

Institutional Change and Identity Shift: The Case of Contemporary Scotland

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Abstract

Many studies of state fragmentation and secession emphasize the importance of institutions in these dynamics. Devolved or federal institutions may be intended to placate national sentiments at the regional level, but they often provide a foundation for attempts at secession or independence. Much of the literature on these dynamics emphasizes the material and network resources and infrastructure that sub-state institutions can provide for independence movements. Their discursive and symbolic resources have been less examined. This contribution outlines how the 1997 devolution for Scotland has provided an institutional resource for the Scottish National Movement. However, the institutions of devolution did not only serve as material and infrastructural resource. They also provided a symbolic and ideational context for rhetorical and discursive disputes with the Conservative-Liberal Democrat British government established in Westminster in 2010. The Scottish case is particularly useful to illustrate both the possibilities and limits of these discursive contestations. The Scottish example shows how identities are solidified in the process of contention (Tilly 2008) – thus, whatever the referendum outcome in 2014, Scottish-ness is strengthened by these events.

When the UK government of Tony Blair moved to create devolved government for Scotland in 1997, it did not expect that years later this institutional platform might produce a challenge to the existence of the United Kingdom itself. Devolution was intended by Blair's Labour government as part of a move to placate the Scottish Nationalists (Curtice 2009: 55). In September of 1997, a successful referendum confirmed the foundation of a Scottish parliament, now an active institution at Holyrood in Edinburgh. In the 15 years since, the

Scottish National Party (SNP) has increased its power and support, partly due to its platform within the new Scottish Parliament (Mitchell 2009: 31). Following the Scottish elections in 2007 and then codified in 2011, it even began to wrest votes and seats away from the Labour Party in Scotland. With most of Scottish voters registering preferences for leftward leaning policies, Scottish relations with the British central government in Westminster began to decay following the establishment of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in London in 2010. In the years of budget cuts and a program of austerity that followed, the SNP's view that Scotland might be better off without the rest of Britain gained increasing support among the population. By 2012, a settlement was negotiated between Westminster and Edinburgh that a referendum on Scottish independence was to be held in late 2014.

This paper examines the dynamics leading up to the decision on the referendum, to illustrate how identities are both constructed and constitutive parts of political change. The elites, British Prime Minister David Cameron and Scotland First Minister Alex Salmond, have been negotiating the specifics of the referendum, but public responses to these discussions become part of the story. Much of the literature on separatist dynamics argues that regional institutions such as the Scottish parliament can provide the resources and infrastructure for further independence (Bunce 1999; Gorenburg 2003; Roeder 2007). In this paper, I argue that in addition to material, infrastructure, and network resources, the institutions of the Scottish Parliament have also provided a symbolic and ideational basis to legitimize Scottish-ness as a political position. In addition, Scottish identity has been strengthened in the course of disputes between Scotland and Westminster since a Conservative-Liberal Democratic government took power in the British government in 2010. As noted by Charles Tilly (2008), identities are strengthened and solidified in the course of contentious action and discourse, and the Scottish case demonstrates the dynamics of this process. In this contentious discourse, Scottish identity has been clarified in terms of what it is *not*, in its rejection of the rightward-leaning policies of the post-2010 Westminster government.

In the discussion that follows, I first outline the content of the 1997 reforms and give an overview of the literature on institutions as producing potential secession. I then outline how the discourse of identities in opposition is legitimized by and provides content for these institutions. I illustrate these dynamics using some of the examples from the Scotland-Westminster disputes since 2010, which show an entrenchment of identity over time that is

constituted by an intensifying discourse of difference on what it means to be Scottish or English.

An Outline of the Devolved Scottish Institutions

Scotland has been subject to English (and then British) rule since the middle ages, and was then codified with the Acts of Union of 1707. However, Scottish identity retained many independent elements, which prompted a recognition of a broader need for autonomy by the Labour government during the 1990s. The government embarked on a process of increased devolution throughout Britain, also granting additional powers to Wales and Northern Ireland. As part of this process, a referendum was held among Scottish voters in September 1997.

The referendum put two questions to Scottish voters. The first question, regarding whether a Scottish Parliament should be established, received an overwhelming yes vote of 73.4 percent. An additional question, regarding whether the Scottish government should have the powers to adjust the rate of taxes (tax-varying powers), received a yes vote of 63.5 percent (McFadden and Lazarowicz, 2000: 4). With these results, the Labour government in Westminster passed through the Scotland Act in November 1998. The Scotland Act primarily focused on the creation of the Scottish Parliament of 129 members and the Scottish Executive, comprised of the First Minister and Cabinet Secretaries. While Westminster members are referred to as MPs, members of the Scottish Parliament are referred to as MSPs.

The law-making powers of these bodies remain subordinate to the authority of the British Government and Parliament in Westminster, with just some powers transferred from Westminster to Scottish authority. The Scotland Act outlines these powers in reverse, specifying which powers *cannot* be performed by the Scottish institutions – with those not specified being those that Scotland *can* perform (McFadden and Lazarowicz, 2000: 5-6). In essence, the Scottish Parliament can only pass laws that pertain to matters within the Scottish territorial boundaries and must adhere to European legislation. A number of powers such as foreign relations and security, immigration, and many economic powers are reserved for the UK government, as well as regulatory authority over several areas. The British Parliament can also override any of the Scottish laws with which it disagrees. With these limitations, matters that are devolved include the National Health Service in Scotland, education, local government and social programs such as housing, and local economic development and transport. In addition, some matters of criminal and civil law (including the keeping of public

records) are devolved to Scotland, and there are some environmental, agricultural, and cultural powers as well (McFadden and Lazarowicz, 2000: 9-11, 17-20).

In sharp contrast to the First-Past-the-Post or Single Member District majoritarian election system that is used to elect the UK parliament, the Scottish parliament uses a Mixed Member Proportional system. In this system, 73 MSPs are elected from districts (constituencies) and 56 are chosen via proportional lists. Observers of Scottish politics have described the creation of this system as “an electoral lifeline” for the Scottish National Party (Curtice 2009: 59). As noted by Curtice, the SNP has tended to draw a broad base of support that was spread over several districts, but never in a majority. The addition of the proportional element to the electoral system allowed the SNP to begin to reflect these votes in seats in the parliament, rather than having them wasted in majoritarian district elections (Curtice 2009: 56-60). In addition, the creation of the Scottish Parliament has meant that the SNP could become more than a party in constant opposition to Westminster – they could also now achieve constructive goals (Mitchell 2009: 33; Mackay 2009: 79-80).

While the first two Scottish Parliament elections in 1999 and 2003 produced Labour majorities, the SNP dominated the 2007 and 2011 elections, demonstrating its upward trend in popularity. Interestingly, those considering themselves as “Scottish not British” began to demonstrate increasing support for the SNP during this time, showing an increase of those who linked the party with a Scottish identity. Of those with a primary Scottish identity, 43 percent voted for the SNP in 1999 – but by 2007, 58 percent voted for the SNP. In addition, among those voting for the SNP in 2007, 78 percent supported an agenda of Scottish independence, an increase from 62 percent in 1999 and 58 percent in 2003 (Curtice 2009: 63, 64). These figures demonstrate both an increase in support for the SNP party over time, and a simultaneous increase among its supporters for its agenda of independence.¹ Several theorists of secession and independence movements would attribute this increase in support for the party and its program to the new institutional base, as providing resources and institutional support, as outlined below.

Devolved Institutions, Material and Network Resources, and Infrastructure

Devolved institutions of government for specific national groups are intended to provide these groups with institutions of self-government, or an ability to regulate some of their own affairs. This reasoning is that this type of inclusion should make them more involved in the workings of the general state, and thus should placate potential desires for independence or secession (Heintze 1998; Rothchild and Hartzell 1999). While this

reasonable position has achieved a great deal of support within the theoretical as well as the policy community, many have observed that in practice, such institutions can serve as a platform for additional separatism (Mozaffar and Scarritt 1999; Cornell 2002; Jenne 2006).

There are a few reasons that devolved institutions might provide a platform for further separatism. First, institutions can serve as material resources and infrastructure for further claims of independence from the state. As outlined by Bunce, the federations of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia all fragmented along the lines of their devolved institutions, because the local units were able to collect and hold the resources that “leaked” out of the center to these regional units (Bunce 1999: 39). Second, institutions can serve as network resources that guide the type of networks and the communication that can be fostered for mobilizations (Gorenburg 2003: 3). This type of institutional infrastructure also concentrated mobilization activities within the local unit rather than across the broader state (Bunce 1999: 39). Devolved institutions thus create the material, network, and infrastructural platform for both elites and masses to mobilize behind a national identity.

These accounts provide solid a solid understanding of the structural conditions that can foster mobilizations. But how do the dynamics of identity mobilizations emerge? Is it possible to trace changes in the content of these ideas? As outlined by Roeder in his “segmental institutions thesis,” in addition to these structural conditions there must be identities, grievances, and a willingness of masses to engage in mobilization. Each of these components must be present and “mutually reinforcing.” In his view, it is institutions that achieve the alignment of these components, providing a structure to channel identities, grievances, and the will to mobilize together behind the focus of a national goal (Roeder 2007: 9-10). He notes that devolved units, or “segment-states,” thus “create a nurturing environment for nationalist machines to emerge before independence” (Roeder 2007: 84).

Have Scotland’s devolved institutions been able to channel identities, grievances, and the will to mobilize? An answer to this question would require some attention to the *content of what is being said* about Scotland, and about its relationship with the rest of Britain. Some theoretical background for an examination of this discourse is outlined below.

Discourses of Opposition and Support for Independence

During the run-up to the 2007 elections, the SNP and its leader Alex Salmond began to present a positive, optimistic image. Taking an “unfailingly positive” stance regarding Scotland’s future became part of the party’s campaign strategy, assisted by some adept public relations and campaign consultants (Mackay 2009: 85). It is no accident that the party won

the most seats in the Scottish Parliament in the 2007 elections, as this optimistic image gained ground with voters. While the ideational nature of political support is under-studied in Political Science (often upstaged by materialist or rationalist approaches), the power of ideas, image, and symbols is well-understood in the hands-on world of political campaigns. A positive image is a good place to start to garner support.

However, for a campaign to be successful, it also needs a clear identity and set of goals. And in order for its identity and goals to resonate clearly among a voting population, its characteristics must be clearly visible and resonate with prior understandings and grievances (Motyl 1999). The SNP benefitted from its new positive image in the 2007 campaign, but in order to sustain momentum through the next elections, it needed a foil. It found its villain in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government that took power at Westminster in mid-2010. The SNP had difficulty carving out a true niche while the Labour government that had produced devolution remained in power in Westminster, particularly due to the left-leaning viewpoints shared between Labour and the SNP. With the advent of the Conservative-Liberal Democratic government and its policies of cuts and austerity, the SNP was able to ground its pro-Scottish rhetoric solidly in what it was *not*, establishing its clear differences from the new Westminster government. These differences go beyond the material issue of the cuts and austerity themselves. They have become part of a rhetoric of identity about a northern “country” emulating the model of the Nordic states – one that pursues a social democratic agenda funded by North Sea Oil. Grievances against Westminster include an anti-austerity and anti-Conservative rhetoric that supports this clear stance (SNP interview 2011).

In theoretical terms, the clarification of an identity requires the establishment and preservation of a boundary between categories of “us” and “them” (Abbott 2001). Identities thus emerge in a relational manner, and in opposition – it is hard to envision a category of Scots without an understanding of “not-Scots.” An understanding of identity from a relational perspective requires that instead of starting with an identity essence, we first approach the interactions of opposition that create and preserve that identity as an essence, or a bounded category (Tilly 2005: 61; Tilly 2008). Corporate identities exist as a function of the boundaries between them, and the mechanisms of creation and maintenance of those boundaries. Group-ness requires an identity of distinction, sustained by the maintenance of a boundary between individuals or groups as paired categories (Abbott 2001; Tilly, 2005; Tilly 2008). For example, states can be best understood as projects that emerge relationally, with some being more successful state projects than others (Jackson and Nexon 1999). Similarly,

national groups as bounded categories with certain goals can be understood as successful or less successful projects in terms of their boundary creation and maintenance over time. These dynamics are the essence of identity construction – construction is not an abstract phenomena, but emerges through relational interactions.

These relational insights help to demonstrate how it is that identities can increase or decrease in salience over time, with the unfolding of interactions that increase or decrease the strength of the boundary. In the course of public discussion and debate, some rhetorical focal points recur and become anchors for these identity boundaries. The concept of “rhetorical commonplaces” (Jackson 2006) is used to denote these stable focal points, which can be used to legitimize desired political goals. For example, the notion of Scotland as emulating a Nordic model is one such rhetorical commonplace, deployed by the SNP but also resonating among many ordinary Scots. As outlined by Jackson, the effort to establish and anchor rhetorical commonplaces becomes the nature of political struggle – “legitimation contests” for public support between those deploying different goals (Jackson 2006: 253).

A quite successful rhetorical commonplace among many Scots is the notion that the UK government in Westminster (and the English) take a patronizing attitude toward Scotland. As noted by Condor and Abell following their repeat interviews with 60 Scottish participants, a recurrent theme in discussions with Scots was a resentment of what they perceive as an unjustified “superior” attitude by the English (Condor and Abell 2006: 61-62). This perspective on a patronizing attitude experienced by Scots from the “South” also emerged quickly in conversations with the author while in Edinburgh.² This rhetorical commonplace is expertly navigated by Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond in his dealings with the Westminster government, in deploying language that refers to a resentment about London telling Scotland what it should do. The author’s interactions with a few London-based academics on the Scotland issue has revealed that Scottish perceptions of a patronizing attitude are actually evident in much of the London-based discourse.³ It could perhaps be the case that among the “English” or the London-based policy community, a rhetorical commonplace of Scotland needing its hand in governance has been established. But such an idea does not ring well with Scots.

The arena in which these focal points for identity are presented is that of the media. Interactions between the Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond and the Westminster government made headlines throughout 2010-12, with most media discussions adding to a boundary between Scottish and English / British identity. The media portrayal of most of the exchanges as acrimonious has conveyed to the public that a “side” is to be chosen in these

discussions, and that opinions must be formed. But individuals are constrained in formulating these choices and opinions, illustrating that persuasion has its limits (Tilly 2008). A person in Scotland with a Scottish accent cannot suddenly become English any more than someone born in London or Bristol to English parents could suddenly become a strong Scottish nationalist. In putting forth boundary-solidifying positions, elites on both sides of the discussion have some limits to the breadth of potential audiences that they might mobilize. Therefore, a strategy of emphasizing difference in their discussions, or the depth and salience of these identities, is more evident.

The Scottish leader Alex Salmond's attempts to present Scotland as a unique identity deserving of independence is countered by a Westminster rhetoric of Britain as a heroic, historical, unitary territory. Each side is attempting to create a hegemony with their own particular narrative – and such discursive hegemonic projects constitute the nature of politics (Finlayson 2012: 752-54; Bacon 2012). As noted by Finlayson, the role of argument in politics is often overlooked by theorists eager to attribute rationality and material incentives to what political actors do. But politicians themselves are quite aware of the crucial role of argument and persuasion in moving towards their political goals (Finlayson 2012: 752, 758).

These theoretical foundations illustrate how rhetoric and discourse can be traced to illustrate the rise and decline of the Scottish boundary-creation project. The post-2010 rhetoric between the Scottish government and Westminster provides a useful demonstration of these dynamics at work. The evidence in the section that follows reveals that identity salience increases when Westminster and Edinburgh are in opposition, and weakens somewhat when Westminster gives in to or supports Scottish claims.

Post-2010 Examples of Oppositional Discourse: Scotland and the Conservatives

The post-2010 discussions between Scotland and the British government have been organized around a few primary themes. Each of these themes has become a set of talking points for both the Scottish and the British positions – allowing each side to deploy and reference its own rhetorical commonplaces. To illustrate these dynamics in action, this section sketches how rhetoric and discourse constitute the debate. The themes that follow sketch some of the key motifs of the different narrative accounts (Bacon 2012) that constitute the boundary between Scottish-ness and British-ness or English-ness. Interactions that are fraught with disagreement tend to solidify Scottish-ness in relation to British-ness, clarifying the boundary between these identity categories for those absorbing the media discourse. The identity boundary is more blurred in interactions that demonstrate agreement between the two

sides. The discussion that follows will explore the following themes: the independence referendum, economic prospects for Scotland, Scottish distinctiveness from Britain, and Scotland and the European Union.

The Independence Referendum

The Scottish National Party (SNP) has pursued independence for Scotland as a longstanding goal. After two sessions of a Labour party majority in the Scottish Parliament (following the 1999 and 2003 Scottish elections), the SNP gained a 1-seat victory over Labour in the Scottish Parliament elections in 2007. After a rather successful period of governance between 2007 and 2011 with just this slim majority, the party won a decisive victory of 69 of the 129 parliamentary seats in the May 2011 elections. The SNP then perceived a mandate to openly pursue its independence agenda, and talk of a referendum on independence soon followed (SNP interview 2011).

A debate between the Scottish and UK governments over the conduct of the referendum became especially visible in the media by early 2012. The UK Prime Minister David Cameron put forth statements that if Scotland was indeed serious about holding a referendum on independence, it should do so quickly within the next 18 months (by mid-2013). The Scottish government response included an accusation that Westminster was “trying to dictate the future for the Scottish people,” (Curtis 2012) a reference to the rhetorical commonplace for Scots about British pretensions of superiority toward them. Scottish First Minister Salmond expertly used this moment, making a statement in the Scottish Parliament that: “The terms of the referendum are for the Scottish Parliament and the people of Scotland to decide,” proposing that Scotland and England should be viewed as “equal partners” (Burns and Cowell 2012). Poll results at that time (and into 2013) showed that a referendum would not pass, perhaps one of the main reasons behind the Prime Minister Cameron’s push for a quicker process. For the Scottish side, a slow upward trend in support for independence in opinion polls was one likely reason for wishing to delay the referendum (Curtis 2012). There was also a clear symbolic aspect. Early in these discussions, Salmond proposed that the referendum should be held in late 2014 to coincide with the 700-year anniversary of a battle for Scottish independence – the Battle of Bannockburn (Watt 2012).⁴

Settling the question for the referendum was a complex affair. Initially, Salmond proposed that there might be two potential questions – one on full Scottish independence, and one on increased powers for Scotland within the framework of Britain. This second question on maximum devolution, or “devo-max,” was understood by most analysts to be a kind of

insurance policy for the SNP if they could not attain a majority “yes” vote on a question for full independence. British Prime Minister Cameron diligently pushed the position that only one question on full independence should be allowed. Indeed, on this aspect Cameron found the SNP’s weak flank, as the two-question position revealed the SNP’s worries about not being able to achieve enough support for actual independence. In the end, the “devo-max” question did not survive the referendum negotiations. By the autumn of 2012, one question was decided upon, referring simply to independence: “Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?” (Carrell 2012a, 2012d; Ascherson 2012; Mitchell 2012; Watt and Carrell 2012). The date set for the referendum is September 18, 2014, reflecting the wishes of the SNP with regard to its timing.

Scotland’s Economic and Social Prospects

The Westminster government has been keen to argue that an independent Scotland would no longer benefit from subsidies that it receives from the distribution of tax revenues. This rhetorical commonplace references the UK’s prosperous Southeast region, including London’s financial center, as providing the support for Scottish social programs – support that would be lost in the event of independence (Carrell 2012c). The SNP response frequently involves revenues from North Sea Oil, arguing that if Scotland were able to use all of these oil revenues, it could sustain a social democracy in the style of Norway (SNP interview 2011; Burns and Cowell 2012; Salmond 2012; McFadyen 2012). Comparisons of Scotland to other small, independent countries are frequent in this line of discussion (Finlay 2009: 28).

Before the European Union’s economic crisis, the notion that Scotland might use the Euro as its currency was a more attractive idea than it began to be around 2011 and 2012. Discussions over the independence referendum thus also began to invoke the currency question – if Scotland were to leave the British union, what currency would it use? The Scottish rhetoric on the currency issue began to reflect the notion that Scottish independence would not require a change of currency, and that the pound could still be used (Salmond 2012). The Westminster government quickly attacked this position, stating that independence would indeed require a separate currency, and that the British government would not allow the pound to be used by a newly-independent Scotland (Wright 2012). Such discussions were especially notable in light of the existence of Scottish pound banknotes, as outlined in the section on Scottish distinctiveness below.

One of the most distinct social differences between Scotland and the rest of the UK is the fact that Scottish students do not pay tuition fees to attend Scottish universities. However,

English students attending universities in Scotland must pay such fees. Scotland's relationship with the European Union has translated into a policy that EU students receive the same educational benefits as Scottish students. As a result, English or other UK students must pay increasingly high university tuition fees for universities in Scotland, while Scottish and EU students do not pay such fees.⁵ Resentment over this issue by English students has produced an on-going dispute and court case – and has raised questions regarding the cost of sustaining this policy. In spite of the justice and financial aspects involved, the prevalence of this issue in Scottish rhetoric illustrates it as linked to an oppositional identity with Westminster. One of the most visible moves of the post-2010 Conservative-Liberal Democrat government was to triple the amount of tuition fees that undergraduates must pay per year. Scottish resistance to implementing this policy is made possible by the Scottish Parliament's powers over education – and the will to resist fees for Scottish students is related to an identity stance that resists the free-market emphasis of the post-2010 UK government (Benn 2012).

Scottish Distinctiveness from Britain

One of the first things a visitor to Scotland will notice is the use of Scottish pound banknotes. Such banknotes are for all practical purposes the same as those used in London, but they include Scottish iconography that is intended to reflect a distinct Scottish identity (Penrose and Cumming 2011). Separate pound banknotes are not exclusive to Scotland – Northern Ireland also has its own pound notes with local iconography. While both sets of banknotes are officially legal tender in the rest of the UK, in practice an attempt to spend them in London may result in the payer being asked to produce “less dodgy” notes, or those without these local iconographies.

Other symbols of a distinct Scottish identity have become prevalent in everyday life throughout the UK in an increasing fashion since 1997. The British Broadcasting Company (BBC) includes in its programming a broadcast of proceedings from the Scottish Parliament. Any UK resident who is skipping through the television listings is thus passively reminded of Scotland's distinct political identity. The Scottish government also wholeheartedly embraced the release of the Disney film “Brave” in 2012. The film, which depicts a Scottish-accented heroine in the context of medieval Scotland, was described as a “showcase for Scotland” that would add to Scottish tourism (Scottish Government, ‘Brave’, 2012). In addition to these examples of a symbolic media presence, interviews, speeches, and conversations reveal persistent references to Scotland's similarity with the Nordic countries – in terms of national

character, culture, and support for left-leaning economic and social policies (SNP interview 2011; Salmond 2012).

Cultural resources, however, are not the exclusive property of Scotland. The successful Olympic Games in London during the summer of 2012 have also been deployed in the struggle for Scottish identity. Arguing against Scottish independence, former (Labour) Prime Minister Gordon Brown invoked the Olympics as an example of what the countries could achieve together with a pooling of resources and effort (Higgins and Carrell 2012). The seemingly inane nature of these discussions in the media demonstrates how the independence debate is grounded in everyday discourse, with attempts made regularly by both sides to push their rhetorical arguments.

Scotland and the European Union

One of Scotland's longstanding rhetorical commonplaces has been its close relationship to EU institutions. Given the persistent voices of anti-EU forces within other parts of the UK, Scotland's identity along these lines was reasonably easy to establish as a rhetorical commonplace. Its role as an EU-friendly country was supported in practice by the Scottish government's maintenance of its agreement to treat EU students similarly to Scottish students in terms of free tuition at Scottish universities. In addition, Scotland maintained a favourable position toward the Euro as a potential currency long after the crisis began to turn this support into a potential liability.

In light of its support for the EU as a rhetorical device, Scotland had envisioned that with potential independence it would be granted automatic membership within the EU. It thus came as a strong blow to its position that the president of the European Commission called this potential membership into question in September 2012. Declaring that new states would not be granted automatic membership but would have to apply, EC President Barroso (from Portugal) appeared to discredit the SNP position that there would be few risks resulting from independence. This statement was later backed up by a Spanish official and by other officials in Brussels, codifying this blow to Scottish aspirations (Carrell 2012b; Tremlett and Carrell 2012; Maddox 2012). The fact that Spain is dealing with its own simultaneous separatist movement in Catalonia might be one reason behind its adamant stance on this matter. In taking a hard line toward Scottish aspirations, the Spanish government can send a rhetorical message to quell the aspirations of the Catalan movement within its own borders.

Conclusions: Rhetorical Commonplaces and Competition via Discourse

The four areas sketched above illustrate how competing rhetorical commonplaces constitute the battle for hearts and minds on the issue of Scottish independence. The 2014 referendum may push the boundaries of these dynamics, because as of this writing polls of Scottish voters do not show majority support for a “yes” vote on independence. At the same time, the increasing power of the SNP in terms of vote share and its successful deployment of rhetorical arguments is an indicator that the issue of Scottish independence will not easily disappear – even in light of a negative referendum result. The example of Quebec illustrates the longevity of separatist goals, even after two failed independence referenda.

Scotland, Quebec, and Catalonia all received ample media attention for their separatist movements in 2012. Each of these movements has an institutional foundation. But because institutions are relatively stable, the source of *change* over the past few years must be identified elsewhere. In the Scottish example, the SNP was able to increase its support especially after the advent of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat government in Westminster in 2010. Since that time, interactions between Scotland and Westminster have taken on an acrimonious character that has solidified the Scottish identity in opposition to that of the UK central government. Are similar dynamics at play in Quebec in Catalonia, with these regional identities being entrenched in opposition to their central governments? Might such oppositions easily emerge during economic downturns, when it might be easier to convince publics to believe in local solutions? Or might the answer lie in a more general discursive shift that favors decentralized government or federal structures? An examination of the discursive identities that comprise these discussions provides a promising avenue for future research.

¹ However, it is of note that not only SNP supporters would vote in an independence referendum, and general polls as of this writing in late 2013 do not show support for a “yes” vote for independence.

² The author’s American accent perhaps marks this as “safe” conversational territory.

³ Statements have included language such as: “They [Scots] really have no idea what they are asking,” or “They really need to realize that...”.

⁴ He was generally successful in this effort, with the referendum scheduled for September 18, 2014.

⁵ While attractive from a social perspective, staff at Scottish universities have noted that this policy has produced ever-reduced funding for universities there.

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