s. Yet crucially, Blair had no real need to do this in Scotland, since the 1980s were a highly successful period for the party. In 1992, Labour held 49 out of 72 Scottish constituencies – well ahead of its nearest rivals, the Scottish Conservatives, who were clearly in precipitate decline. The restructuring and refocusing that the architects of New Labour had in mind were primarily focused on the poor state of the party in *England*, after four straight General Election defeats to the Conservatives under first Margaret Thatcher and then John Major.

Political opportunity structures and the framing of 'New' Labour produced equivalent opportunities for the SNP. The 1997 SNP manifesto was the first to try to take full advantage of the new political landscape opened up by the different reforms introduced via Blair's adoption of an Anglo-centric version of Salmond's 'Third Way'. Labour may well have been by far the dominant political force in Scotland but it was now split internally between 'new' and 'old' Labour, with the Scottish party notorious for its infighting, factionalism and even minor corruption in some local authorities. McAdam (1996) argues that in order to take full advantage of improved opportunities, actors must consider 'the timing of collective action' as well as 'the outcomes of movement activity', pointing to the importance of 'movement form' and 'tactics'. Other scholars emphasize the need for movements to 'frame' their messages successfully (Snow et al. 1986). Campbell (2005: 49) meanwhile defines 'framing' as the 'strategic creation and manipulation of shared understandings and interpretations of the world, its problems, and viable courses of action'. If New Labour was synonymous with spin and media control, Alex Salmond's leadership of the SNP also introduced similar sophisticated political framing techniques around this time.

Salmond's Foreword to the 1997 election manifesto established the new rhetorical tone:

> New Labour is telling us that nothing can change: that we must go on accepting Tory policies, Tory spending limits and Tory taxes. Can Tory or New Labour change anything? Can they get Scotland back to work, can they rebuild a truly National Health Service, can they help schools and our young people, can they secure new jobs? No They Can't. So Scotland needs something different. Scotland needs a return to the virtues of enterprise and compassion, which taken together make a country really great: great to live

in, great to work in, great to learn in, and great to grow old in' (Scottish National Party

1997).

In the document, the term 'social justice' appears ten times, compared to previous party

documents in which it was used occasionally but not developed in any detail. The manifesto is

also much more geared towards outlining what Scottish society should look like, rather than

trying to establish whether or not natural resources in the North Sea could make an independent

Scotland economically viable.

By the time of the first devolved elections to the new Scottish Parliament in 1999, the SNP was

calling itself 'Scotland's Party' and had adopted as its flagship policy a 'penny for Scotland':

'We will not implement the penny tax bribe in Gordon Brown's disastrous budget for Scotland.

We will devote the income from this penny – Scotland's penny – to education, health and

housing' (Scottish National Party 1999). This policy of resisting cuts in income tax is given

significantly more prominence than the sections of the manifesto on independence itself, and is

used as a means of distancing the party from Blairism: 'This approach to our public finances

defines the difference between the SNP and New Labour. New Labour has taken on Tory

principles. Tax cuts, rather than public services, are New Labour's priority'. In short, the SNP's

aspirations for Scotland were now 'quite different to the New Labour's London priorities that

[were] damaging Scotland and sending the jobless figures up' (Scottish National Party 1999).

An orthodoxy has subsequently developed that posits that voters in Scotland – naturally more

left-wing in their values and political outlook (see Table 1) – became so disillusioned by the

policy direction of successive British governments at Westminster that they started to support a

party that offered a genuine left-wing alternative – namely, the SNP (see Curtice and Ormston 2011). From this perspective, New Labour could be seen as an ideological 'betrayal' of the Scottish people, compounding its sins through British involvement in the Iraq War and the introduction of private finance initiatives in the National Health Service (NHS), Labour had ceased to be a genuine party of the left, according to its SNP critics (see Scottish National Party 2016a).

Insert Table 1 – Should the government choose to reduce taxes, keep them the same or increase taxes? – **here**

Communitarian values and rhetoric replete with references to social justice began to permeate SNP speeches and manifestos after 1997. By implication, merely by virtue of being the 'National Party' of Scotland, the SNP is by definition more 'socialist' than London-centric Labour and the irredeemable Tories; and surveys suggest that this message has been accepted by the majority of Scottish voters (McGarvey and Cairney 2008: 56).

After its astonishing success in the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary elections, the SNP could be forgiven for assuming that it had established something approaching 'hegemony' in Scotland. A latter-day Lady Macbeth could have whispered in Salmond's ear: 'Thou hast it now – pathos, ethos, logos, all', adding that if he wanted to fulfil his party's pledge of a referendum on independence, it should be 'done quickly'. In the aftermath of victory, Salmond attributed the result to Scotland's desire 'to travel in hope and to aim high. Scotland has chosen to believe it itself and our shared capacity to build a fair society' (Torrance 2015: 206-207). When the

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Scottish Government published its 650-page White Paper to prepare the ground for the referendum campaign, Salmond claimed that 'Our national story has been shaped down the generations by compassion, equality, and unrivalled commitment to the empowerment of education' (Scottish Government 2013: viii). At the 2011 SNP conference, Salmond even alluded to Scotland's 'divine legacy', as if he was the country's High Priest. In practice, his commitment to social justice seemed more uncertain; the suggestion that the SNP government should establish a commission on 'fairness' was shelved because the First Minister was unenthusiastic (Torrance 2015: 212, 216).

The fact was that Salmond's rhetorical horizons were now unavoidably circumscribed by political responsibility. The SNP could argue that it had boosted its logos by proving that it could govern the country with a degree of competence, but by the time of the independence referendum in September 2014 critics could argue that after seven years of SNP government there was little sign of radical redistribution of incomes and wealth in Scotland. The SNP had abolished NHS prescription charges, but the other key 'progressive' decision – the refusal to follow English practice in respect of university tuition fees – had been initiated by a Labour administration at Holyrood. This did not prevent Salmond from parading the achievements of SNP governments in his 2012 Hugo Young lecture, where he claimed that 'an independent Scotland could be a beacon for progressive opinion south of the border' before closing with the obligatory Burns quotation (Salmond 2012). Indeed, Salmond must have relished the chance to deliver his message to an audience largely composed of 'London lefties' languishing under the Coalition's regime of austerity. Any awkward questions concerning his government's own imperfections could be

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fended off by the claim that things would get better once Scotland achieved full decision-making authority.

Nevertheless, Salmond was not at his best for most of the referendum campaign. The fact that the poll was being held in 2014 – the 700th anniversary of the Scottish victory over the English at Bannockburn – was surely sufficient in itself to tickle the tummies of 'ethnic nationalists', who would have voted for independence in any year. However, the thought of Bannockburn always seemed to lure Salmond into rhetorical excesses: in June 2014 he hailed the battlefield as the 'birthplace' of modern Scotland, a thought which would have made the combatants drop their weapons in astonishment. As if to compensate for this lapse, he also tried to derive political capital from a more 'civic' occasion – the 2014 Commonwealth Games, held in Glasgow.

In the first televised pre-referendum debate, on 5 August, Salmond appeared unconvincing in contrast to his opponent from the 'Better Together' campaign, former Labour Chancellor Alistair Darling (Torrance 2015: 240-242). The confrontation between Salmond and Darling is a fascinating case-study in political rhetoric. With his bank-managerial appearance and measured diction, Darling was the personification of logos. As mentioned above, Salmond could depend, to a significant extent, on all three elements of the rhetorical triad. His decision to restrain his normal exuberance seemed to weaken him on all fronts – in particular, he was unconvincing on the future Scottish currency, where Darling's logos was strongest. 'Better Together' campaigners were well aware of Salmond's rhetorical advantages, as well as his mastery of quick-fire debating exchanges; as a result, they were as surprised as they were elated by the first debate.

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Thankfully for Salmond there was a second televised encounter, on 26 August, for which he prepared more thoroughly and was rewarded by positive opinion polls.

By early September, it looked as if Salmond's rhetoric had been effective in assuring a majority of Scottish voters that independence was an exciting opportunity rather than the reckless gamble depicted by Darling. The gap between the two sides in the opinion polls had been narrowing for some time, and on 6 September YouGov put the 'Yes' campaign ahead. London-based politicians seemed to be in panic, swearing a 'Vow' to increase the powers of the devolved Scottish institutions if the voters rejected outright independence. On the eve of the poll, Salmond defied his advisors and made a direct appeal to ethnic nationalists, asking the electorate to write 'a new chapter in the history of this ancient nation' (Torrance 2015: 244). On the same evening, however, he was taken on by a rival who was at least his equal in terms of rhetorical power and authority. The former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, exploited every weapon in his considerable arsenal, deploying the language of patriotism against the Nationalists and even (possibly unconsciously) borrowing Salmond's image of a 'beacon' when invoking the Scottish tradition of 'sharing and solidarity' as a reason for retaining the Union rather than breaking it up. In particular, Brown spoke of 'a world of social justice that people can believe in', which would be endangered by separation. Salmond had spoken of the referendum as a 'once in a lifetime' opportunity; Brown retorted that 'this is not a decision just for this time: this is a decision for all time' (Brown 2014).

Alex Salmond resigned as First Minister after the vote, in which the 'Better Together' campaign won by 55 to 45 per cent on a turnout approaching 85 per cent. The result was close enough to

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suggest that September 2014 had not been a 'one in a lifetime' chance after all, but it was difficult to see how a new referendum could be called without a change of leader. Salmond had always aroused strong feelings, including within his own party, but even his critics had to admit that he was quick-witted and tactically astute (though they would prefer to use the word 'cunning'). If he had been an opportunistic leader, this hardly made him unique; one suspects, indeed, that his detractors disliked him because he was so *good* at seizing political opportunities, in relation to an issue which transcended the usual political games by involving the ever-sensitive question of 'identity'. In any case, Salmond's departure was not necessarily helpful for those who rejected his policies, since the rhetorical opportunities that he had enjoyed were still available, provided that his successor was equally able. In the 2015 Westminster general election, Salmond's former deputy Nicola Sturgeon proved a more than adequate substitute, emerging as an eloquent spokesperson for an anti-austerity approach and playing a starring role in the televised debates, where she relied for pathos on the 'progressive' message rather than the call for independence. She was clearly casting herself as the leader of a party which provided the only remaining 'voice of the left' in Britain. Such a claim was a reflection on the other Westminster parties – the post-coalition Liberal Democrats, as well as Labour – rather than a product of the SNP's governing performance. Whatever its plausibility, it was at least not laughable, as it would have been at any time prior to the death in 1994 of ~~that great Scottish patriot,~~ John Smith, a proud Highlander, ~~in 1994,~~ and his replacement as Labour leader by Tony Blair.

The result, as noted above, was a staggering SNP performance in the election itself, and the return of 56 SNP MPs including Alex Salmond, who had chosen to return to his first political

stage now as MP for Gordon which he won from the Liberal Democrats. Another of the new MPs was Mhairi Black, who symbolized the revolution in Scottish politics by defeating Labour's Shadow Foreign Secretary, Douglas Alexander, in his seat of Paisley and Renfrewshire South – before her 21st birthday, while she was still engaged in (very successful) undergraduate studies. In itself this made Black a noteworthy figure at Westminster, and she consolidated her ethos by delivering a maiden speech which was singled out for praise amongst the other novice SNP orators (who tended to dwell on Labour's problems without noticeable lamentation). She asserted that 'the SNP did not triumph on a wave of nationalism; in fact, nationalism has nothing to do with what's happened in Scotland. We triumphed on a wave of hope, hope that there was something different'. She told the Commons that she came from 'a traditional socialist Labour family', and that 'I feel that it is the Labour party that left me, not the other way about' (*Hansard*, 14 July 2015, Vol. 558, cols. 774-775). Whatever the merits of the speech, its reception could hardly have been a better illustration of the rhetorical opportunities that Labour had bestowed on the SNP, and which continued to make the latter party the most promising destination for any young Scot who aspired to a reputation for effective oratory.

While the first-past-the-post system used for Westminster elections had given the appearance that the SNP had annihilated all of its rivals, Nicola Sturgeon was well aware that the party continued to be a divisive force. Her best tactic after the 2015 election was to avoid triumphalism, and to use her own enhanced ethos to characterize the SNP as an *inclusive* force. Accordingly, she told her party's 2015 conference that 'The SNP's heartland is SCOTLAND ... We truly are Scotland's party'. At the same time, Labour's travails gave her the opportunity to combine an inclusive appeal with a testament of commitment to a specific ideological position.

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She registered her disagreement with people who argued that 'old labels of "left" and "right" are meaningless':

> I know where we stand. We are a left of centre social democratic party - standing up for the values, interests and aspirations of mainstream Scotland - and that's what we will always be. But when people look at the SNP they don't just see left or right – they see above all else a party that always seeks to do the right thing for Scotland. Whether in government at Holyrood or in opposition at Westminster they see our party, united, standing up for Scotland and always making our country's voice heard (Sturgeon 2015).

Sturgeon's logic suggested that those who rejected the SNP's form of 'social democracy' were not just outside Scotland's 'mainstream'; rather, they were not really 'Scottish' at all – unless they decided to put aside ideological differences and vote for 'Scotland's party'. One way of nudging ideological dissidents into the welcoming SNP fold was for the party to dilute what was already a fairly watery commitment to social democracy. During the 2016 Scottish Parliament election campaign, the SNP promoted the memorable slogan: 'Who benefits most from our policies? We all do'. It was, though, much more difficult to find references to 'social justice' in the document (Scottish National Party 2016c). The SNP now preferred to talk of 'fairness', a principle which had limited potential to disrupt the party's 'catch-all' (Kirchheimer 1966) appeal since few of its rivals were likely to contest an election under the banner of '*un*fairness'. The result, though, was a slight antidote to the previous year's euphoria. On 5 May 2016 the SNP lost six of its 69 Holyrood seats, leaving it two short of an overall majority. If anything, its erosion of the Labour vote had proved all too effective; the revived Conservatives were now the official

opposition, making it much more difficult for Sturgeon to claim that the SNP's centre-left ideology allowed it to speak for Scotland as a whole.

However, in the following month, political opportunity seemed to come knocking once again for Sturgeon's party. This time the gift was delivered by English voters, in the referendum on EU membership. Even if the SNP's conversion to a pro-European position had been opportunistic to a degree, it had happened a long time ago (before Salmond became leader) and it was now difficult to find examples of the party using the word 'independence' without adding 'within Europe'. In the 2016 Scottish Parliamentary election the SNP had reserved the right to hold another referendum on independence if there was 'a significant and material change in the circumstances that prevailed in 2014', specifically mentioning a 'Brexit' vote as an example of such a change.

Sturgeon's public reaction to this new development was highly instructive. Far from playing up the potential for pathos – rehearsing all the familiar arguments about Scotland's readiness to escape from the bondage of the United Kingdom – she registered her dismay at the overall outcome of the referendum and merely noted that it underlined the political estrangement between her country and the rest of the UK. The overriding theme of her remarks was 'responsibility'. As she put it, 'Now is the time for me as first minister to do everything I can to bring people together in common cause and to seek to lead our country forward as one'. She had already spoken to the Governor of the Bank of England and the newly-elected Mayor of London, and further discussions with EU partners would be sought at the earliest opportunity. In the role of 'statesperson' rather than partisan politician, Sturgeon even found time to thank the departing

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David Cameron for his six years as Prime Minister, 'whatever our disagreements' (Sturgeon 2016). Unlike her predecessor, Sturgeon seemed to be unaffected by the perceived need to lose a little pathos in return for additional ethos and logos.

Conclusion

There is growing academic and media interest in how the SNP has contrived to present itself simultaneously as an anti-establishment grassroots social movement and as the Government of Scotland since 2007. This chapter has sought not to analyse the merits of Scottish independence as a policy, but instead to try to explain how and why the party has become Scotland's principal 'voice of the left', replacing Labour in the process. The transformation from Labour to New Labour that took place under the leadership of Tony Blair can be identified as a crucial turning point, offering Scottish Nationalists a political opportunity to accuse Labour of losing its own left-wing credentials and taking for granted the loyalty of its Scottish supporters.

Yet some unkind critics could suggest that the chief difference between the SNP and New Labour was that the latter had the decency to disappoint its supporters *before* taking office. The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that, while the SNP undoubtedly deserves a place in a study of leftist rhetoric, its commitment cannot entirely evade the accusation of opportunism. As a 'catch-all' party, describing itself as 'social democratic' on the assumption that this places it within the mainstream of Scottish opinion, the SNP's development closely resembles that of New Labour and other left of centre parties in Western Europe, as well as the Democrats in the United States. It is significant that, since September 2015, Labour has been led by North London

MP Jeremy Corbyn, a genuine lifelong Socialist, who one might have expected to have been praised by SNP supporters and leaders alike. Instead, both Nicola Sturgeon and her predecessor, Alex Salmond, have criticized Mr Corbyn for lacking competence and the Labour Party itself for its inability to offer a credible alternative to the Conservatives (BBC News 2015). This re-opens the old question of whether the SNP's objective of independence is potent enough to trump all other considerations, rather than being a goal which is indissolubly linked to the prospect of a Scotland which is free to implement 'fairness'.

After a decade in power at Holyrood, the SNP still presides over a Scotland marked in some areas by deprived housing estates and high unemployment levels – especially in the post-industrial Central Belt (Office for National Statistics 2016). At the same time, the standard of living in the more affluent commuter belt and rural areas remain as healthy as anywhere in the United Kingdom, including the South-East of England. Much of 'middle Scotland' works in the service sector in Glasgow and Edinburgh, lives in the cities' suburbs and sends its children to high performing schools and universities. There is scant evidence, either in SNP policy or (upon close analysis) in the party's rhetoric that it nurses a determination to tackle social issues in a manner which might unsettle this core part of the Scottish electorate. At present, it clearly suits the party to 'talk left' while governing from slightly left of centre; but the real ideological destination of the SNP remains an open question.

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