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► To cite this version:

Keith Dixon. New Labour and Devolution: radicalism or bricolage?. Textes & Contextes, 2008, Identités nationales, identités régionales, 1, <https://preo.u-bourgogne.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=113>. halshs-00317916v2

HAL Id: halshs-00317916

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00317916v2>

Submitted on 8 Sep 2008

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Article tiré de :

Textes et Contextes. [Ressource électronique] / Centre de Recherche Interlangues « texte image langage ». N°1, « identités nationales, identités régionales ». (2008). ISSN : 1961-991X.

Disponible sur internet :

<http://revuesshs.u-bourgogne.fr/textes&contextes/>

New Labour and Devolution: radicalism or bricolage?

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Abstract

This paper argues that New Labour's devolution proposals can be seen as part of a strategy of « political distinction » from the Conservative party, all the more necessary as there had been a conspicuous convergence in most other policy areas. After retracing the history of Labour attitudes towards Home Rule on the periphery of the United Kingdom in the XXth century, the paper focuses on the contemporary period, suggesting that Thatcherism was perceived as an “alien” doctrine in both Scotland and Wales, thus hardening the resolve of a significant part of the population to loosen or break the old constitutional ties. It is against this background that New Labour's positioning as the party of movement is discussed. It is argued that, in Scotland, two factors contributed to making constitutional reform unavoidable from the 1980s on : a major shift in favour of Scottish autonomy in both the cultural and intellectual fields and the creation of a “popular front” in favour of constitutional reform in the shape of the Scottish Constitutional Convention. The paper concludes on a discussion of the contrasting positions of Vernon Bogdanor and Tom Nairn of the state that the United Kingdom is in today.

Résumé

Cet article considère que les propositions de réforme des néo-travailleurs concernant la dévolution doivent être appréhendées comme faisant partie d'une stratégie de « distinction politique » par rapport au parti conservateur, rendue d'autant plus nécessaire par la forte convergence dans la plupart des autres domaines. Après avoir retracé l'évolution du positionnement travailliste sur la question de l'autonomie de la périphérie britannique au cours du XXe siècle, l'analyse se centre sur la période contemporaine. Au cours des années quatre-vingt, le thatchérisme est de plus en plus perçu, en Ecosse comme au pays de Galles comme une doctrine étrangère (aux traditions politiques et philosophiques de ces deux pays), et cette perception renforce la détermination d'une partie de la population de desserrer, voire de rompre les vieux liens constitutionnels. C'est en tenant compte de cette contrainte, que l'on doit analyser le nouveau positionnement des travailleurs comme le parti du mouvement constitutionnel. Deux facteurs en Ecosse ont rendu la réforme constitutionnelle difficile à éviter pour les néo-travailleurs: un changement significatif en faveur de l'autonomie dans les champs intellectuel et culturel et la construction d'un « front populaire » en faveur du changement, sous la forme de la Convention Constitutionnelle Ecossaise. L'article se termine avec une discussion des positions divergentes sur cette question de Vernon Bogdanor et de Tom Nairn.

Introduction

If the Labour party became New Labour with the arrival of Anthony Blair as leader in 1994, the process of transformation which led to and accelerated under New Labour began – most observers would agree – a decade earlier. With 28.3% of the vote in the general election of 1983 the Labour party registered its lowest score since the introduction of full adult suffrage in 1918. This was the alarm signal that was to trigger, under the successive leaderships of Neil Kinnock, John Smith and Anthony Blair, the process which is often described in both the hagiographic and the academic literature on the subject as the « modernization » of the Labour party and its policies. As I have explained at length elsewhere (Dixon 1998, 2003, 2005) I would prefer the notion of « conspicuous convergence », as developed among others by Colin Hay (1999), to the modernization thesis¹ which has become part of the Blairites' (now jaded) self-image. From the mid-eighties on, the leadership of the Labour party, when faced with the on-going successes of the Thatcher governments, adopted a policy of gradual accommodation with the new policy mix that had been introduced by the radical Conservatives, thus creating a new « common sense » of government. This process of policy accommodation was to be more publicly proclaimed and more explicitly theorized under the new New Labour leadership, with some considerable help from Anthony Giddens (1994, 1998), first among others in what had become the New Labour organic intelligentsia.

By 1996, when Blair published his first collection of speeches and newspaper articles as Labour leader, entitled *New Britain. My vision of a young country*, the contours of New Labour economic and social policy were relatively plain to see, for anyone willing to read through Blair's not always inspiring prose and look beyond the rhetorical gimmicks. The paradigms of economic and social management of Britain that had been introduced by Margaret Thatcher, which included a large degree of privatization, flexible labour markets, a reformed and wealthy-friendly fiscal structure and a legally constrained trade union movement, would be kept by an incoming Labour government. The reality of New Labour government since 1997 has given ample proof that Blair's promises have been kept, sometimes quite zealously so. Privatization has continued in one or other of its various forms (the dominant one being that which was borrowed from John Major in the form of the Private Finance Initiative - now rebaptized Public-Private Partnerships); labour market flexibility is considered to be so important that successive New Labour Foreign Ministers have insisted on its serving as a model for the rest of archaic Old Europe²; Britain continues to be a low-tax regime, and to attract capital and labour for that reason; if the trade unions have seen their legal situation somewhat improved (with the right to trade union organization in the workplace now officially recognized) there has been no return to the trade union rights of the pre-Thatcher period, and the leader of New Labour has regularly shown his distaste for traditional forms of trade union action and adopted a rhetoric more familiar within the Conservative tradition when confronted with striking workers. Similarly, in the area of foreign

1 This is best exemplified in the hagiographic literature produced by Blair's inner circle. See, for example, Peter Mandelson, *The Blair Revolution Revisited* (Mandelson, 2002).

2 This is a central theme of the « Blair-Schröder platform » for the European elections of 1999. In this joint policy document which bears the hallmark of Peter Mandelson, labour market flexibility is presented as the way forward from “old” European rigidities. The German social democrats were to be thereafter less enthusiastic in their endorsement of Blairism after disastrous results in these elections.

policy the path followed by New Labour has been one of sometimes spectacular convergence around policies initiated by successive American presidents, Democrat and Republican, thus transforming the relatively novel and much discussed ideological proximity between Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan into a model of contemporary Anglo-American relations.

The policy convergence between the New Thatcherite Right and New Blairite Labour has been such that the title of Simon Jenkins' recent book on the relationship between M. Thatcher, J. Major, A. Blair and G. Brown – *Thatcher and Sons* (2006) – seems much more flatly descriptive and much less provocative than the author no doubt hoped. Given this extraordinary convergence, the problem for New Labour, at least in the early years of its rise to power, has been how to demarcate itself in this relationship of ideological fellow travellership with Conservative neoliberalism. I will suggest here that devolution, and more generally constitutional reform, have been one of the major elements in what we might like to call *New Labour's strategy of political distinction*. Although in the areas of economic, social, penal and foreign policy the divergence between the two major parties has been a matter of what Freud described in another context as « the narcissism of minor differences » Conservative and New Labour attitudes towards constitutional reform over the last twenty years have been strikingly at odds with each other.

1. Labour, old and new, and the National Question

There were no particular reasons why this should be so. Both parties had come to see the British union as the only viable framework in which to operate effectively. The Conservatives had of course been more vocal in their opposition to any form of Home Rule from the late XIXth century on. In their early manifestations the labour movement and the first political organizations to emerge from that movement were in favour of the demands for Home Rule expressed forcefully in Ireland and less so in Scotland (Harvie 1989). However, by the 1920s there is an observable parting of the ways between the Home Rulers and the socialists, with some notable exceptions (one thinks of Roland Muirhead in Scotland, for example). In the inter-war period in both Scotland and Wales, not to mention England, the demands for recognition of national particularities in the cultural and political fields seemed at best an irritation as class issues came to the fore. The ambiguity, in political terms, of the nationalist movements in both Scotland and Wales, the propensity for certain of their leaders to lean heavily towards the Right and to manipulate the dynamite of xenophobia were to confirm many Socialists in their hostility towards vociferous small-nation nationalism (Saunders Lewis was a some time admirer of Maurras and *Action Française* and Andrew Dewar Gibb, the SNP leader of the late Thirties, hated the Irish immigrants in his native land and made no bones about it (Dixon, 1997).

« What a curse to the earth are small nations » proclaimed the revolutionary socialist Scottish novelist Lewis Grassie Gibbon in 1934 (Grassie Gibbon 1934 : 144) and in doing so he was expressing the vigorous rejection of nationalism by many within the labour movement. By the time of the post-war Labour government of Clement Attlee, the Labour party had become in its own way as unionist as its Conservative enemies (to borrow a phrase from Tony Crosland) and this was to continue throughout the period of the post-war social democratic consensus which promised and to some extent delivered a more equal treatment between regions of Britain and guaranteed a minimum social protection for all – including those populations who had still in living memory the inordinate suffering inflicted upon them by the free play of market mechanisms in the South of Wales and West of Scotland during what Kenneth Morgan has described as the « locust years » of the Great Depression (Morgan 2002 : 210-240).

The experience of office from 1945 to 1951 and again from 1964 to 1970 no doubt reinforced what had become the *doxa* within the Labour party, leadership and rank and file included, that only a central *British* state occupied by Labour could impose redistribution and effectively combat inter-regional inequalities. The Britishness of that central state was indeed more or less taken for

granted until the rude eruption of nationalism on the political scene from the late Sixties on. I will not go into any detail about the internal debate (or the lack of such debate) within the Labour party in these crucial years which saw both Plaid and the SNP become substantial political and electoral forces – substantial enough to force both the major political parties into a re-appraisal of the national question. Suffice to say that the Labour party's conversion (or return, if you prefer) to Home Rule during the ill-fated governments of Wilson and Callaghan from 1974 to 1979 was a highly uneven process, one of whose most significant manifestations was a durable tension between a pragmatic/opportunistic leadership, struggling to keep the boat of government afloat through deals in parliament with the Liberals and others, and a party rank-and-file which was very far from enthusiastic about what it perceived as concessions to the Nationalists. This is particularly clear in Scotland where the majority of the party in the seventies continued to see the SNP as Tories in national costume and Home Rule as a diversion from the real tasks at hand.

2. The Thatcher factor

What changed all this irremediably was the Conservative victory of the 3rd of May 1979, only a couple of months after the referendum fiasco in Scotland and Wales. Because of the very radicality of Thatcherite policies, largely inspired by the writings of Friedrich von Hayek, that great admirer of English XIXth century economic liberalism, but also because of the growing divergence in the perceptions of Thatcherism between a predominantly enthusiastic England (the populous South of England in particular) on the one hand and an increasingly hostile Scotland and Wales on the other, Thatcherite policies were to prepare the ground for a major shift in public perceptions in both of these two countries (McCrone 1992 ; Brown / McCrone / Paterson 1998). It is indeed during this period that the movement in favour of the recognition of Scotland's national specificities grows in strength, although this is not necessarily reflected in the electoral results of the SNP, which does badly through much of the eighties. Nationalism, or at least the increasingly strident demand that Scotland and Wales should not be submitted to the repeated onslaughts of an *alien* doctrine and of political practices which were inimical to the dominant traditions of both these countries, was to grow and above all to spread across the boundaries of party politics during this period, perhaps more than ever before.

In the Scottish context, I would argue that there are two key factors which were to contribute vitally to creating the conditions in which New Labour was to emerge in the mid-nineties with its proposals for constitutional reform. The first of these is *the shift within the intellectual and cultural fields* which sees the emergence of a multifarious movement in favour of the critical rethinking of Scotland's place within British history and within the contemporary political and cultural landscape. The second, not-unrelated phenomenon, is the emergence of a *popular front of opposition* to the constitutional *status quo* in the form of the Scottish Constitutional Convention (although no doubt some of the more staid members of that august assembly would be unhappy with the idea of them being anything as radical as a popular front).

I have no time here to go into the detail of the contribution of Scotland's academics, writers and other cultural producers in the rewriting of Scotland in the 1980s and 1990s and the reactivation/invention of a tradition in which Scotland stood apart in its defiance of the doctrinaire neo-liberalism being implemented down South with increasing fervour as we move through the decade. As Roderick Watson has argued (Watson 2007), there is a new flowering of Scottish culture during this period, in which few or any of the major actors are willing to publicly espouse the cause of unionist Conservatism. If we look at the names of the major figures of the period – Alasdair Gray, Jim Kelman, Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead, Janice Galloway, Jackie Kay, Iain Banks, Willie McIlvanney, they read like a roll call of more or less militant anti-Thatcherism³.

³ The only Scottish author of note to take sides with Conservative unionism was Alan Massie, although some

Similarly in the academic field, a vast amount of work was being carried out to call into question the historical myths of unionism, of which Scottish academia had been a major vector, and to redesign the contours of Scotland's past and present. Cairns Craig's *Determinations* series at Polygon is one distinguished example among many others of the intellectual vitality of the period. The Series preface was quite clear in its intentions :

If the determinations which shape our experience are to come from within rather than from without, they have to be explored and evaluated and acted upon. Each volume in this series will seek to be a contribution to that self-determination; and each volume, we trust, will require a response, contributing in turn to the on-going dynamic that is Scotland's culture.

Much of this cultural and intellectual work was to find a strong echo in the vibrant journal and small magazine culture of the period, to which *Radical Scotland* was a major contributor.

In the political field, the Scottish Constitutional Convention grew, sometimes laboriously, out of the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly, but above all out of the growing recognition that a broad coalition of forces in Scotland – from the womens' movement to the local authorities, from the STUC to the Catholic Church, and from the Communists to the Liberals, and crucially including Labour - were opposed to the constitutional status quo and were willing to bury (some of) their differences in order to propose a reasoned programme of constitutional change in face of Thatcherite immobility. No matter what the intentions of one or other of the actors may have been (the Labour desire to isolate the SNP or the Liberals' parallel agenda of reforming an electoral system in which they were systematically under-represented) the creation of the Convention and its input as a *collective intellectual* into the political debate constituted a major turning point. It thus gave political form to - *but also a particular political interpretation of* - the mass rejection of Thatcherism which had expressed itself not only in the ballot box in Scotland (and Wales) since 1979 but also in the contribution of the Scots and the Welsh to the major movements against the new faith in the market, in particular the 1984-85 miners strike and the « Can pay, won't pay » campaign against the poll tax in the late eighties⁴.

3. The political inheritance of New Labour

This then is what Anthony Blair inherited when he replaced John Smith at the head of the Labour party in 1994 : a political party still in search of its position within a much changed British political field, now dominated by market thinking, but also a movement whose strengths lay on the periphery where the rejection of Anglo-centrism, in the caricatural form of Thatcher and Major (warm beer and cricket...) was henceforth a force to be reckoned with and which the old incantations about the horrors of tartan Conservatism and separatist Welshness could no longer conjure away. From these two major constraints was to emerge that hybrid creature, Blairism. One must not underestimate these symbolic constraints when measuring the « statesmanship » of Blair as constitutional reformer after 1997.

The dominant group within Blair's New Labour party had no inherent reasons for being more attentive to demands for Home Rule than their immediate forebears. Blair himself had paid little attention to the national question since his election in 1983, and his base in the North East of England did not naturally predispose him in favour of devolution. The new leader was surrounded by Scots – but they had been far from being unanimous in their support of Home Rule in earlier times. Indeed, Robin Cook had been active in his opposition to Home Rule during the 1979 referendum campaign. Although Gordon Brown had moved away from his proximity

may have found it more diplomatic to hold their peace during a period of almost unanimous Scottish loathing of radical Thatcherite conservatism.

⁴ This campaign was to provide a platform for Tommy Sheridan, leader of Scottish Militant Labour, and later of the Scottish Socialist Party, who was to be a major figure in parliamentary debates during the first two terms of the new Scottish parliament after 1999.

with Scotland's nationalist-leaning Left radicals of his early *Red Paper on Scotland* years, he had nonetheless led Labour's first devolution campaign in Scotland. But by the mid-nineties, his preoccupations were no doubt elsewhere as he battled to locate himself at the centre of the New Labour machine. Neil Kinnock, who continued to haunt the corridors of Labour party power and to provide symbolic capital to the New Labour leadership, was himself only a recent convert to devolution, which he had combatted within the Welsh party in the 1970s. No doubt Labour leaders on the periphery, at least in Scotland, were by the mid-nineties obliged to position themselves differently from their Westminster- (or Brussels-) based colleagues, as popular and elite support for constitutional change built up. There is no reason to doubt that some of them, like Donald Dewar, had indeed been won over to the idea of hardy political decentralisation.

From a theoretical point of view, however, Labour in its « new » incarnation, although now officially the party of constitutional *movement* alongside the Liberal Democrats, had made little progress in rethinking the national question and remained as hostile as ever to expressions of nationalism which called into question the centrality or the future of the British state. Thus Anthony Giddens, who has something to say about almost everything in his strangely influential book, *Beyond Left and Right* (1994), pays scant attention to what he calls « local nationalisms » which he sees as a preoccupying symptom of backward reactions to the globalization process which in the main he embraces as a vector of modernization. Blair's presentation of devolution in *New Britain*, after the singing the praise of its own modernism, insists on the unionist dimension of Labour's devolution proposals (a position echoed in Scotland by George Robertson) and makes it clear where sovereignty will ultimately lie, even after the transfer of powers has been enacted : « The sovereignty of the UK parliament will remain undiminished ».

Nonetheless, and in contradistinction to the devolution proposals of the Wilson-Callaghan period, once in office in 1997 the New Labour machine moved quickly and resolutely to implement its 1997 electoral campaign proposals, carrying an admittedly much-cowed party machine and rank-and-file with it. The devolution proposals – largely inspired as far as Scotland was concerned by the detailed demands of the Constitutional Convention – were rapidly put to the vote through a referendum in September 1997, which showed substantial support for change in Scotland and an as yet lukewarm approval of the creation of a relatively weak assembly in Wales⁵. The legislation that was then to lead to the creation of the Scottish parliament and the Welsh assembly in 1999 showed the lengths to which Labour was willing to go to preserve support for its changes. The introduction of proportional representation, in particular, which self-evidently was in contradiction with Labour's immediate interests and condemned the party to coalition government in Scotland, illustrates this quite clearly.

Conclusion: New Labour radicalism or pusillanimous bricolage

In the debate that has accompanied the constitutional reforms of the successive New Labour governments since 1997, two polar positions have emerged. On the one hand, those who see these changes as indicators of the radicality of the New Labour government and of its resolute attachment to modernisation. Vernon Bogdanor is one of the most distinguished representatives of this view. He has argued in a text published at the end of the first New Labour term of government that

« The crucial consequence of the reforms of the Blair era, however, is to give us, for the first time in our history, a constitution; and, moreover, a constitution which is quasi-federal in nature. It can hardly be denied that this is a revolutionary change. » (Bogdanor 2001 : 146)

This indeed is hardly denied by Peter Mandelson, garrulous as ever, who in his *The Blair*

⁵ 74,3% of voters expressed their support for a Scottish parliament in the referendum of the 11th of September 1997 (and 63,5% were in favour of tax-raising powers for the new parliament) whereas a week later in Wales only 50.1% voted in favour of the proposed assembly.

Revolution Revisited describes Blair's « constitutional revolution » as « the most extensive programme of constitutional modernisation for more than a century – indeed, since the Great Reform Act of 1832 » and adds significantly « which appears to have put to rest the serious nationalist threat in Scotland and, to a lesser extent, in Wales » (Mandelson 2002 : xxii)

At the other end of the spectrum, Tom Nairn, in *After Britain* (2000) and more recently in his introduction to the 2006 re-edition of *The Break-up of Britain*, has argued that the Canute-like reforms of New Labour are unlikely to hold back the rising tide of nationalism. Nothing more than a clumsy bricolage and a last-ditch attempt to save the unsaveable :

Underneath the present charades of apostasy and self-contempt, those deeper currents that have carried the break-up so far are not slackening, but acquiring new force. Just as the tide in favour of home rule built up during the eighteen years of Conservative Unionism, so the new tide seeking real independence is forming itself beneath the façade of Blairism. It will rise into the spaces left by New Labour's collapse, and by the increasing misfortunes of the old Union state. (Nairn 2006 : introduction)

Of the two positions, Nairn's seems to be much closer to the real movement of history – indeed there is something strangely unhistorical in Bogdanor's account. As if the massive shift in public and elite opinion, especially in Scotland, in the 1980s and early 1990s, were no more than the background music to Blairite reforms. However, Nairn's own position returns us to a central issue only touched upon earlier in this paper : the fact that the anti-Thatcherite resistance of the 1980s, strong and popular in both Scotland and Wales resulted essentially in a movement in favour of a new constitutional set-up, leaving the rest of the Thatcherite legacy intact. Perhaps Lewis Grassie Gibbon was not entirely wrong when, looking to a self-governing future for Scotland, he stated with heavy irony :

It will profit Glasgow's hundred and fifty thousand slum-dwellers so much to know that they are being starved and brutalized by Labour Exchanges and Public Assistance Committees staffed exclusively by Gaelic-speaking, haggis-eating Scots in saffron kilts and tongued brogues full of such Scottish ideals as those which kept men chained as slaves in Fifeshire mines a century or so ago. (Grassie Gibbon 1934 : 146)

The labour exchanges and public assistance committees have of course disappeared from neoliberal Scotland, and the forms of domination of the poor have indeed been modernized by New Labour's Welfare to Work programmes. But one might be excused for believing that the underlying issue raised here by Grassie Gibbon remains painfully relevant.

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