

Devolution, Democracy, and the Decline of the Scottish Left

Abstract: Over the last fifty years, the political left in Britain and Scotland has encountered crises which precipitated opportunities for democratic socialist policies and discourse, but in most instances political leadership opted for more conservative, ‘politically rational’ courses of action. Partly because of these failures to adopt a radical posture, the left has steadily declined. The lack of effective democratic structures which can compel leadership in the Labour Party and government has also led to political stagnation. Ultimately, a key task of democratic socialists must be to sustain institutional and ideological alternatives to the status quo in times of decay.

Part One: The “Dead Centre” of Social Democracy.¹

When Eric Hobsbawm warned of a growing crisis in the British labour movement and the Labour Party in ‘The Forward March of Labour Halted’ (1978), he drew fire from the radical, socialist left across Labour and the trade unions. In pointing to worker militancy’s limits, and warning about the fragmenting composition of the traditional working class, some argued that Hobsbawm’s article can be read as an intellectual founding document for what became New Labour.² Lewis Minkin foretold in 1991 of the threat of Labour’s abandonment of the working class, that Neil Kinnock’s and soon Tony Blair’s Labour might shift policies and ideology towards what was seen as a less homogenous, less class-oriented electorate.³ Indeed, Blair did much to uncouple Labour from its ‘contentious alliance’ with the unions, further reducing the size of the union block-vote at conference and convening less and less the Trade Union-Labour Liaison Committee. Arguably, then, Hobsbawm’s ‘realistic Marxism’ is ideologically connected with the ‘radicalism of the centre’ of Blair’s third way.

Two years before Hobsbawm’s article, then prime minister and Labour leader Jim Callaghan pronounced the ‘death of Keynesianism’ at Labour conference, declaring that “for too long, perhaps ever since the war, we postponed facing up to fundamental choices and fundamental changes in our society and in our economy.”⁴ Anticipating Margaret Thatcher’s tone when she later asserted that “there is no alternative” to free-market fundamentalism, Callaghan gave his speech amidst a British economy in turmoil. A currency crisis, a collapsing manufacturing sector, and a struggling welfare system all indicated an approaching death knell for postwar social democracy. As socialist critics of the Wilson-Callaghan governments argue, the fatalistic thinking of some on the left in the 1970s demonstrated resignation that there could be no credible left-wing accounts of inflation, and no radical alternatives to austerity.

In Scotland, demands for devolved government was the response to an endangered welfare state and a demotivated Labour government. The chairman of The Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC) Sam Gooding, assured union organisers after Thatcher’s election in 1979 that “you must look forward to an early implementation of the devolution measure when we return a Labour government.”⁵ Many believed that devolution could rescue Scotland’s welfare state from Thatcher’s assault – fifty-four per cent of Scots lived in council housing in 1977; This collapsed to fifteen per cent in 2005.⁶

¹ Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain*, (Verso: London, 2021), p.37

² Herbert Pimlott, ‘From ‘Old Left’ to ‘New Labour’? Eric Hobsbawm and the Rhetoric of ‘Realistic Marxism’, in *Labour*, vol.56, (Athabasca University Press: Alberta, 2005), p.177

³ Lewis Minkin, *The Contentious Alliance: Trade Unions and the Labour Party*, (Edinburgh University Press: 1991), p.648

⁴ Jim Callaghan, *Speech to Party Conference*, (Blackpool, 1976), accessed (19/08/2023): <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=174>,

⁵ Keith Aitken, *The Bairns o’ Adam: The Story of the STUC*, (Polygon: Edinburgh, 1997), p.261

⁶ Gerry Hassan, Eric Shaw, *The Strange Death of Scottish Labour*, (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2012), p.6

The left-wing ideological basis for devolution was established by Tom Nairn in 1977, who offered ‘civic nationalism’ as a radical response to the growing malaise of British social democracy. “British political life”, wrote Nairn,

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’.⁷

For Nairn, the ‘dead centre’ of withering social democracy needed to be radically challenged, not grudgingly sacrificed to neoliberalism. Devolution was not an end point for Nairn. Indeed, for many of its original advocates, devolution was the first step in a total separation of Scottish politics from the Westminster bubble. By winning autonomy over crucial sectors of the Scottish economy, the left could defend existing reforms and win new ones from the uncompromising British state. Flying Scottish radicalism in Tory Britain’s face, devolution could spark wider calls for an independent, democratic, socialist Scotland.

Yet, twenty-five years after devolution’s enactment, it appears that civic nationalism has also sunk into Nairn’s dead centre. Nairn’s legacy today is understood by some on the left as similar to Hobsbawm’s – providing ideological justification for another neoliberal social settlement. James Mitchell argues that “Radical Scotland has barely been evident under devolved government.”⁸ Instead, we have witnessed with devolution the annihilation of Scottish Labour, the collapse of organised labour (fifty-five per cent of workers were unionised in Scotland in 1980, falling to thirty-two per cent in 2010), and the newfound supremacy of a Scottish National Party whose economic policies often embrace austerity.⁹

Part Two: The Paradox of Devolution

In ‘The Forward March of Devolution Halted’, Leighton Andrews argues that devolution’s expansive logic – with the Scottish Parliament’s authority spreading to more policy areas over time – has finally been exhausted.¹⁰ The SNP have bloomed within devolution’s oppositional context, ordering their rhetoric in terms of Scotland’s collective dislike of conservatism, and arguing repeatedly that only with absolute independence can they enact the social reforms which Scots cannot have within the UK. Devolution’s positive potential, as originally conceived by many in the 1970s, has largely failed to be realised, despite the Scottish Parliament’s increasing autonomy. It was aforementioned that devolution was supported by social democrats *and* socialists. By the former out of an anxiety to conserve the welfare state, and for the latter out of a hope that a Scottish Executive could move beyond the conventional social democratic framework to implement radical reforms. The SNP has defined their time in government as wedded to a more conservative social democracy – instead of taking advantage of the fiscal and legislative opportunities granted to them by the devolved settlement, the SNP present themselves as caretakers of an unrealised Scottish state, occupied by the day-to-day business of mitigating the damage wrought by Conservative governments on Scottish communities.

Devolution’s central paradox, then, is that it has failed to deliver for social democrats and socialists alike. Scotland’s political context remains one where the welfare state is vulnerable to erosion, and the discourse of Parliament refrains from considering radical policies. Despite devolution, for

⁷ Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain*, p.37

⁸ James Mitchell, *The Scottish Question*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014), p.281

⁹ Hassan, Shaw, *The Strange Death of Labour Scotland*, p.7

¹⁰ Leighton Andrews, ‘The Forward March of Devolution Halted – and the Limits of Progressive Unionism’, in *The Political Quarterly*, vol.92, (The Political Quarterly Publishing Co., 2021), p.512

instance, child poverty rates in Scotland have mirrored wider UK patterns, with nearly twenty five percent of Scottish children living in poverty in 2020 – roughly ten per cent more than in the 1960s and 1970s.¹¹ As one group of critics argue, far from fomenting a clear break with the familiar landscape of British politics, devolution has cemented Scotland’s position within the neoliberal structure of the union by *streamlining* the process of governance, instead of making it conflictual. Consultation exercises, committee reports, and consensus-building are key tenets of the Scottish Government’s approach to policymaking, and “the details of policy and its enactment are often less significant than the consultation process itself.”¹² Just as Keynesianism was meant to ‘manage’ capitalism, reserving economic and government control to an elite and brokering the relationship between labour and government via a ‘social contract’, so too are the politics of devolution that of an “elite”,

The form taken by [devolved] constitutional politics... precluded the involvement of working-class organisations because the traditional form of working-class politics in Scotland – industrial, member-driven, conflictual, aiming for power, and serving the immense majority against elite interests – were ruled out by Civic Scotland’s cross-class, cross-party and constitutionalist character.¹³

For Labour, the integration of unions in the Party structure caused turbulence in the 1970s when the Keynesian social contract foundered. Successive years of wage-restraint was no longer tenable amidst rising inflation, brewing conflict between rank-and-file union membership and the Labour Government. Just as New Labour reduced the Party’s dependency on unions in order to pursue fiscal policy free from organised labour’s involvement, so too has Scotland’s Parliament often worked to separate the working class from democratic involvement in governance and policymaking. The 2014 Living Rent Campaign for rent controls, for instance, demonstrated the vapidness of the government’s policymaking consultation processes. Despite an overwhelming majority of consultation respondents supporting rent-controls, the government triggered another consultation a year later (partly in reaction to angry landlords), only for the same pattern to be repeated. Rent-controls were only implemented in Scotland in 2022 as an emergency measure by the SNP-Green coalition.

Rather than addressing a democratic deficit in Scotland, opening up parliamentary politics to the people, devolution has proved a continuation of the managerial policymaking of British government today. The Scottish Government’s obsession with consultation and consensus is rooted in the goal of depoliticising Parliament. Genuine democratic impetus generates conflict and diverse discourse.

Part Three: Democratic Deficit, Popular Gulf

Central to the left’s decline are problems of democracy and representation. Repeatedly the state has been gripped by political and economic crises, and opportunities to inject new ideas into government have arisen. Repeatedly, situations where popular support could be rallied to confront structural problems have been squandered by political leadership in favour of what are deemed ‘safer’, politically rational, though generally less democratic, courses of action.

When the Wilson and Callaghan governments did not adopt radical policies amidst economic crisis and a resurgent Tory party led by Thatcher, this was not because radical solutions were not on offer. The Alternative Economic Strategy (AES) was the central policy plank of the Labour Left throughout the 1970s. This policy programme provided an array of solutions to the many economic problems plaguing Britain, which ran counter to the dominating mood of free-market fundamentalism.

¹¹ Amanda Gavin, *Child Poverty in Scotland Since the 1960s*, (Scottish Parliament: SPICe, 2021), p.16, accessed (19/08/2023): <https://digitalpublications.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefings/Report/2021/12/1/a53b6c2d-0d6a-445e-8bd3-413ee081f41b-1#72deac2e-55bf-487f-944f-f40adedf8953.dita>

¹² Rory Scothorne, Cailean Gallagher, Amy Westwell, *Roch Winds: A Treacherous Guide to the State of Scotland*, (Luath Press: Edinburgh, 2021), p.49-50

¹³ *ibid*, p.47

From selective import and export controls to slow the decline of manufacturing, to new regulations to control banks and the flow of capital, to higher taxes on the rich, the AES drummed up consistent majority support at Party conference, enjoyed union-backing, and, significantly, its discourse *disrupted* the rhythm of political discussion which never considered such alternatives.¹⁴

Despite the intuitive appeal of the AES for a Labour government in danger of appearing to the electorate as though it had run out of ideas, and despite the Party membership's support for it, the policy programme was rejected by Wilson and Callaghan's cabinets. The AES was understandably appealing to many in the 1970s context of popular discontent and economic instability. To some extent, Wilson and Callaghan's caution explains Thatcher's blowout victory in 1979 when over half the manual work force and a third of trade union members voted Tory.¹⁵ In truth, the real significance of Hobsbawm's critique of the 1970s labour movement is the democratic disconnect he identified between Labour, the unions, and the people:

The workers, and growing strata outside the manual workers, were looking to [Labour] for a lead and a policy. They didn't get it. They got the Wilson years – and many of them lost faith and hope in the mass party of the working people.¹⁶

In similar vein, Ewan Gibbs' research demonstrates that popular pressure from community organisers and activists outwith unions and the Labour party in Scotland has led to shifts in these institutions' policies away from stances which ignored mass discontent. The people of Glasgow presented a powerful spectacle of dissent to Thatcher's poll-tax by mobilising en-masse across the city in marches, circulating non-payment leaflets, and spreading support for non-payment by word of mouth. While Labour and the STUC's initial stances were not openly in support of non-payment, popular pressure was so powerful that both organisations were compelled to change their positions.¹⁷ Unlike the Living Rent Campaign in 2014, poll-tax non-payment is an instance where popular pressures were channelled by Labour and the unions. The election of 50 Labour MPs in Scotland in 1987 just before had reflected the solidarity of Labour with the Scottish people, and Labour's popularity in Scotland only grew after the poll-tax.

The electoral potential of democratic socialist policies on key issues runs counter to the social democratic anxiety that radical politics alienates moderate voters. Consequently, Labour enjoyed mass support during the Thatcher years when it was in opposition. At the same time, Labour's collapse in Scotland post-devolution mirrored New Labour's gradual loss of authority in Westminster. When Blair made decisions which were massively unpopular in Scotland, like the choice to go to war in Iraq, Labour's mandate suffered as the SNP began articulating a popular, oppositional discourse. By this logic, the SNP have enjoyed near majority support in Scotland for years because their language – not their policies – strikes a chord with Scottish contempt for Westminster governance, which regularly fails to reflect the views of most Scots.

In each of these examples rests a problem where majority opinion on key issues is ignored by Party and government leadership in favour of actions agreed upon by elite political circles and lobbyists. In some situations, a lack of democratic structures existed through which people could hold powerful forces accountable for decisions which were deemed unrepresentative, as with the failure of Labour to adopt the AES. Opting not to tap into currents of popular dissent seems like poor political calculus. The 1960s in Britain, for instance, was a time of great political upheaval. Many mass movements sprung up for women's rights, black rights, and gay rights. Yet, despite this climate of rebellion, the policies and discourse of successive Labour governments remained largely detached from these issues. For Tariq

¹⁴ Leo Panitch, Colin Leys, *Searching for Socialism: The Project of the Labour New Left from Benn to Corbyn*, (Verso: London, 2020), p.73-74

¹⁵ Keith Aitken, *The Bairns o' Adam*, p.260

¹⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?', in *Marxism Today*, (1978), p.285-286

¹⁷ Ewan Gibbs, 'Civic Scotland versus Communities on the Clydeside: Poll-tax Non-Payment, c.1987-1990', in *Scottish Labour History*, vol.49, (2015), p.15-16

Ali, the political potential of Labour stemmed from an objective of “turning the entire organisation into a gigantic lever of popular political mobilisations, championing the causes of all sectors of the oppressed and offering a governmental perspective of real change.”¹⁸ The Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD), for instance, sought to create accountability structures which would grant Party membership more power and would compel Party leadership. The CLPD also demonstrated the potential of alternatives in the 1970s much like the AES. Without cohesive democratic channels within the Party or attached to government, mass movements then and now have few ways to articulate their demands at the level of institutional power. As discussed, this threatens the integrity and popularity of the elite, and wastes real opportunities to transform society for the better.

Conclusion: Proletarian Positivity

As we have seen, for over fifty years the left in Britain and Scotland has encountered political and economic crises which have presented opportunities to challenge systemic issues in society. But at each turn, foremost in Labour, popular discontent has been largely ignored, with leadership favouring the well-trodden path of liberal parliamentary politics. This has often led to crushing defeats, as the legitimacy of social democracy has dwindled with the welfare state’s decline. These defeats might have been prevented altogether if thorough democratic structures were in place, whether in Labour or in Parliament.

Significantly, the already existing presence of *alternatives* to the current order of things is one of the greatest tools with which democratic socialists can seek to win power and change society. The historical examples of the CLPD and the AES, as well as the poll-tax non-payment movement and the original, radical discourse which inspired devolution in Scotland, are all significant elements of a political counterculture which opposes the dominant, moderate one. In his seminal essay *Origins of the Present Crisis*, Perry Anderson argues that a chief focus for democratic socialists ought to be the consistent implementation of their ideals and values in their organisations, alongside the constant advocacy of them in original and critical ways.¹⁹ Describing this principle as ‘proletarian positivity’, Anderson points to Raymond Williams who argues that the perpetuation of a democratic socialist culture in the organisations of the working class, activists, and organisers, is the best way to increase the appeal of radical alternatives in times of crisis. The more sophisticated and professional a left culture is, and the more that left organisations embody their ideals of democracy, the more enticing democratic socialism becomes at times when new ideas are sought to challenge the status quo. As Williams famously wrote at the end of *Culture and Society*:

There are ideas, and ways of thinking, with the seeds of life in them, and there are others, perhaps deep in our minds, with the seeds of a general death. Our measure of success in recognising these kinds, and in naming them making possible their common recognition, may be literally the measure of our future.²⁰

¹⁸ Tariq Ali, ‘Why I’m Joining the Labour Party’, in *Socialist Review*, no.38, (1981), accessed (23/08/2023): [Tariq Ali: Why I’m Joining the Labour Party \(December 1981\) \(marxists.org\)](https://www.marxists.org/archive/ali/1981/12/why-joining-labour-party.htm)

¹⁹ Perry Anderson, ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’, in *New Left Review*, vol.1, (1964), p.44

²⁰ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, c1780-1950*, (Penguin: London, 1966), p.324

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