

The 2014 Scottish Referendum and the Nationalism-Social Policy Nexus: A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract: During the campaign leading to the 2014 Scottish referendum on independence, social policy issues played a central role. This article explains the nature of Scottish nationalist mobilization and its relationship with social policy, from the drive for “home rule” in the 1980s and early-mid 1990s to the 2014 referendum campaign. As shown, the idea that Scotland must become independent from the United Kingdom to protect its more progressive nation from social policy retrenchment originating from the central (British) government appeared long before the 2014 referendum campaign. In fact, the march towards devolution in the 1980s and early to mid-1990s had featured a similar argument about how political autonomy could enable Scots to make social policy better suited to their social democratic preferences. Through a comparison with the 1980 and 1995 Québec referendums on sovereignty, this article offers a comparative and historical perspective on the social policy debate surrounding the 2014 Scottish referendum while focusing primarily on health care and old-age pensions.

Keywords: Nationalism; referendum; independence; social policy; Scotland; Québec

Résumé:

Au cours de la campagne référendaire de 2014 au sujet de l'indépendance écossaise, les questions de protection sociale jouèrent un rôle central. Cet article explore la nature de la mobilisation nationaliste écossaise et sa relation avec la protection sociale, du mouvement des années 1980 et de la première moitié des années 1990 en faveur de l'“autonomie interne” (*home rule*) jusqu'à la campagne référendaire de 2014. Tel que souligné, l'idée que l'Écosse devrait devenir indépendante du Royaume-Uni pour protéger sa nation plus progressiste contre les politiques d'austérité du gouvernement central (britannique) émergea bien avant la campagne référendaire de 2014. En fait, la marche vers la décentralisation des années 1980 et de la première moitié des années 1990 s'accompagna d'un argument similaire concernant la manière dont l'autonomie politique pourrait permettre aux Écossais de développer des politiques sociales mieux adaptées à leurs préférences sociales démocratiques. À travers une comparaison avec les référendums québécois sur la souveraineté de 1980 et 1995, cet article propose une perspective historique et comparative sur le débat au sujet de la protection sociale qui entoura le référendum écossais de 2014 tout en mettant principalement l'accent sur les soins de santé et les pensions de vieillesse.

Mots-clé: nationalisme; référendum; indépendance; protection sociale; Écosse; Québec

Introduction

“It’s now well understood that voting yes will allow us to protect Scotland's National Health Service (NHS) from the threat to budgets here as a consequence of the cult of austerity and privatisation being forced on the NHS in England.” (quoted in Carrell, 2014) These words were spoken by Scottish First Minister and Scottish National Party (SNP) leader, Alex Salmond, about a month before the 2014 referendum on Scotland’s independence. They constituted a central argument in the Yes campaign for Scottish independence, especially in the last stretch of the campaign when secessionist leaders were desperately trying to push their option over the 50 per cent + 1 of the vote they needed.

The idea that Scotland had to become independent from the United Kingdom to protect its more progressive nation from neoliberalism and social policy retrenchment originating in the central British government did not make its first appearance in the 2014 referendum campaign. In fact, the march towards devolution in the 1980s and early to mid-1990s had featured a similar argument about how political autonomy could enable Scots to make public policy, and especially social policy, better suited to their social democratic preferences. Therefore, a pattern seems to exist in contemporary Scottish nationalist mobilization whereby references to social policy are made to persuade Scots to support increased political autonomy from the British state. In the absence of significant linguistic or religious differences, Scottish nationalist leaders have used the apparent connection between their community and progressive values on health care and social policy more generally to mobilize the population in favour of greater autonomy and, during the 2014 referendum campaign, independence.

This emphasis on social policy in nationalist mobilization is not unique to Scotland and the case of Québec offers an instructive comparative perspective. The Parti québécois (PQ) has long promoted progressive social policy as part of the province's identity and argued that independence would allow the province to further work on social justice. In the broad context of a national identity defined in part by progressive positions on redistribution and social protection, specific policies and programs such as drug insurance, affordable daycare, and university tuition fees lower than most everywhere in the country have become, in the last couple of decades, symbols of Québec's national distinctiveness. Contrary to the situation prevailing in Scotland in the 2014, however, social policy issues played a relatively limited role in both the 1980 and 1995 Québec sovereignty referendums (Béland and Lecours, 2008). In 1980, Québec nationalism was driven by the liberation and emancipation of a French-speaking people and, indeed, by the notion of creating a social-democratic country, but without the type of specific references that would develop beginning in the late 1990s, when "*l'État social*" became synonymous with "*l'État national*." In 1995, mobilization for a "yes" vote during the referendum campaign centred on the failure of the Meech and Charlottetown Accords, interpreted by sovereigntist leaders as a rejection of Québec by the rest of the country.

In this context, one cannot assume that social policy, even when it becomes part of a nation-building project at the sub-state level as is the case in Québec, will become a central component of a referendum campaign, as was the case in 2014 Scotland. The objective of this article is to explain why social policy became so central to both nation-building and referendum politics in Scotland, in contrast with the Québec experience where the link between nation-building and social policy did not shape the referendums

nearly as much as in Scotland. As argued, with the backdrop of a coalition government led by a Conservative Party extremely unpopular in Scotland, issues of redistribution and social justice became central aspects of the political discourse of both the “Yes Scotland” and the “Better Together” campaigns.

The article is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the interaction between nationalism and social policy and explains why it can serve as an important point of reference in nationalist mobilization processes. The second section looks at the two main instances of contemporary nationalist mobilization in Scotland, the drive for “home rule” and the 2014 campaign leading up to the 18 September referendum on independence. The last section features a comparative discussion of Québécois nationalism and the experience of sovereignty referendums in the province, which contrasts with that of Scotland.

We focus on two major social policy issues in our analysis of the 2014 referendum campaign to shed light on the connection between nationalism and social policy in Scotland: health care and public pensions. The rationale for this selection is twofold. First, these two policy areas affect either the population as a whole (health care) or a major demographic group (public pensions). This makes them prominent social policy fields for voters and politicians alike. Second, there are important differences in the institutional governance of these policies: health care is a devolved matter while public pensions represent a reserved matter.¹ As we shall see, the differentiated nature of social policy-making in Scotland under devolution did not prevent the mobilization of the nationalism-social policy nexus. The following analysis begins with health care, with a focus on the NHS, a devolved area of social policy (Greer, 2004). The NHS was

particularly central to the referendum campaign in part because it was used by “Yes Scotland” to make broader arguments about the type of social policies Scots were said to want and that independence could make possible. Then, we move to public pensions, which were less of a symbolic issue than the future of the NHS in the campaign, but were nevertheless discussed as a key social policy whose future, according to both sides, would be drastically different in an independent Scotland. Overall, our goal is to analyze the discourse of both “Yes Scotland” and “Better Together” around these policies rather than to assess how social policy arguments impacted public opinion and voting behaviour.

Nationalist Mobilization and Social Policy

Nationalism and the state are inextricably linked (Breuilly, 1994). The origins of the state, at least from the modernist perspective,² lie in processes of state-building that involved centralization, bureaucratization (Gellner, 1982), and the development of public policies aimed at a territorially-circumscribed population. The development of such public policies was central to nation-building. Compulsory public education, for example, worked towards linguistic and cultural homogenization, as well as the diffusion of symbols and narratives that were framed as national (Weber, 1976).

In the post-War War II era, the development and expansion of the modern welfare state further contributed to the strengthening of the (statewide) nation. For instance, in countries with universal social programs such as the UK and Canada, the pooling of fiscal resources and economic risks at a (state) national level encouraged solidarity within the boundaries of the state, as well as loyalty towards that state. The national community

also became a community of protection and redistribution where social policies such as public health care coverage, old-age pensions, employment insurance, and social assistance represented tangible benefits of inclusion in the nation (McEwen, 2006). Many of these social programs came to be central symbols of nationhood in their respective countries (Fierlbeck, 2011). Social policy has therefore played an important role in the development and consolidation of (state) national identities in advanced industrialized countries, particularly in multinational democracies (Gagnon and Tully, 2001). This is the case in the Canada, where federal social policies have been used as tools of nation-building by the central government (Banting, 2005). In the United Kingdom, the post-war era also saw the development of a welfare state that built up allegiance to the British political community (McEwen, 2006).

The development of the modern welfare state offered potential for social policy to become constitutive of the nation. To some extent, the dominant values of a political community shaped, or at least became embodied in, specific social programs. Social policy was therefore more than a simple instrument in the hands of nation-builders who could use it to attract the political loyalty of citizens from minority communities. Its development for the purpose of protecting citizens against social risks also had the unintended consequence of serving a nation-building process by adding redistribution and social solidarity to the bonds uniting a territorial community.

If the connection between nationalism and social policy in the context of a (state) national community is increasingly recognized, less has been said about how nationalist movements can use social policy to stimulate territorial mobilization against the central state (Béland and Lecours, 2008). In the case of Scotland, the emphasis on social policy

is related at least in part to the fact that two factors which have stimulated and legitimized sub-state nationalist mobilization and the quest for greater autonomy or independence in a number of countries are generally absent: “hard” cultural differences (language and religion) and oppression grievances towards the state.

First, in terms of linguistic and religious differences, some authors believe that they present an inherent potential for nationhood (Connor, 1990) and that communities with these distinct traits will normally look to acquire or increase their political autonomy. Some scholars have emphasized the role of political elites in providing subjective meaning to cultural markers and in rallying the members of their communities around a collective distinctiveness (Brass, 1991). In other words, politicians struggling for power can find it attractive and effective to use the distinct language or religion of their political community as a focus for mobilization. This dynamic is virtually absent in Scotland. Cultural differences between Scotland and England are not sufficiently “hard” (that is, they are not related to language or religion) to be used for nationalist mobilization in the way typically described in the literature.³

Second, for other authors, nationalist mobilization is the result of grievances against a state that has looked to assimilate or marginalize a distinct community (Fearon and Laitin, 2003). Even in the absence of violence and repression, minority communities can find themselves in states with constitutional regimes that systematically favour the majority community. This is not the case in the United Kingdom. There are no serious Scottish accusations that the British state has purposefully worked towards the marginalization of Scotland and the assimilation of Scots. In fact, the United Kingdom is typically described as a “union-state” (Rokkan and Urwin, 1982; Keating, 2004) or a

“state of unions” (Mitchell, 2010); that is, it is described as a state that has fully acknowledged its multinational nature and resisted adopting a Jacobin model of “integration.” In this context of the British Empire, the United Kingdom also offered Scottish business important trade and market opportunities.⁴ There have been, in the last few decades, claims that Scotland is the victim of a British “democratic deficit” because several British (Conservative) governments have been formed with virtually no support from Scottish Members of Parliament. While these claims have in fact spurred contemporary nationalist mobilization in Scotland, such mobilization has not been propelled by references to deep historical grievances of oppression and assimilation against the United Kingdom.

Despite the absence of these historical grievances and of “hard” cultural differences with England, Scottish society has been effectively mobilized in the name of the nation twice in the last 30 years: in the drive for “home rule” and during the 2014 independence referendum campaign. On both occasions, social policy emerged as a crucial component of nationalist mobilization. As suggested, in Scotland, this is true not only because politicians use social policy to mobilize voters but because social programs have long helped frame the Scottish nation and the nationalist claims surrounding it.

The Drive for “Home Rule” and Social Policy

The push for “home rule” during the 1980s and early to mid-1990s should be understood in a context of growing dissatisfaction towards Conservative governments in Westminster. In the 1979 and 1983 general elections, out of 72 seats, the Conservative Party won 22 and 21 seats respectively in Scotland. These numbers were basically halved

in the two subsequent elections (the Conservatives won 10 seats in Scotland in 1987 and 11 in 1992), after a decade or so of welfare retrenchment discourse and policies that were unpopular in Scotland. The weakness of the Conservative Party in Scotland beginning in the late 1980s rendered the British government's policies even less tolerable for most Scots.

Scottish perceptions of Thatcherism and the retrenchment and privatization policies associated with it, including in the field of health and social policy reform, fed nationalism in Scotland (McCrone, 2001). As Scottish intellectual Gerry Hassan stated: "By the late 1980s, Scottishness had become to me a kind of political resistance against Thatcherism. This was imbued with a moral superiority in relation to the English. They embraced Thatcherism; we rejected it. We opposed tax cuts, privatisation, council house sales; they embraced it" (quoted in Devine and Logue, 2002: 95). Scottish Labour officials supported this perspective, arguing that constitutional change was necessary to make sure "another Mrs Thatcher can never represent the same threat" to Scotland (Brown and Alexander, 1990: 10). In other words, Labour successfully depicted itself as the promoter of Scottish autonomy against conservative social and economic policies (Hutchinson, 2001: 148). The SNP, meanwhile, developed a fairly similar social-democratic ethos and, with a very similar logic, argued that the independence of Scotland was necessary to avoid more England-based Conservative governments that would unavoidably impose their neoliberal policies on Scottish society. In this context, social policy gradually became an integral part of Scottish identity and nationalism (Béland and Lecours, 2008).

Thus, under both Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) and John Major (1990-1997), the idea that political autonomy would help Scotland protect progressive social programs against Conservative attacks emanating from Westminster became a central aspect of the territorial mobilization for “home rule,” leading to the successful 1997 referendum on devolution initiated at the beginning of the Blair years (1997-2007). During and after the Thatcher era, this political mobilization took place in the context of a redefinition of the Scottish nation in part around the pursuit of distinct social policy objectives. Civil society actors like the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) played a direct role in this reframing of Scottish nationalism around the idea of progressive social programming, in opposition to the policies then adopted at Westminster (Béland and Lecours, 2008).

At a broader level, as Gerry Mooney and Charlotte Williams (2006) noted, in Scotland, social policy issues became a central aspect of the quest for devolution. This was clear during the 1997 Scottish referendum campaign on devolution where these issues played a direct and explicit role. For instance, a group of physicians argued that devolution would allow Scotland to tackle public health issues more effectively than under the existing, more centralized system of government (Béland and Lecours, 2008). After Scots voted for devolution in 1997, the idea that political autonomy was important for Scotland, in part because of the need to implement distinct, more progressive social policy preferences remained a significant feature of Scottish nationalism, a fact that should not hide the limitations of the social policies enacted by the new Scottish parliament after devolution (Mooney and Poole, 2004). Despite these limitations, and the fact that devolution only led to limited social policy decentralization (for instance, social security remained a Westminster competency and Scotland received only limited fiscal

autonomy), the link between progressive social policy and Scottish nationalism—as a discourse and as a form of political mobilization—remained. The following analysis of the debate over social policy issues during the 2014 independence referendum in Scotland backs this claim.

The 2014 Independence Referendum Campaign

A peculiarity of the Scottish referendum is that it did not have a precipitating event. After the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, the SNP promised to organize a referendum on independence whenever it could get support from a majority of MSPs (Members of the Scottish Parliament).⁵ In the 2007 elections, the SNP won 47 seats, just edging out the Scottish Labour party, which won 46 seats, and thereafter formed a minority government. During this minority government period, the SNP launched a “National Conversation” (held between August 2007 and November 2009), whereby Scots were invited to weigh in on the constitutional future of Scotland in such forums as public meetings and internet blogs. For the SNP, this was a way to seriously engage Scots with the issue of constitutional change and with its own preferred option of independence. The best case scenario, for the nationalist party, was that it soon would be in a position to organize a referendum on Scotland’s constitutional future. The SNP received that opportunity when it won a majority of seats in the 2011 Scottish elections, thanks in large part to the increasing unpopularity of Labour. The election of a majority SNP government that year was not the product of a surge in favour of Scotland’s independence. Rather, it was both the reward for what Scots considered to be four years

of competent government and the product of on-going, and growing, dissatisfaction towards Labour.

The majority SNP government made the promotion of independence and the organization of a referendum that would allow Scots to speak on the issue its highest priority from the beginning of its mandate. In October 2012, the Scottish and British governments signed the Edinburgh agreement specifying the parameters for the referendum. The British government obtained what it wanted most: a referendum where Scots would have to say “yes” or “no” on one short straightforward question on independence.⁶ There was, in all likelihood, very little doubt in the mind of Prime Minister Cameron that the Scots would choose to stay within the United Kingdom in the context of such a choice. Through this agreement, the Scottish government removed any potential doubt on the constitutionality, legality, and legitimacy of the referendum as both parties committed to honour its result. It also was able to decide on the timing of the referendum (wanted in the last year of its mandate) and on the franchise (residents of Scotland aged 16 and 17 would be granted the right to vote in the referendum).

For the SNP, a lot of convincing and mobilizing needed to be done to reach its ultimate political objective. After all, support for independence in Scotland had rarely been over 40 per cent, and the SNP needed more than half of the votes on 18 September 2014 to say “yes” to the following question: “Should Scotland be an independent country?”

The SNP led the “Yes Scotland” side but the Scottish Green Party, the Scottish Socialist Party as well as grassroots organizations linked to the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) also played an important role in mobilizing Scottish civil society. A key

moment in the campaign was the publication in November 2013 of a “white paper” on independence (Scottish Government, 2013a). The mere publication of this paper—in Alex Salmond’s words, “the most comprehensive blueprint for an independent country ever published” (Black, 2013)—was intended by the SNP to indicate the seriousness of the independence project. As one commentator put it, “The White Paper—all 650 pages of it—wasn’t meant to be read; it was supposed to be a thudding statement declaring *We’ve thought about this and it’s going to be OK*” (Massie, 2014; italics in the original).

Still, the White Paper laid the basis for the arguments that would be developed to promote independence. The document states that: “Democracy, prosperity and fairness are the principles at the heart of the case for independence.” (The Smith Commission, 40) In fact, these three themes were at the centre of the Yes campaign’s discourse about the merits of Scotland becoming independent.

Democracy, “Yes Scotland” leaders argued, involved the right for a community to be governed by politicians it chose. From this perspective, Scotland was often in a democratic deficit within the UK because, even after devolution, some policies formulated by the British government applied to Scotland despite very few Conservative MPs (only one since 2005) having been elected by the Scottish people. The focus on democracy was embodied by the oft-repeated line: “With independence, Scotland will always get the governments we vote for” (Ibid, 42).

“Yes Scotland” leaders also sought to counter questions raised by the “Better Together” campaign about the fiscal, financial, and economic consequences of independence by assuring Scots that Scotland had enough resources to be a prosperous

independent country. “Even without North Sea oil,” the White Paper states, “Scotland’s economy produces almost exactly the same amount of output per head as the rest of the UK. With oil and gas, we produce nearly a fifth more” (Ibid, 43). Still, oil was a key element of the “Yes Scotland” campaign’s prosperity argument, as its spokespeople accused the British government of downplaying the depth of North Sea reserves.

For the SNP government, inequalities in Scotland are the direct product of Westminster policies, and independence would give the Scottish government the necessary powers to craft a fairer, more progressive, and more egalitarian society. “Within the UK,” the White Paper argues, “Scotland is part of an increasingly unequal society” (Ibid, 40). From this perspective, there exists an ideological (social-democratic) consensus in Scotland that would underpin, and be reflected by, public policy.

When combined, the three “principles” at the heart of the case for independence according to the SNP take us right into the nationalism-social policy nexus. The SNP’s discourse suggests that one of the constitutive aspects of the Scottish nation is its egalitarian nature. Above and beyond some of the differences between the SNP, the Scottish Greens, the RIC, and groupings such as Common Weal on the specific social policies most desirable in Scotland, the idea that Scots prioritize equality, and therefore broadly support significant wealth redistribution, was foremost in the characterization of Scotland put forth by “Yes Scotland.”⁷ In fact, from the nationalist perspective, there is a Scottish collective and egalitarian ethos that stands in sharp contrast to English values emphasizing individual autonomy and the market. Although survey data suggest such a sharp dichotomy is an exaggeration, this is a strong and enduring idea in Scottish politics (Béland and Lecours, 2008).⁸

The strength of this idea allowed “Yes Scotland” to make an argument about independence that linked Scottish preferences on social policy and the workings of the United Kingdom’s Westminster government. “Yes Scotland” leaders argued that, as a result of a political system where British governments can be formed without the support of a substantial numbers of Scottish MPs, the direction social policy had taken over the last few decades was incongruent with Scottish values and social policy preferences. By assuming all the policymaking powers of a sovereign state, the nationalist argument was that independence could, through the enactment of more progressive social policies, reduce inequalities in Scotland, produce a fairer society, and thus respect the genuine preferences of Scots. The “Yes Scotland” campaign took the shape of a social justice movement (Mooney and Scott, 2014). Full possession of its North Sea oil, the argument went, would allow Scotland to finance the type of social programs its people prefer. The same discourse used by several different parties and political forces to mobilize Scots in support of home rule more than two decades before served the “Yes Scotland” campaign well in its own effort to generate support for independence.

At a more specific level, the NHS was one of the “Yes Scotland” campaign’s favourite subjects in the debates leading up to the 2014 referendum. Many times, Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond raised the spectre of Westminster’s increased privatisation of the NHS as a prime motivation for Scots to vote in favour of independence. Surveys showed that a large majority of Scots opposed private companies running NHS hospitals.⁹ The NHS’ founding principle, Salmond argued, had been “scorned and betrayed by successive Westminster governments” (Carrell, 2014). An independent Scotland, the “Yes Scotland” campaign argued, was therefore necessary to preserve a

universal and publicly-funded health care system. A foremost British institution and symbol of territorial, national, and social solidarity in the United Kingdom, the NHS was used as a lightning rod for nationalist mobilization. Alex Salmond even mused about writing the NHS into the constitution of an independent Scotland. Making reference to NHS founder, Aneurin (Nye) Bevan, Salmond said: “With independence we have the golden opportunity to enshrine (Nye) Bevan’s founding principles for our National Health Service in the written constitution for Scotland—publicly-owned, clinically-driven, and freely-delivered for all— a guarantee that not only will the NHS be kept in public hands, but that the services are free to access today and will be free to access in the future” (quoted in MacNab, 2014).

Health care is a devolved matter, and Salmond’s suggestion that independence was necessary to “protect” it led “Better Together” politicians to point out that Scotland’s NHS was already under the total control of the Scottish government. But the “Yes Scotland” campaign still maintained there was a threat because privatisation in England could lead to a decrease in NHS funding for Scotland. “Better Together” countered by saying this was the “biggest lie of the referendum campaign” (Carrell, 2014). But the credibility of the British political parties of “Better Together” on this issue was not great in Scotland.¹⁰ For many people in Scotland the British Labour governments of the late 1990s and 2000s initiated the privatisation of public services (as one audience member reminded “Better Together” leader Alistair Darling in the second referendum debate). The Tory brand, of course, seemed beyond repair in Scotland while the Liberal-Democrats suffered from the party’s participation in the Conservative-led coalition government at Westminster.

Labour attempted to fight the “Yes Scotland” campaign’s nationalist mobilization over the NHS by emphasizing the progressive character of Britishness, especially among its traditional working-class constituency. Labour also attempted to challenge “Yes Scotland’s” discourse about a progressive Scotland needing to emancipate from a conservative England. In Glasgow, Labour leader Ed Miliband said:

So Alex Salmond wants to tell you a very particular story. In this story, England is conservative, while Scotland is a progressive beacon. Of course, the Scottish people have always stood out for their strongest ideals of social justice. Shown by the history of educational opportunity for all. Shown by the campaign down the years for the right to work. And the opposition to the poll tax. But my case is that these ideals for Scotland can best be realised in the United Kingdom. (...) I stand here today as a challenger against a Government in Westminster which is wrong on the economy, and has no vision for the United Kingdom. And as a challenger against a Government in Holyrood with a plan for separation which will not help the working people of Scotland. A challenger, determined to fight to make this whole country fairer. Because I am proud of what our nations have achieved together. And because I know that our best, our fairest, our most just days lie ahead of us, together.¹¹

“Alex Salmond’s story,” however, was very powerful because it tapped into the nationalism-social policy nexus that developed during the Thatcher and Major years, and helped deliver devolution. For Scots, the association between their nation and a progressive, social-democratic model meant that the prospect of more Conservative governments in Westminster represented a threat not only to what most considered appropriate social policy but also to their nationhood. In this context, the fear of what Conservatives in Westminster could do to social policy was used to counter anxieties stemming from the potential economic, financial, and fiscal consequences of independence.

Yet the idea of independence had the potential to generate social policy anxieties of its own, especially in policy areas such as public pensions, which remained entirely managed and financed by the central state, as did other elements of the social security system. In fact, devolution did not lead to the decentralization of social security in the aftermath of the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. In this context, the very fact that older people received pensions from the central state could in itself have become an argument against independence, something that happened in Canada during the campaign leading to the 1980 Québec referendum when opponents of “separation” suggested federal pensions would be threatened in the case of a “yes” vote (Béland and Lecours, 2008).

Anticipating this type of argument from the “Better Together” campaign, as early as September 2013 the Scottish Government released a 109-page long report titled *Pensions in an Independent Scotland*. As expected considering the above remarks, one of the first points made in the report was the fact that the State Pension currently paid by the central government would not be eliminated as a consequence of independence. Moreover, the report stressed that, while older people would continue to receive the equivalent of the existing State Pension in an independent Scotland, significant improvements to the public pension system would be made to strengthen their overall economic security:

With independence, we will keep the best of the existing State Pensions system, making genuine improvements where necessary. This means that the State Pension will continue as now, and planned reforms will be rolled out, including the single-tier pension. All pensions will continue to be paid as now and all accrued rights will be honoured and protected. Improvements include a commitment to apply the Triple Lock to the

single-tier pension, the Basic State Pension and Guarantee Credit initially for the term of the first independent parliament, thereby protecting the value of pensions over time. We will maintain Savings Credit to benefit low-income households (Scottish Government, 2013b: ii).

From this perspective, the issue here was not simply about preserving the status quo, as in the case of the NHS, but about improving the quality of public pension coverage available to older residents of Scotland. Pledging more generous public pensions seemed like a straightforward proposition considering the well-documented flaws of the current British public pension system: “In 2011, the UK ranked 2nd worst out of 27 EU member states for both men and women in terms of how well the state pays pensioners relative to gross average pre-retirement earnings.” (Scottish Government, 2013b: 2) Interestingly, however, perhaps in the name of fiscal prudence, the improvements to public pensions discussed in the 2013 pension report appeared incremental in nature, as the State Pension would only undertake limited changes after independence. This being said, “Yes Scotland” argued that public, state-granted pensions could be significantly improved in an independent Scotland¹², and it made at least two promises to that effect. First, it said that pension age could be lower in an independent Scotland as the UK was preparing to increase its age to 67 (Yes Edinburgh North and Leith, 2014). Second, it stated that public pensions would “rise every year in line with prices, earnings or by 2.5 per cent, whichever is the highest” (Yes Scotland, 2014).

The “Better Together” campaign came down hard on the pension proposals of the Scottish government during the referendum campaign. For instance, in July 2014, the chairman of the Labour Co-operative, MP Ian Davidson, stated that:

The only thing definite about the Scottish Government's welfare policies is uncertainty. They cannot say what their pensions bill would be. They have no credible plans to cope with the rising costs of Scotland's ageing population. They don't know what their own promises would cost. Pensioners—current and future—deserve certainty. Instead the Scottish Government offer [sic] no detail, no costings, no believable plan and what they are offering amounts to the biggest mis-selling scandal in history. Without any Scottish Government plan, no Scot is able to plan for their pension after separation. They are asking the people of Scotland to leave the strength of the pooling and sharing of resources in the UK for a future they cannot even begin to detail after separation (quoted in *The Scotsman*, 2014).

Pension and retirement decisions involve long-term planning on the part of individuals and families so uncertainty about their future is, politically, a particularly sensitive issue. In this context, it is not surprising that the “Better Together” campaign emphasized the potential pension uncertainty stemming from independence, an issue rendered especially crucial as a result of the demographic and electoral weight of older people, in Scotland as elsewhere. In this context, the “Yes Scotland” camp did its best to dispel uncertainties about the future of public pensions in a post-independence Scotland, but only with limited success.¹³ In fact, in a poll published the day before the vote asking voters if they felt old age pensions would be higher or lower in an independent Scotland, 28 per cent said they would be lower while 19 per cent thought they would be higher (30 per cent felt they would be unchanged and 22 per cent did not know) (Scotsman ICM Poll, 2014).

The discourse of “Yes Scotland” during the referendum campaign was much more centred on health care than on any other social policy. Yet, the debate over the State Pension points to the diversity of the social policy issues raised in the months preceding the 18 September vote. For example, Scotland's Deputy First Minister Nicola Sturgeon

“warned that £310m could be cut from disability welfare spending in Scotland” if the “no” side won (Carrell, 2014).

To stop the momentum of “Yes Scotland,” the leaders of the three British parties sought to formally counter its discourse on nationalism and social policy by addressing both general notions of social justice and the NHS more specifically. In their “vow,” Prime Minister David Cameron, Labour leader Ed Miliband, and leader of the Liberal Democrats, Nick Clegg, first promised that “extensive new powers for Scotland” would follow a rejection of independence. Next, they spoke to social justice, stating that “the UK exists to ensure opportunity and security for all by sharing our resources equitably.” Finally, the three leaders sought to reassure Scottish voters about the future of the NHS as they promised that “the final say on funding for the NHS would lie with the Scottish government” (Daily Record, 2014).

Fittingly, these promises were first outlined by the dominant figure of Scottish Labour politics, former British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. For Brown, a defining feature of the Union is “the pooling and sharing of resources through UK-wide pensions, UK-wide provision for social security and UK-wide National Insurance” (Brown, 2014: 239).¹⁴ Britishness, from this perspective, is defined in a very similar way as Scottishness. Overall, “the future of welfare entitlements and the welfare state more generally was deployed by both sides in the debate with YES advocating that the future of the welfare state was only secure with independence and the NO campaign claiming that independence would lead to an end to cross-UK transfers and therefore a decline in services” (Mooney and Scott, 2014).

Discussion: Scotland and Québec

In the end, Scots rejected independence by a 10 per cent margin (55 per cent to 45 per cent), despite a late surge of the “yes” option in the polls that coincided with an intensification of the discussion about the future of the NHS in Scotland. Just like during the campaign for “home rule” that began during the Thatcher years, Scottish secessionists featured the advancement of progressive values and social policies prominently in their nationalist mobilization discourse. This continuity in patterns of nationalist mobilization in Scotland highlights the enduring relationship between nationalism and social policy in Scottish politics, a relationship that is likely to strengthen as the most recent Scotland Bill enhances the powers of the Scottish Parliament over social policy.¹⁵ Moreover, with Nicola Sturgeon succeeding Alex Salmond at the head of the SNP, the political leadership of the nationalist movement in Scotland is moving towards even more social-democratic policy positions.

By contrast, in Québec, the expression of nationalism in terms of progressive social values and policies is less visible than it has been in some time. For example, the current Québec Liberal government’s austerity measures have not triggered the same type of criticism (i.e. that they undermine the very fabric of the nation) directed at Jean Charest’s ill-fated attempt at “re-engineering the state” a decade earlier. The Parti québécois’s (PQ) leader from May 2015 to May 2016, communication magnate Pierre-Karl Péladeau, also seemed to challenge the idea that nationalist politics in Québec requires the defence and promotion of a social-democratic welfare state. For instance, his strong anti-union positions during his long career in the private sector did not seem consistent with a social-democratic creed. Yet, Péladeau’s political aspirations within the

PQ necessitated an apparent change of heart as he has openly defended the province's social programs and denounced the austerity measures of the current Liberal government (Rettino-Parazalli and Fortier, 2014). These measures, it is important to note, have left the core of Québec's major social programs (publicly-funded day care, drug insurance, low university tuition fees) intact. In fact, the notion of progressive social policy remains constitutive of the nation in Québec, which limits the range of reform options available to policymakers.

Importantly, however, the simple existence of a link between national identity and social policy does not necessarily mean that social programs are to play a central role in referendum politics. As suggested above, for instance, despite the existence of this link in Québec, neither the 1980 nor the 1995 referendums on sovereignty held in the province featured social policy prominently. The contrast in the referendum experiences in Québec and Scotland owes in part to the fact that Québec presents two important components of nationalist mobilization that are virtually absent in the Scottish case.

The first component is the province's linguistic distinctiveness, which allows secessionist leaders to link the question of Québec's political future to the future of the French language. In other words, an argument for the independence of Québec can involve a reference to an issue—the vitality of French in the province—which is very important to many Quebecers but is not directly related to the welfare state.

The second component is an unresolved constitutional issue; Québec has not signed the 1982 Constitution Act, and the failure of subsequent attempts to reform the Canadian constitution in a way that would satisfy Québec represents an enduring sore point for Quebecers. Fears surrounding the future of the French language in Québec and

anger about failed constitutional efforts may have abated in the last decade or so, but they remain potential sources for nationalist mobilization.

Scotland, despite a strong national identity, lacks some of this “raw” material for nationalist mobilization, which explains the importance taken by social policy in the referendum campaign. The greater policy and fiscal autonomy enjoyed by Québec in the Canadian federation in comparison to Scotland’s situation in the United Kingdom also helps to explain why social policy was virtually absent during the 1980 and 1995 referendum campaigns.

In fact, whereas Scotland’s secessionist politicians could argue in 2014 that remaining part of the United Kingdom would make pensions and NHS Scotland vulnerable to unilateral cuts adopted in Westminster,¹⁶ the PQ is in a weaker position to make similar claims because the Québec government has near exclusive legislative control over health care and much of social welfare, in addition to opting out of the national pension program (Canada Pension Plan) and, instead, running its own earnings-related pension program (the Québec Pension Plan).

Conclusion

Drawing on the Scottish experience in the mirror of the Québec experience, this article suggests that the existence of a direct relationship between nationalism and social policy at the sub-state level only translates into a central role for welfare in referendum politics under specific circumstances. In Scotland, culture and past grievances did not present sufficient nationalist mobilization potential for “Yes Scotland” to augment support for independence so much of the campaign was focused on social programming. Not only

was an emphasis on this theme picking up on the connection between the Scottish nation and progressive positions on welfare that had developed during the Thatcher years and played a key role in the devolution movement, but it also benefitted from the politics of austerity associated with the Cameron coalition government then in power at Westminster. The “Yes Scotland” campaign was therefore able to frame the idea of a major contrast between Scottish and English values, which was already central to modern, post-Thatcher national identity in Scotland.

How potent this link between nationalism and social policy will be in the coming years, to what extent it can further shape British politics and who will benefit from it remain to be seen. The dramatic increase in SNP membership after the 2014 referendum and the triumph of the SNP at the 2015 Westminster election (and the complete collapse of Labour in Scotland) suggest that the referendum might have helped the SNP take full ownership of the nationalism and social policy nexus at the expense of both Labour and the Liberal-Democrats. More recently, the victory of the “Leave” side at the June 2016 UK referendum on membership in the European Union could be good news for the SNP’s secessionist project. In fact, voters in Scotland voted massively to stay within the EU while a majority of English voters supported the “Leave” option, which led Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon to state that a second referendum on independence was very much on the table. If another such referendum is held, the question of EU membership is likely to overshadow social policy in the argument in favour of independence. The Brexit vote provides the SNP with political ammunition not available to the PQ in Québec.

Endnotes

- ¹ Throughout this article, the term “public pensions” refers exclusively to benefits such as the State Pension that target the general population, rather than occupational pensions for public workers, which are sometimes under the responsibility of the Scottish government, as is the case for teachers and NHS workers, for example.
- ² There is an alternative school to “modernism” (sometimes called “ethno-symbolism”) in the scholarship on nationalism that gives less importance to the state in the process of nation formation (Smith, 2009).
- ³ There is a traditional Scottish accent consisting a strong rolling of the R’s, but it is uneven in the Scottish population and less audible in the younger generation (Fenton, 2015).
- ⁴ The end of the Empire may have been the first necessary structural condition for the decline of Unionism in Scotland.
- ⁵ The question of independence was rarely asked before the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. Then, independence was for some years presented as two options (within or outside the EU) amongst five (<http://whatscotlandthinks.org/search?query=&years=2004&topics=Attitudes+to+independence>).
- ⁶ The SNP considered many options in relation to the question, including presenting three options: independence, status quo and greater devolution. The British government insisted that there be no middle option.
- ⁷ At the same time, Alex Salmond insisted that an independent Scotland would be fiscally responsible, as he argued his SNP government had been.

⁸ Perhaps for this reason, when Scots are asked who should make important decisions about welfare levels in Scotland, more than twice as many Scots choose the Scottish Parliament over Westminster. See <http://whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/who-ought-to-make-most-important-decisions-for-scotland-about-welfare-benefits-6#line>

⁹ <http://whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/who-ought-to-make-most-important-decisions-for-scotland-about-welfare-benefits-6#line>

¹⁰ Scottish Labour and the Scottish Liberal-Democrats were still at that point seen as progressive forces, more in tune with Scottish values than their British counterparts.

¹¹ See Ed Miliband's speech in Glasgow:

<http://www.totalpolitics.com/print/speeches/292477/ed-milibands-speech-on-scottish-independence-in-glasgow.shtml> .

¹² Survey data suggests the argument that old-age pensions would be higher after independence seemed to resonate only very mildly with Scots

¹³ <http://www.yesscotland.net/answers/what-about-pensions-independent-scotland> and <http://www.yesscotland.net/answers/what-would-independence-mean-my-state-pension-and-credits> .

¹⁴ At the time of writing this article, there was not yet any available survey data on the impact of Brown's intervention, or of the social policy argument, on the referendum vote.

¹⁵ The Scotland Bill features the key provisions put forward by the Smith Commission (2014). It is often said by the British government that the Scotland Bill will make the Scottish Parliament the "most powerful devolved assembly in the world" (Green, 2015).

¹⁶ The initial claim by "Yes Scotland" that Westminster could reform NHS Scotland towards greater privatization was dubious considering it is a devolved matter. When

“Better Together” pointed this out, “Yes Scotland” politicians replied that cuts in NHS funding would unavoidably lead to forced structural reforms for NHS Scotland. In fact, the Barnett formula works in such a way that spending decisions for England can affect funding for Scotland. If Westminster chose to implement important cuts in NHS funding for England, funding for the NHS in Scotland would also be reduced.

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