

British Political Parties and National Identity

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and National Identity:
A Changing Discourse 1997-2010

By

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**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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This book first published 2011

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-2727-4, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2727-0

For Eric, Fanny and Julien

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was long in the making, frequently interrupted by various family and academic duties at the University of Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3. It has been made possible in the last few months by being accepted as a member of the Institut Universitaire de France, which has enabled me to devote more time to research. I am particularly grateful to Carol Koulikourdi, editor at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, for her patience and understanding.

Various friends and colleagues have read chapters over the years and given me valuable advice and encouragement. I would like to thank in particular Frédéric Bozo, Bernard d'Hellencourt, Romain Garbaye, Edwige Camp-Piétrain in France, as well as my friends and colleagues across the Channel and beyond, Anand Menon, David Baker, Oliver Daddow and Vivien Schmidt.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my closest family, Eric and our children Fanny and Julien, who have respectively encouraged and unwittingly delayed the progress of the book. Any remaining typing error should be blamed on Muki, the house tiger.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This study is about party political discourses on national identity in Britain under the New Labour governments (1997-2010). Identity has permeated political debates throughout Europe, as illustrated by the rise of the far right in many Scandinavian countries, the questioning of the multicultural model in Germany and the Netherlands or the ill-fated 2009 debate on national identity organised by the French government. Though taking place across Europe, it is taking different forms according to the specific history and traditions of every country. Britishness has become a major theme in the British political debate since the end of the second world war, and even more so since the early 1990s, either directly or through discussions of specific issues like immigration, Europe or devolution to Scotland and Wales. Numerous political leaders, among whom Gordon Brown stands out for the number of speeches he devoted to the issue, have publicly worried about the weakness of the common citizenship in the UK and the threat to the survival of Britishness, which has been the only common thread in competing discourses between and within parties. Conservative leaders like John Major and William Hague have accused New Labour of undermining Britishness with their reckless policies on devolution, Europe and immigration. Brown instead attempted to promote a “British Way” made of shared values such as freedom, tolerance, fairness and internationalism (Brown 1999).

This ubiquitous presence in the recent public debate illustrates the problematic nature of the definition of Britishness, as opposed to other, more easily defined or less contested, national identities in Europe. This book looks at how the issue of Britishness has been used by the three main political parties in the last two decades, and especially at the turn of the twenty-first century, in order to mobilise support among voters and to frame a vision of Britain in the context of major social and political changes, including devolution, globalisation, Europeanisation and the emergence of Muslim fundamentalist terrorism. It does not tackle Northern Ireland, where the issue of identity appears in a radically different form and,

with its party political scene developing along different, ethnic/religious lines, would deserve one or several books of its own.

Definitions

By “national identity” I mean classically the identity of a political community, including the sharing of symbols, memories and a common political culture. Following Benedict Anderson, I take into account the “imagined” nature of many of these communities, which use myths of a more or less real past to construct their collective identity and entrench their citizens’ loyalty to the nation (Anderson 1991). We will see that it is particularly true of the Conservative party in Britain, which has built its own identity on a specific definition of Britain. Collective identities evolve more slowly than individual identities, and governments may find it hard to change popular perceptions of their identity (Smith 1992: 65)—as New Labour has experienced in government.

This is a book about language and the way politicians choose to use it to formulate and construct a vision of the world which gives meaning to Britain as a nation-state. It is therefore an analysis of the rhetoric, rather than the reality, of British identity. We start from the premise, loosely derived from linguistic/structuralist analysis, that discourse is meaningful in itself and not just through the message it conveys, and that it tells us a lot about the values and the strategy of its user. In the political arena, discourse is used to convince voters and to give legitimacy to actors. They attempt to impose a dominant discourse which conceptualises the environment in which voters find themselves. More generally, discourse contributes to giving meaning to the environment in which the polity needs to find a place for itself, which in contemporary Britain is particularly problematic. Elaborating on Vivien Schmidt’s definition, one needs to bear in mind both this “ideational” dimension, necessary for governments and aspiring governments to justify policy change, and the “communicative” dimension of discourse, which seeks to attract voters’ support by convincing them that their representation of reality is truth itself (Schmidt 2001: 249-250). Discourse is a crucial element of politics in general of course, but particularly so when something as abstract but also necessary as collective identity is concerned. In the case of Britain, this book will show that there is no longer one dominant discourse on the nation such as existed for decades around the “Whig” vision of national history, based on progress towards freedom from tyranny and the absolute sovereignty of the Westminster Parliament, inseparable from the nation itself (Larsen 1997: ch. 2). There are now competing visions among parties,

though also some elements of *rapprochement* between them. Our main sources for this analysis are speeches and parliamentary debates as well as party manifestos, official reports and newspaper interviews.

Making sense of Britishness

Numerous historians and commentators have lately attempted to understand the nature and evolution of the British national sentiment from the 17th century. Britishness covered several nations, making it an “awkward idea” (Colls 2002 : 42). It first represented a state, rather than a nation. Historically, being British was a relatively new “civic” identity which was superimposed on older, more “ethnic”, or at least cultural, English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish identities, which were easier to identify. As Bernard Crick put it,

'British' is a political and legal concept best applied to the institutions of the United Kingdom state, to common citizenship and common political arrangements. It is not a cultural term, nor does it correspond to any real sense of the nation. (Crick 1991: 97)

It therefore refers to a citizenship rather than a nationality (McCrone and Kiely 2000). Linda Colley has convincingly shown that Britishness was the result of a conscious effort, after the 1707 Act of Union with Scotland, to establish a common purpose among the then three united nations through colonial expansion across the seas, in which the different nations participated and from which they benefitted. She also stressed the role of protestantism in unifying the country and the unity against a common enemy, on the continent, to give this sense of a common destiny. The industrial revolution was later instrumental in integrating the “periphery” of Britain, especially Scotland and Wales (Kumar 2003: 169). Arguably the late 19th and first half of the 20th century, when Britain was the first world power, was also the time when Britishness was least questioned and most successful in sustaining the loyalty of the citizens. Colls wrote that “by 1900 the British were a remarkably stable formation. They were riddled with differences, of course, largely along lines of class and nationality, but even so, what divided them was far less important than what united them.” (Colls 2002 : 49) Typical values like freedom and resilience were epitomised in the self-representation of British valiance in standing alone in the face of Nazi aggression during the second world war.

The end of the war marked the end of such an idyllic “whig” perception of a smooth national identity (Marquand 1995). New challenges had to be faced : the loss of empire and the subsequent wave of

immigration from the "new" Commonwealth which changed the social structure of Britain, was one. The relative economic and political decline of Britain in the world was another one, which was accompanied by agonised questioning over whether to join the then European Community (EC). The rise of nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales from the 1960s and their demand for a reappraisal of the union between England, Scotland and Wales questioned the future of Britain. All this was undermining the traditional foundations of a distinctive British identity: the sense of a common national destiny seemed to be unravelling.

The mainstream national parties, Labour, the Conservative and Liberals, which will be the main focus of this analysis with nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, had to deal with what Andrew Gamble called "the politics of decline" (Gamble 2003: 5). This included the need to reposition themselves ideologically in a radically different environment and provide a new meaning to their own party identity as well as to a common national citizenship. The Labour party achieved this by presenting itself as the party of the Welfare state and of the Commonwealth - both centralising and internationalist in the name of equality and solidarity. It tried to redefine British identity as pluralistic, multi-national and multicultural, leaving aside European integration, which it tended to oppose on ideological (rather than identity) terms. The Conservative party, which could no longer uphold the empire, defended the independence and unity of the nation while espousing economic liberalism. From the 1960s to the 1980s, Conservative politicians like Enoch Powell and Margaret Thatcher lamented the decline of British, or rather often English, identity (a highly significant slippage in definition in itself) and attempted to reassert a British nationalism defined as mostly white, anglo-centric, Anglo-American and anti-European, whereas the majority of the party followed the Heath-Macmillan line of accommodating immigration and Europe within British identity (Lynch 1999). The Liberals, politically much weakened in the decades following the second world war, were able to experience a revival from the 1980s onwards by sticking to an agenda of liberalism and federalism which was adjusted to the twin challenges of Europeanization and devolution and distanced them from the other mainstream parties.

At the same time, the 1970s saw the start of political de-alignment and the rise in new "post-materialist" issues like the environment, local identities, etc., i.e new concerns that economic prosperity had made possible (Inglehart 1977). Identity-related issues became more salient from then onwards and even more so in the 1990s, when ideological differences between the main parties became more blurred. On the one hand, New

Labour accepted many elements of the Thatcher legacy, including the focus on the fight against inflation, macro-economic stability, competition to provide public services and a flexible labour market. On the other hand, the Conservative party in opposition came close to New Labour on the need to keep a high level of spending on public services and came to share its new commitment to some environmental issues, particularly climate change. Much the same could be argued about the Liberal Democrats, in spite of their efforts to provide alternative policies. Mainstream parties were therefore finding it increasingly difficult to differentiate themselves from each other in a “post-ideological society”, where market liberalism appeared to have replaced the Keynesian post-war era as the prevailing consensus – although this has been challenged in the global economic crisis which has seen some return of state intervention in industrialised countries, including Britain. In contrast, the new or “post-materialist” and identity issues offered a wide scope for debate and differences.

Nevertheless, the party responses to the political and social changes of the last forty years were hardly ideologically coherent when it came to defining a new British vision. Indeed a striking feature of the last decades has been the fitful, sometimes contradictory discourses of the main political parties on the issues related to national identity. One exception would be the Liberals (now Liberal Democrats), who have remained true to their tradition of being, in their different historical guises, the only mainstream party to have consistently defended devolution and European integration as part of what Whiteley *et al* call their “distinctive policy agenda” (2006 : 6). Indeed they recurrently criticised the British constitution and promoted a radical federalist agenda and multi-level governance, within the country and at the European level. But they are an exception. The Labour leadership’s views on devolution and Europe changed quite dramatically between the 1960s and 1990s, while the party members remained divided on the issues for three decades. Another well-known instance is that of the Conservative party’s attitude towards the European Economic Community (EEC)/European Union (EU) : having been the “party of Europe” in the 1960s, it became a strongly eurosceptic, if not an outright anti-European party after 1997.

Other examples will be described, which all illustrate how uncomfortable traditional parties are with issues of national identity, which cut across traditional ideological or class cleavages such as those identified by Lipset and Rokkan (1967). Immigration/integration, devolution and the EU have been three of the most contentious issues in British politics since the late 1980s, yet they do not easily fit into traditional cleavages. This is particularly true of Europe, where the pattern of party differences in

Britain is different from that of other member-states. Thus, whereas mainstream parties in other countries are usually pro-European, the British adversarial system and one-party government mean that "it is the supporters of integration who are separated by institutional factors, and prevented from making common cause, while either party of government will, inevitably, have some Eurosceptics in its ranks" (Hix and Lord 1997 : 5). This creates intra-party tensions and management difficulties for the leaderships and increases voters' reluctance to identify with Europe. Similarly, the Left/Right cleavage hardly applies when it comes to granting (or not) autonomy to Scotland and Wales, though pro-devolution parties have tended to be on the left of the political spectrum. The issue had more to do with differing visions of the British state and the level of centralisation/decentralisation than about traditional ideological competition based on class.

The debate has developed further since the 1990s. Devolution to Scotland and Wales, further steps towards European integration from the Maastricht treaty onwards and the perceived failure of the British model of integration of ethnic minorities, underlined by the 2001 urban riots and the July 2005 bomb attacks in London, were all construed as signs of a weakened, if not dying nation, unable to stand together. Contributors to the debate included both academics (amongst others, Linda Colley, Robert Colls, Bernard Crick, Norman Davies, Tariq Modood, Tom Nairn, Stephen Haseler, Krishnan Kumar, Roger Scruton), journalists and politicians (including Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Gordon Brown, David Goodhart, Simon Heffer, Andrew Marr, Jeremy Paxman or John Redwood). Several of them, especially Tom Nairn and Andrew Marr, used apocalyptic words to describe the end of Britain as a single entity and the break-up of the Union (Nairn 2000, Marr 2000).

New Cleavages

Party attitudes and discourses remain complex and fluctuating, but in order to help their understanding I suggest we can build on the work by David Baker *et al* (1993). Examining Conservative splits in the past and comparing them with the internal crisis that erupted over the ratification of the Maastricht treaty in 1993, they defined a cleavage about European integration along the integration/interdependence axis, which they added to the political and economic one about extended government *vs* limited government (1993 : 425). Sovereignty, and the issues related to it, including the special relationship with the United States, had become so important in the party politics that it justified this new typology, more

relevant than the traditional Left/Right one, at least when describing the ideological tensions in modern British Conservatism. They showed that on Maastricht—but this goes for the subsequent period as well—the majority of the Conservative party favoured national sovereignty over interdependence. Andrew Gamble has also provided an interesting approach to the British identity issue by stressing the Europe/America dichotomy and splits between and among parties about strategic choices in the political economy (Gamble 2003).

Europe is only one of the dimensions of identity that we will examine here, but as a starting point we can establish two further cleavages which can help us situate the British parties' attitudes to issues of identity in the mid 1990s : centre/periphery and unity/diversity. The first is actually the modern form of an old cleavage identified by Lipset and Rokkan, but rather than referring to an opposition between the political centre and restive local elites reluctant to be integrated, it covers the tension between England on the one hand, and Scotland and Wales on the other. The unity vs diversity dichotomy includes attitudes towards multiculturalism and the integration of ethnic minorities and the resulting inclusive/exclusive vision of British society. We can then imagine a map (see Fig. 1) where the Labour party stood in the interdependence/centre/diversity quadrant because of their support for European integration, for maintaining the United Kingdom and for a multicultural society. The Conservative party, on the other hand, was in the sovereignty/centre/unity one, as it was critical of European integration, opposed to devolution and insisted on the need for minorities to accept British values. The Liberal Democrats stood on the interdependence/periphery/diversity quadrangle because of their support for federalism, both at the national and European level. Finally the Scottish and Welsh nationalists could be assumed to stand in the interdependence/periphery/diversity quadrangle because of their (relatively new) support for European integration and multicultural society in their respective territories.

This typology only applies for the early period under study and requires to be qualified, as it tends to simplify party views and disregard party divisions. It should therefore be used as an approximation, as reflecting leadership views, but not necessarily that of all members. Also, it does not apply to globalisation, which is not a cleavage in the UK political debate. With this caveat in mind, this typology can nevertheless be relevant to explain party positions on identity issues.

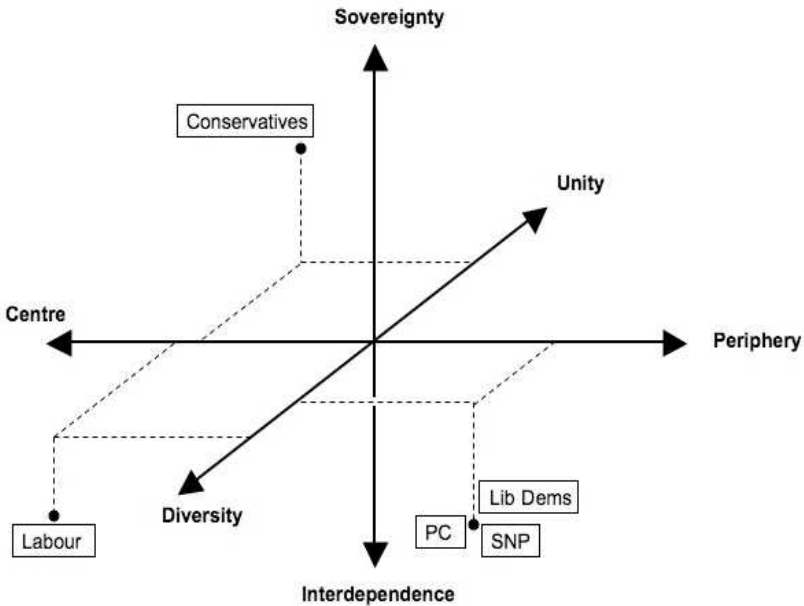


Fig. 1

This book will examine successively devolution, European integration, multiculturalism and globalisation and analyse party responses to these different challenges to Britishness through this novel typology. We will see that identity issues cut across traditional party lines and that the cleavages between centralisers and decentralisers, pro- and anti-Europeans, multiculturalists and integrationists have become less salient during the course of the 1990s and especially 2000s. In the first chapter, I will examine the rise of Scottish and Welsh political identities, fuelling in turn a renewed Englishness, to the detriment of a common Britishness. The responses of the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties, supporting devolution as a means to maintain the Union, will be examined, as well as the Conservatives' opposition to devolution before 1997, and their evolution afterwards. The SNP victory in the 2007 Holyrood election shows that New Labour has failed to extinguish the Scottish debate on independence and to ensure the unity of the country, although many factors still constrain the SNP's dream, especially after the global financial meltdown of 2007-8. Europe will be the focus of the second chapter, in which I will show the growing difference in discourse between Labour and

the Liberal Democrats on the one hand and the Conservatives on the other, who see British and European identities as incompatible. In the third chapter, I will describe, on the contrary, the way in which both main parties have come closer to each other in qualifying their support for multiculturalism, though coming from very different starting points on the axis described above.

Finally, I will explore the debate on globalisation, which has taken a very different form in the UK from other European countries, particularly France. Unlike the three other issues, globalisation has *not* proven a divisive issue in British politics. There is a remarkable consensus, at least at the elite party level, on the benefits of economic, financial and technological globalisation, which chimes with the yet various definitions of Britishness adopted by political parties. This can be traced back to overall attitudes towards free trade, which since the repeal of the Corn Laws have been a cornerstone of the definition of Britain by all three parties. We will see that this consensus has been affected by the financial crisis and that some aspects of globalisation are questioned by part of the general public.

CHAPTER TWO

THE END OF BRITAIN ? THE DEBATE ABOUT DEVOLUTION

The United Kingdom established by the successive unions of England with Wales, Scotland and, for some time, Ireland has shown increasing signs of strain in the last four decades as the “empire state” built along the last centuries contracted (Gamble 2003), leading some to fear, and others to celebrate, the end of Britain (Nairn 1977, Scruton 2000, Marr 2000, Redwood 1999). The links that Linda Colley had identified as joining the four nations, i.e. colonial expansion and the industrial revolution, weakened after the second world war as the empire faded, economic difficulties grew and increasing centralisation of the state was resented in the periphery. As elsewhere in Western Europe, feelings of a distinct “regional” or national identity grew in both Scotland, Wales and to some extent England, to the detriment of a common British identity. The electoral results obtained by the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, in by-elections and local elections in 1967-1968, then again in the general election of 1974, and later in the 1980s-1990s as well as the pressure they were able to exercise on “British” political parties illustrated vividly the emergence of an unprecedented challenge to the consensual, though implicit, definition of Britishness.

The British party responses to the nationalist challenge were for many years confused, hesitant and defensive—a sure sign that it did not fit in the traditional categories and dichotomies of the post-war political debates, even if the debates about Home Rule for Ireland had already been a crucial political cleavage in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. On the whole, like all identity-related issues, it did not easily fit in the usual right/left or statist/free market categories which parties and voters normally used to position themselves on the political spectrum. The issues raised by these increasingly popular nationalisms had to do with the nature of the British state, the future of Britain and the best way to keep the country together. It is therefore hardly surprising that attitudes to devolution, that is whether or not to create (or re-create) a Parliament in Scotland and/or in Wales,

fluctuated widely between the 1960s and 1980s within both the Conservative and Labour parties, illustrating their unease on this topic. Labour supported it mildly until 1958, when it came out clearly against it, whereas the Conservative party opposed it except in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when it seemed to reluctantly support it. A clear picture only emerged in the late 1980s, which was summed up in figure 1 in the introduction : Labour came out strongly in favour of devolution, developing a vision of a common British identity which could accommodate a stronger sense of Scottish or Welsh identity, while the Conservatives under Thatcher and Major opposed it and stuck to a vision of administrative devolution to Scotland and Wales which they saw as the only solution compatible with the Union (Camp-Piétrain 2006: 57-58). The Liberal party (later Liberal Democrats) was the party whose line was the most consistent over these decades, as they supported a reform of the British constitution and the adoption of a federal system in Britain which would accommodate Scottish and Welsh nationalisms.

The landslide victory in the 1997 general election enabled New Labour to get a large majority in favour of the creation of a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly, based on the argument that addressing the Scottish and Welsh grievances would be the best way to maintain the Union together. But the SNP victory in the third election to the Scottish Parliament in 2007, and their pledge, later postponed, to organise a referendum on Scottish independence in 2010, show that the future of the United Kingdom has not been entirely secured by the 1998 Scotland Act.

After a reminder of party attitudes towards devolution before 1999, in which I will focus on the clash between two different, Conservative and Labour, philosophies of the state and the nation, I will examine the implementation of the devolution project and the effect it has had, insofar as it can be measured at a still early age, on political parties and their visions of British identity in Scotland, Wales and England. Two periods will be distinguished : one running from 1997 to 2006, when devolution settled quite smoothly in Scotland and Wales following the pattern envisaged by New Labour; then the period since 2006, where things have been again in flux both in Wales, where pressure towards more autonomy has been growing, and in Scotland, where the victory of the SNP in the 2007 election raised again the spectre of the possible break-up of Britain. Finally, a last short section will attempt to assess the effect of devolution on perceptions of identity in England, Scotland and Wales, suggesting that changes in self-identification might have a longer lasting impact on Britishness than the likelihood of full independence for some nations.

The nationalist challenge

The resurgence of Scottish and Welsh nationalism from the mid-1960s onwards represented an obvious threat to Britishness, as it challenged the established orthodoxy that Britain was a successful multinational state in which the different Scottish, Welsh and English cultural identities were happily subsumed under a common “civic” British identity. Until the second world war, most Scots and Welsh people had been satisfied with this dual identity, the practical socio-economic benefits of which they had enjoyed. In party political terms, Labour had been the main beneficiary of this loyalty in Wales, and both the Conservative party and Labour enjoyed widespread support in Scotland until the 1950s—the Conservatives still got 50% of the Scottish votes in 1951. But with the economic decline and the loss of public sector jobs, whether it be in the Welsh mines or Scottish shipbuilding, strains emerged with London, which was accused of neglecting Scotland and Wales, in turn fuelling support for the nationalist parties in the Celtic fringe, reflected in by-elections results. From the mid-1960s onwards, both the Scottish and Welsh political scenes became increasingly different from the UK one with distinctive and powerful third parties, the SNP in Scotland and Plaid Cymru in Wales, disturbing the traditional two-party system.

The response of the British parties was muddled. The instinct of both main parties was to resist nationalist pressure, though for different ideological reasons. The Conservatives were traditionally unionists, indeed their party identity was inseparable from unionism, and they were therefore suspicious of any movement which might weaken the United Kingdom (Aughey 2001: 68). Yet they had not hesitated to “play the Scottish card” after 1945, when Churchill contrasted the Labour government’s nationalisation and centralisation policies to the Conservative protection of Scottish identity (Seawright 2007). But their identity as a party remained embedded in the Union. Labour’s socialist tradition insisted on equality in social services that all citizens should enjoy irrespective of territory. It had been centralist and egalitarian since the 1920s and therefore made no difference between the different parts of the country. But Scottish and Welsh votes were crucial for any Labour majority, and the Conservatives were concerned about their loss of popularity in Scotland. Both parties had therefore a keen interest in keeping voters happy in Scotland and Wales. Another common characteristic was that they were divided on the territorial issue, partly as a result of being torn between their unionist natural instincts and their electoral interests. The Wilson government passed the Welsh Language

Act in 1967, which gave Welsh equal legal status with English in Wales, and appointed the Crowther (later Kilbrandon) commission to consider devolution to Scotland and Wales (Ward 2006). This enabled the government to both show that it was tackling the issue and postpone any decision until the commission had reported, in the backdrop of divisions within the party about devolution.

At that point, the Conservatives in opposition were more daring: Edward Heath, then leader of the party, made his famous Perth declaration during the 1968 Scottish Conservative party conference, in which he supported the principle of a devolved Scottish assembly. This was a controversial stance within his party yet it remained official policy for several years. Nevertheless, it was not implemented during Heath's premiership (1970-74), even when the Kilbrandon report came out, both because the nationalist vote had momentarily subsided and because there were more pressing economic problems.

In the second half of the 1970s, it was again a Labour government which faced the devolution question, following the spectacular results of the SNP in the two 1974 general elections, when they took nine Conservative seats and a total of eleven in Scotland (30% of the votes). The Kilbrandon report had suggested the creation of Scottish and Welsh assemblies, and Wilson's second government (1974-76) gave it much higher priority than its first one in the 1960s. But the party was deeply divided on the issue, including its Scottish and Welsh branches (Berbéri 2006: 73). The 1976 Scotland and Wales Bill, which envisaged a Scottish Parliament with limited legislative powers and a Welsh assembly with executive powers, was rejected in the Commons by a coalition of Conservative and Labour MPs opposed to devolution. In the meantime, the so-called Barnett formula for the distribution of public expenditure over England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland was devised, which in relative terms favoured the celtic nations. This was aimed at appeasing nationalists in Scotland and Wales, and was kept when devolution was introduced in the late 1990s. A second attempt was more successful in 1978, but anti-devolutionists imposed a referendum and a 40% turnout threshold which proved crucial: the referendum organised in Scotland in 1979 gave a positive result but turnout was below 40%, and in Wales the result was negative. By then the issue of devolution seemed effectively buried.

The Conservative policy in these years was ambiguous: officially the new leader of the party after 1975, Margaret Thatcher, shared her predecessor's support for devolution, and claimed that the party's opposition to the government's successive devolution bills was based on a

criticism of the bills, not on the principle itself. But it soon appeared that Conservative support for devolution had become fictitious, as illustrated by the resignation of Sir Alick Buchanan-Smith, the pro-devolution Shadow Scottish Secretary, and even more especially after the collapse of the referendum on devolution. It was clear that Thatcher's instincts were centralist and individualistic, a far cry from the self-proclaimed distinctive Scottish political culture which insisted on values of community and solidarity. Pro-devolution Conservatives were marginalised, whereas previous supporters like Malcolm Rifkind became staunch unionists. The only policy initiatives taken under Thatcher and Major concerned administrative devolution, with the strengthening of the Welsh Office and of the Scottish Grand Committee in Westminster (Camp-Piétrain 2006a: 63). In Scotland, the Conservative party was increasingly perceived as exclusively English, not British. As Aughey put it, "the particularity of Thatcherite populism (its Englishness) weakened the patriotic identity of the party (its Britishness)" (2001: 74). This is one factor which can explain the electoral collapse of the Conservative party in Scotland and Wales after 1987, which was reinforced by the first-past-the-post electoral system. Socio-economic factors also played an important part, as Finlay has shown (2008: 162-163). By 1997 there was not a single Conservative MP in Scotland or Wales. The Scottish and Welsh rejection of the Thatcherite philosophy and feeling of alienation from the London policy-making process had strengthened the case for autonomous decision-making.

The Labour party after 1979 shifted to the left under Michael Foot and adopted an Alternative Economic Strategy which was socialist and centralist, therefore hardly compatible with sub-national devolution. But following its second defeat in the 1983 general election, it became strategically important for the party to keep its strong base in Scotland at a time when the Conservatives dominated the English political scene. The party was therefore drawn into a renewed debate about devolution, especially as, after a drop in support in 1979, the SNP was again a powerful force in 1987, gaining 14% of the Scottish vote and 21.5% in the 1992 general election. The Labour, but also Liberal Democrat strategy was then to pre-empt the debate on devolution while isolating the nationalists. Both parties took an active part in the Scottish Constitutional Convention which was launched by the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly in 1989. The SNP left the Convention on the ground that full independence for Scotland was ruled out in its proceedings and Labour effectively controlled it. The Conservatives declined to join an organisation which was clearly opposed to their policies. Labour party divisions on devolution

subsided, with previous opponents, like Robin Cook, rallying to it. Donald Dewar, the Shadow Scottish Secretary, was able to convince Neil Kinnock, the Welsh anti-devolutionist leader of the party, of the merits of autonomy. Kinnock's successor after 1992, John Smith, was a Scot who had always supported devolution and was able to entrench Labour's now unambiguous support for devolution and create a party consensus around it. The 1992 general election was fought partly on devolution, Labour announcing plans for a Scottish Parliament and Welsh assembly in its manifesto, while John Major and the Conservative party strongly criticized these plans. In a rally during the campaign, the Prime Minister claimed: "To imperil the tried and successful Union of our four nations for party benefit, as our opponents do, is unforgivable. To toss aside the Union through which, over three hundred years, this country has moulded the history of the world. That is unbelievable." He urged voters to "wake up" as the UK was "in danger".¹ His unexpected victory in the general election ensured that, once again, devolution was postponed.

New Labour's Project

The Scottish Convention's final report published in 1995, *Scotland's Parliament, Scotland's Right*, anticipated on what became New Labour's devolution bills. There was no equivalent in Wales to the Scottish Convention, (though there was a Campaign for a Welsh Assembly from 1988) but the work it produced was followed with much attention in Wales, especially among nationalist circles. Labour renewed its promise for devolution in Wales in the late 1980s. Ron Davies, the Shadow Welsh Secretary from 1983, had become a supporter of devolution in Wales and published an influential document called *No Devolution, No Deal*, but the local party remained divided (Camp-Piétrain 2006b : 103-105). Although Labour's new leader after 1994, Tony Blair, was less enthusiastic about devolution than his predecessor, he endorsed the principle in Scotland and Wales which he included in a wider programme of modernisation of the British constitution. He argued that devolution was the best way to avoid the break-up of Britain, and rejected both separatism, which he said the Scots and the Welsh did not want, and federalism, because England was too big compared with the other nations whereas a balance between parts was required in a federal state. He insisted that the sovereignty of Westminster, and therefore the basic principle of the British constitution, would not be affected :

¹ *The Scotsman*, 6 April 1992.

What we propose is devolution which requires a decision taken by the UK parliament to establish a subsidiary assembly or parliament to exercise certain functions in one part of the UK as it brings power closer to people and is part of a wider process of decentralisation which allows the centre to concentrate on the strategic needs of the country (Blair 1996).

The point was repeated in the foreword to the White Paper, *Scotland's Parliament*, that the new government issued in June 1997. Donald Dewar, the new Scottish Secretary insisted that:

Scotland will remain firmly part of the United Kingdom. Westminster will continue to be responsible for those areas of policy best run on a United Kingdom basis. These include foreign affairs, defence and national security and macro-economic and fiscal matters. It follows that the UK Government will continue to act in many areas of public life in Scotland but in future it will be the Scottish Parliament-working within the framework of the United Kingdom-which will be responsible for much of the business of government in Scotland (Scottish Office 1997).

The government therefore refused the “slippery slope” theory then developed by the Conservatives, and wished for by the SNP, according to which devolution would inevitably lead to further Scottish demands and ultimately full independence and the end of the United Kingdom. Blair saw devolution as an end in itself, a similar process to that which had taken place in other EU countries, part of a wider decentralisation process which could also affect England and would reconnect citizens and the state.

As promised, the New Labour government organised a referendum on devolution in Scotland on 11 September 1997 and in Wales a week later. The project foresaw the creation of a Scottish Parliament with legislative powers over a wide range of local issues, except those “reserved” to Westminster, including macro-economic, foreign and defence policies. The new Welsh Assembly would have only powers over secondary legislation. In Scotland two questions were asked, the first one on the creation of a Parliament and the second on whether it should have tax-varying powers. The “yes” campaign was led by Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the SNP, who unlike the former parties were hoping that devolution would be a first step towards independence. The “no” campaign was mostly led by demoralised Conservative activists and defeated MPs—the few Labour opponents to devolution, like Tam Dalyell, refused to join it. Support for devolution was now so widespread in Scotland that, unlike in 1992, the Conservatives focussed on the dangers

of giving Parliament the power to raise taxes rather than on the future of Britain. This failed to make a decisive impact, since the results gave almost 75% yes votes to the first question and over 63% to the second one.

The division between parties was similar in Wales, where Plaid Cymru finally supported the New Labour plan, although the future assembly would have much less power than the Scottish Parliament, as well as the Liberal Democrats. Still, the Welsh Labour party was less united over devolution than its Scottish counterpart, with a number of activists and MPs, like Llew Smith and Alan Williams, openly campaigning against a Welsh assembly, which they saw as a mere talking shop. The Conservatives conducted a low-key campaign against the project, unwilling to antagonise the Welsh electorate should the result be positive (Camp-Pietrain 2006: 115). They insisted on the cost of the future assembly and the money that would be wasted on it.² In the end, the referendum was passed with a very small majority of 50.3% and an equally low turnout, illustrating the then mixed feelings of much of the Welsh population about the devolution project on offer.

As the government had hoped, the positive results of the two referendums effectively stifled any parliamentary opposition to the two bills that were introduced in the Autumn. The Conservatives acknowledged the result of the democratic vote and endorsed the reform, though without enthusiasm. Their new discourse was focussed on the need to make the institutions work in order to maintain the Union. Malcolm Rifkind wrote in the *Daily Mail* on 2 December 1997 that:

It is good that Scottish Tories accept the new Scottish Parliament and will work for its success. The Union continues but it will be a new UK with many of the characteristics of a federal system. We must become its champions.

The Conservatives therefore approached the debate in a positive spirit, in order to make the settlement “workable”. In the second reading of the bill, Michael Ancram said:

Scottish Conservatives will stand for and participate in a Scottish Parliament, and we will ensure that the voice of Scottish conservatism is heard loud and clear within that new democratic institution...We shall approach the Bill also in a constructive manner...We maintain our view that the Bill contains within it the seeds that will loosen the bonds that hold

² Michael Ancram, *House of Commons Parliamentary Debates*, 22 July 1997, vol. 297, col. 760-761.

together the United Kingdom and could well lead to its break-up. We have no regrets that we placed those fears firmly before the people of Scotland in the referendum, even if they ultimately chose to take the risk, because that is what democracy is about.³

But he was also keen, like other Conservative MPs, to raise the imbalance and problems which the government bill was creating:

The failure to resolve the fundamental problems of the imbalance between Scotland and England that the proposals in the Bill make inevitable will eventually and inevitably lead to English resentment. The undermining and marginalising of Scotland's position in the United Kingdom and within the Councils of the European Union will inevitably lead to Scottish resentment...Last but certainly not least is the failure to provide any assurance or definition on the face of the Bill on the future financial relationship between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom...Each of the areas that I have set out provides the rocks on which the United Kingdom could ultimately founder.⁴

The government's refusal to review the Barnett formula and to tackle the West Lothian question was criticised—it was to become a recurring Conservative argument in the years that followed.⁵ Yet, at that stage, Ancram acknowledged that there was no “easy answer” to the West Lothian (or “English”) question and did not call for English bills to be voted by English MPs only. He merely called for a debate to discuss the different options, which also included an English Grand Committee within the Commons or the creation of an English Parliament.

The Liberal Democrats fully supported the Scotland and Wales bills, in keeping with the work they had done with Labour on the Scottish constitutional convention and with their support for the referendum. James Wallace, leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, reminded Parliament that his party still supported a federal solution for the UK.⁶

In May 1999, elections in Scotland and Wales, using the Additional Member electoral system, led to the establishment of the Parliament and

³ Michael Ancram, *H. of C. Parl. Deb.*, 12 January 1998, Vol. 304, col. 35.

⁴ *Idem*, col. 41.

⁵ The West Lothian question, first raised in the 1970s by Tam Dalyell, MP for West Lothian, refers to the inequality between Scottish MPs in Westminster, who after devolution would still be able to vote on English matters, and the English MPs who could no longer vote on Scottish matters devolved to the new Scottish Parliament.

⁶ James Wallace, *H. of C. Parliam. Deb.*, Vol. 304, col. 50, 12 January 1998.

Assembly. As had been anticipated with the adoption of a measure of proportional representation, no party was able to win an absolute majority of seats. The electoral system gave a relative majority to Labour in Scotland (56 seats), the SNP coming second with 35 seats. Labour formed a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats (17 seats) while the Conservatives got 18 seats, all of them ironically gained on the party list, a system they had opposed, and none in the constituencies with the first-past-the-post electoral system. In Wales, Labour also came first with 28 seats and formed a coalition with the Liberal Democrats (6 seats) after February 2000. Plaid Cymru came second with 12 seats and the Conservatives third with 11 seats.

Devolution settled ? (1999-2006)

By 1997-1999, all the main political parties in Britain had accepted devolution, in response to the “settled will of the people”, as John Smith had put it much earlier, in Scotland and Wales. But the underlying question of whether devolution would actually strengthen or undermine the unity of the kingdom remained unanswered, especially with the SNP now the Official Opposition in the Scottish Parliament and Plaid Cymru strengthened in Wales, and both parties taking full advantage of the platform created by the new sub-state political system. For all unionist parties, the priority was going to be to make sure the new institutions functioned and gained legitimacy in their respective communities while reducing the risk of conflict between Edinburgh/Cardiff and London, in other words making sure the dynamics of devolution would remain within the present British political system. The Conservatives had the further challenge of re-establishing their credentials as a legitimate Scottish party in the emerging political scene. The SNP’s aim instead was to show that the Scottish Parliament did not have enough powers and that only full independence would answer the needs of the Scottish population, which Alex Salmond hoped to do by 2007.⁷

The start of the Scottish Parliament was hardly auspicious. There were three Labour First Ministers in the first term: after Donald Dewar’s sudden death in October 2000, his successor Henry MacLeish had to resign over his Westminster allowances in 2001 and was followed by Jack McConnell. The Parliament building project was late and over-budget, ending up costing over 400 million pounds. This led to repeated criticisms in the Scottish press and the setting up of an official enquiry chaired by Lord

⁷ “Hour is at hand, says Salmond”, *The Herald*, 25 September 1999.