

Devolution, Democracy and the Decline of the Scottish Left

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A lack of effective democratic structures in the Labour Party and Government has also sustained decline.

Introduction: For around fifty years, Britain and Scotland have encountered periodic crises which have offered the political left opportunities to confront systemic issues with radicalism. However, often at the expense of their success, political leaders have regularly elected to pursue moderate policies.

Research indicates that social democratic parties have caved across Western Europe as post-war welfare states strain. Amidst this decaying political climate, social democrats have doubled-down on liberal solutions, and the far left and far right have benefitted increasingly at elections.



Ultimately, democratic socialists have to sustain institutional and ideological alternatives to the status quo in periods of stagnation, so that existing alternatives appeal in periods of crisis. Participatory democratic structures like those attempted by the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy are a key part of that effort.



Key Findings:

- Rather than provide Scotland with a political settlement which can defend the welfare state from erosion outside of Westminster and stimulate support for radical reform, devolution has cemented Scotland's position within the union and limited conflictual politics.
- Left wing political alternatives have always been available to Labour leaders in times of strife, but they have been consistently neglected. In 1979, many working class people who traditionally voted Labour elected Margaret Thatcher because Jim Callaghan and Harold Wilson had failed to articulate a convincing left wing explanation for the economic crises of the 1970s, or to express an appealing alternative.
- Participatory democratic structures which engage political party membership in decision making processes often stimulate more active political climates in which elite leadership circles are held accountable by a vibrant populace.

Methodology:

- Extensive secondary readings including political theory, sociological studies of electoral behaviour, and historical commentaries.
- Informal interviews with experts such as political commentators, historians and critical educators/
- Primary sources such as political speeches, journal entries and census data.



"British political life has revolved helplessly in diminishing and sinking circles, from which both main political parties try to strike out in vain. They imagine that 'Left' or 'Right' wing solutions are feasible without a radical break in the crippling state formation which corsets them both and forces all new policies back into a dead centre of 'consensus'." – Tom Nairn, 'The Break up of Britain'

Proletarian Positivity: The notion of proletarian positivity holds that alternative political cultures across the institutions and organisations of the working class and the left, from the Labour Party to trade unions to grassroots organisations, form important microcosms of the policies, values and structures which constitute radical alternatives to the status quo.

The Pitfalls of Civic Nationalism: Although devolution was originally conceived on the left in Scotland as a measure to fragment the structure of the British state which could enable radical reforms, the 'civic nationalism' of Tom Nairn which underpins devolved government has created political conditions in which trade unions and the Labour Party have collapsed.

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