

## **The British Coalition Government, Scotland and Independence**

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Paper presented to the Australian Political Science Association Conference,  
University of Sydney 28<sup>th</sup> September- 1<sup>st</sup> October 2014.

Coalition politics while new, novel and unique in the village of Westminster in 2010 had already been well-established governing forms, and are actually 'par for the course' and the anticipated governmental outcome post-election in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In each of these countries post-devolution constitutional rules and electoral procedures all contain within them provision for a more proportional legislature. Despite coalition politics being the anticipated 'normal' politics in the Celtic periphery, the irony is that for the bulk of the 2010-15 period, both Scotland (SNP) and Wales (Labour) were governed by single parties, in spite of the more proportional devolved electoral systems.

Beyond Westminster, the prospect of minority government did not raise the same alarm and the political spin that accompanied the formation of the coalition - that it was a necessity due to the UK's urgent economic crisis association with spiraling public sector debt - appeared rather manufactured. In 2010 Scotland had already experienced three years of stable minority government under the SNP. In Wales Labour governed as a minority 1999-2000 and 2005-7. The Conservatives were only 21 seats short of a majority in the 650 member House of Commons, the SNP had been governing Scotland 18 seats short in a much smaller 129-member chamber. The notion of minority government being unstable was more a judgement of the internal politics of the Conservative Party and reflected the biases of the Westminster political class.

An immediate effect of the Coalition Agreement was that the five year fixed term meant that the UK General Election of 2015 would coincide with the scheduled devolved 2015 elections. Faced with the prospect of UK and devolved elections taking place simultaneously it was agreed that the elections beyond Westminster be postponed until 2016.

This chapter will outline that the UK Government coalition effect, in terms of policy impact, is less tangible in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales principally because devolution contains, as part of its design, an umbrella sheltering each territory from some parts of UK Government policy agenda they do not want to pursue. The UK Government's policies in areas like education, social and health care stop at the English border. It became clearer in each area that, post-devolution, significant political power now lies beyond Westminster and Whitehall. There was no more vivid manifestation of that than on the 18<sup>th</sup> September 2014 when the future sovereignty of Scotland was placed in the hands of the Scottish electorate for a day. The 2014 Scottish Referendum focused the spotlight very much on Scotland with the potential break-up of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Three themes are outlined in the chapter. First, the argument is made that the Coalition Government have carried on the now established tradition of increased flexibility of unionist political parties in their approaches to the Celtic periphery. Unionist flexibility has become a newly established operating code for UK Government. In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales there is a wealth of evidence of what could be termed flexible unionism. The trend continued by the Government is of the UK being an ever-looser union with increased autonomy in the Celtic nations. The UK when viewed from beyond Westminster can no longer credibly be conceived of as a unitary state, it is now quite clearly a state of asymmetrical unions. Indeed for a brief period in September 2014 referendum campaign (after the first poll showing a Yes lead), there was the rather bizarre situation of Gordon Brown, a former Prime Minister and Labour backbencher, appearing to announce a timetable for a new union in a closed doors Labour Party meeting in Midlothian, apparently with the consent of his party leader as well as the UK Prime Minister and his Deputy!

The Coalition Government inherited commitments to extend more devolutionary powers to Scotland and Wales. It has carried forward on this commitment. In Scotland it responded to the SNP's 2011 landslide election victory and commitment to holding a referendum on Scotland's membership of the United Kingdom by negotiating and agreeing on the terms of that referendum. In Wales, there was more stability, but the trajectory of travel was also enhanced autonomy. The knock-on effect of these developments in Northern Ireland meant that constitutional politics remained never far from its agenda.

A second, notable development - that has largely gone under the radar - is that the legitimacy question has been removed from politics beyond Westminster. From the 1970s politics was dominated, albeit in radically different ways, by notions of a democratic and political legitimacy deficit in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Different forms of politics, the inflexibility and weakness of the Conservative Party, as well as their perceived inflexible approach to the union, led to increasing demands for more autonomy. Post-2010 those concerns were not heard. The combination of devolution and the Liberal Democrat inclusion in government has allowed to the UK Government to claim an enhanced degree of legitimacy. The collective vote of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats add considerable weight to its governing authority throughout the UK.

Despite all the pre-devolution talk of new politics and Westminster as a negative template, as it has evolved the legislatures in both Scotland and Wales have gradually taken on more of the features of the Westminster

arrangements.<sup>1</sup> Northern Ireland, with its own distinctive arrangements, has remained something of a case apart. However, the new legislatures in all three countries are now widely accepted as the politically legitimate and democratically accountable bodies in all three countries. In Northern Ireland the armed struggle republican tradition has been sidelined with mainstream Irish republicanism now participating in relatively stable joint governance arrangements with the Democratic Unionist Party. Devolution has shifted perceptions amongst Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh electorates about where political power and authority is and should be. Despite previous projections of the doomsday scenario of a Conservative led Westminster Government facing off to nationalist led (or influenced) administrations in the periphery, intergovernmental relations have remained cordial with each side according the other a degree of respect oiled by the diplomatic skills of the UK Home and Northern Ireland civil service.

A final theme identified is the continuing constitutional tinkering that is now par for the course for British politics, with little effort made to identify any underlying principles. In Wales and Scotland two very different referendums were held. The Welsh one in 2011 was low key and labeled unnecessary.<sup>2</sup> The Scottish one in 2014, in contrast, was more fundamental and necessitated by the result at the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary Election where the SNP gained a majority of seats in Scotland. Together with the Alternative Vote Referendum and the Conservative commitment to an In-Out EU Referendum in 2017 they highlight just how quickly referendums came to be established as conventional custom and practice in a Westminster constitutional order, that until the 1970s, regarded them as alien.

The chapter has been structured around these three themes. In discussing each, reflections are made on developments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Inevitably, as a result of size and the importance of the referendum campaign to the UK's political and constitutional future, much of the discussion focuses on developments in Scotland.

### **From a Unitary State to a State of Unions?**

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<sup>1</sup> See Alan Trench 'Wales and the Westminster Model' *Parliamentary Affairs* vol.63 no.1 2010 pp. 117-133. Paul Cairney and James Johnston 'What is the Role of the Scottish Parliament?' *Scottish Parliamentary Review* vol.1 no.2 2013 <https://paulcairney.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/scottish-parliamentary-review-cairney-johnston-2.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Richard Wyn Jones and Roger Scully, *Wales Says Yes: Devolution and the 2011 Welsh Referendum*. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012).

A key theme of this chapter is that the coalition government have carried forward the trajectory of new unionism in British politics. Primarily this reflected that the constitutional conservatism of pre-1997 UK Government was eschewed in favour of carrying on the trajectory of post-1997 territorial governance. Devolution has proved to be an ongoing process rather than a series of singular events in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

The 2012 Scotland Act<sup>3</sup> was a grudging, incremental adjustment to the 1999 devolution arrangements. It was always unlikely to promote stability. Indeed it already had a dated feel before it even reached the statute book, with the 2012 Edinburgh Agreement between the UK and Scottish Governments on the terms of the 2014 Scottish Referendum signed in the same year.

In Wales both the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives advocated extensions to devolution at the 2011 Welsh election. The Liberal Democrats advocated policing, justice and energy projects. The Conservatives advocated part of the latter too, though it should be noted that neither party was particularly vocal about these during campaigning.<sup>4</sup>

In Northern Ireland there were no new Acts, referendums or significant constitutional developments. However, there did continue clashes around the politics of symbolism – flags, marches, language and the like. The point to be made is that the political process in each area was ongoing and much of it was independent of any coalition effect.

The Coalition Government faced Governments in all three peripheries without any Conservative or Liberal Democrat representation. Although there was potential for antagonism inter-governmental relations, aided by the diplomatic skills and culture of a shared civil service, remain remarkably smooth.

David Cameron had previously written of the union as a ‘constitutional masterstroke’.<sup>5</sup> Cameron has also challenged the ‘at best widespread ambivalence, and at worst prevailing animosity’<sup>6</sup> in England, as well as the campaigning tone of bullying Scotland into remaining in the UK for fear of

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<sup>3</sup> See Table 3.4 for details.

<sup>4</sup> McAllister, Laura and Michael Cole ‘The 2011 Welsh General Election: An Analysis of the Latest Staging Post in the Maturing of Welsh Politics’ *Parliamentary Affairs* 2014 vol.6, no.7 p.175.

<sup>5</sup> Cameron, David ‘Scots and English flourish in the union’ *The Telegraph* 11 April 2007 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3639114/Scots-and-English-flourish-in-the-Union.html>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

the consequences of going it alone, suggesting the case for the Union must also appeal to the heart. Whilst in opposition Cameron had previously acknowledged, 'small, independent and thriving economies across Europe such as Finland, Switzerland and Norway. It would be wrong to suggest Scotland could not be another successful, independent country'.<sup>7</sup>

This conciliatory tone was an implicit acknowledgement that the more inflexible unionism of the Thatcher and Major years was a mistake, and one that the Conservative Party beyond Westminster paid (and continued to pay in Scotland) a heavy electoral price for. It also reflected Conservative electoral weakness beyond its English heartlands.

The Scottish referendum campaign provides an illustrative example of the slippage of power from Westminster. The two parties of the coalition, whilst not bystanders, were supporting actors in the tribal war of attrition led by Labour on the No side and the Scottish National Party on the Yes side. David Cameron, Prime Minister and Nick Clegg, Deputy Prime Minister largely watched from the sidelines as the leading figures from the Scottish Labour Party such as Alistair Darling, Jim Murphy and Gordon Brown presented the case for remaining in the union.

The campaign itself, especially in its latter days, had an intensity rarely (if ever) seen in electoral politics in the UK. It was prone to much hyperbolic claim and counter-claim as regards the costs and benefits of the union and independence. At its height the Yes side were boasting every Scot would gain £1,000 per year, while Better Together were claiming it would cost £1400 per annum. Both were claiming a vote for them was necessary to 'save the NHS'.

**Table 3.1: The 2014 Scottish Referendum Result**

No	2,001,926	55.3%
Yes	1,617, 989	44.7%
Turnout	84.5%	

Better Together won a convincing majority 55-45 percent majority – see Table 3.2 - but were widely seen to have 'lost' the campaign despite winning the vote. Much of the Better Together campaign was labeled 'Project Fear' such as its negativity about the future of an independent Scotland with no currency union, no EU membership, banks threatening to move head offices

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

and retailers warning of price increases.<sup>8</sup> George Robertson former Labour Defence Minister and NATO chief, outlined warnings of independence being cataclysmic for not only Scottish defence and security, but the whole of the western world!<sup>9</sup> Some hyperbole referred to a Scottish decision to leave as a potential 'Suez moment' for the UK<sup>10</sup>.

There was a failure to articulate a positive future of the Union and it fell into the Yes Scotland trap of contrasting Scotland with the UK. Perhaps this was a clear example of how different the approach may have been if Gordon Brown had won in 2010. Brown, as his interventions in the campaign demonstrated, had a clear and forthright message about Scotland's place in the union. In his book *My Scotland, Our Britain a Future Worth Sharing*<sup>11</sup> he articulates how 'it was Scottish ideas of solidarity that combined with English ideas of toleration and liberty to create a union that remains greater than the sum of its parts'. The Edinburgh Agreement signed by Salmond and Cameron may have taken a different form if Brown had retained office.

The Better Together campaign was caricatured by Simon Jenkins, 'Horsemen of the apocalypse will descend from the Highlands bringing famine, terrorism and nuclear war. Vote yes, says Osborne, and old men will starve in the gutter and wee bairns erupt in boils'.<sup>12</sup> The aspiration of setting out a positive case for the union was lost and, for a brief period during the latter stages of the campaign, Scotland's union with the rest of the UK looked in serious jeopardy. Serious questions were being asked about the knock-on implications of independence or enhanced devolution for governance in Northern Ireland, Wales and the English regions. After the conclusive No Vote, Cameron immediately seized the constitutional agenda by linking

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<sup>8</sup> Julia Finch, Sarah Butler, Jill Reanor and Severin Carrell, 'Retailers under pressure to back no vote in Scottish Referendum' *The Guardian* 11 September 2014

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3639114/Scots-and-English-flourish-in-the-Union.html>

<sup>9</sup> BBC News Scotland 'Scottish Independence: Lord Robertson says Yes Vote would be cataclysmic' 8 April 2014 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-26933998>

<sup>10</sup> See James Forsyth 'Without Scotland, England will be a weedy laughing stock' *The Spectator* 5 July 2014. <http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/9253771/what-will-be-left/>

<sup>11</sup> Gordon Brown *My Scotland, Our Britain a Future Worth Sharing* (London: Simon and Schuster: 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Jenkins, Simon, 'Scotland's New Era Beckons regardless of how it votes in a stupid referendum' *The Guardian* 29 May 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/29/scotland-new-vote-referendum-era-alex-salmond>

enhanced devolution to Scotland with 'English Votes for English Laws' and the potential for constitutional reform across the whole of the UK.<sup>13</sup>

Whilst devolution sheltered the Celtic periphery from much as the coalition government's social policy agenda, the politics of austerity and welfare reform were major issues in all three countries. Indeed, one could even argue that the UK Government's welfare reform agenda had an enhanced saliency in the Celtic periphery because it remained the only area of social policy where it can have an impact (the others being largely devolved). The umbrella of devolution has meant that many of the English reforms in the fields of education, health care, housing and other areas of local government did not impact. Probably the most visible (and politically controversial) of those that did was the 'bedroom tax' – the policy aimed at encouraging a more efficient use of social housing. Like the poll tax three decades previously, its official title was replaced in popular discourse by those campaigning for its abolition. The bedroom tax and other related welfare reforms tend to be narrated as Westminster inspired cuts in welfare support in the periphery.<sup>14</sup> This reform had potentially a larger impact beyond Westminster as social housing was more prevalent. In all three countries there were devolved legislature majorities in favour of its abolition and steps were taken to delay or negate its impact.

Although more reconciliatory in terms of territorial management and constitutional politics than the previous Conservative led UK Government, the 'bread and butter' coalition programme followed a rather Thatcherite agenda of fiscal austerity, public sector retrenchment, privatization (NHS, Royal Mail) and welfare cuts. Whilst such policies undoubtedly have constituencies of support, beyond Westminster there is generally a less receptive electorate to many of these issues.

Disillusionment with Westminster politics, the corrosiveness of their austerity agenda and dislike of the Conservative party were a key strand of the Yes campaign's narrative in the Scottish referendum campaign. The coalition oversaw a period of state retrenchment and cutback that was unprecedented.

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<sup>13</sup> Oliver Wright and Heather Saul 'Scottish referendum results: David Cameron pledges plans for English votes for English laws' in January' *The Independent* 19<sup>th</sup> September 2015 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/scottish-independence/scottish-independence-referendum-results-cameron-pledges-draft-laws-on-new-powers-for-scotland-will-be-published-by-january-9742831.html>

<sup>14</sup> See for example Peter Lazenby 'This Tory-LD assault on welfare is battering Scotland and the north again' *The Guardian* 29 March 2013 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/mar/29/tory-assault-welfare-scotland-north>



Given the financial control the UK Government continues to enjoy, the location of key banking and financial institutions, it is perhaps inevitable that most of the public blame for austerity in the periphery has been directed towards London. The Yes campaign in Scotland was able to capture the disillusionment with Westminster politics and utilize it to create a momentum behind their campaign.

In Northern Ireland David Cameron referred to his alarm at the 'East European' level of dependence on the public sector. Northern Ireland since the arrival of the welfare state in 1945 has been materially dependent on Westminster. From 2010 to 2015 the DUP-Sinn Fein devolved administration presided over a £4 billion reduction in public expenditure.<sup>15</sup> On one level this was 'normal' and the austerity cuts in line with those inflicted on other devolved administrations.

However, Northern Irish politics remained somewhat dysfunctional and abnormal from the norm. The fundamentals of the nationalist-unionist divide remain institutionalized in the power-sharing arrangements at Stormont – they reflect more the communal parcelisation of power and mutual vetoes than power-sharing between the two blocs.<sup>16</sup>

By 2015 the UK was looking even less like the unitary state that pre-devolution UK politics textbooks conventionally labeled the UK. Relations with executives and legislatures in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales were continuing on the trajectory of increased detachment and autonomy.

### **A More Legitimate UK Government?**

However, the increase flexibility in their approach to the Union has allowed the UK Coalition to firmly establish its constitutional and governing authority over the whole of the UK. Being a coalition government has actually helped in this respect. The existence of the Liberal Democrats in Government has, at least dampened, the perception of an alien right-wing government imposing its will beyond Westminster. The Liberal Democrats by being part of the coalition as a junior partner enhanced its political legitimacy beyond Westminster. The awkward and potentially political illegitimate governing position the Conservative Party found itself in in the 1980s and 1990s was avoided.

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<sup>15</sup> Henry Patterson 'Unionist after Good Friday and St Andrews' *The Political Quarterly* 2010 vol.85 No.2

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 253-4.

**Table 3.2: 2010 UK General Election Result in Northern Ireland, Scotland & Wales**

*Scotland*

	% Vote	Seats
Labour	42.0 (+2.5)	41 (0)
Liberal Democrats	18.9 (-3.7)	11 (-1)
SNP	19.9 (+2.3)	6 (-1)
Conservative	16.7 (+0.9)	1 (0)

*Wales*

	% Vote	Seats
Labour	36.2 (-6.5)	26 (-4)
Liberal Democrats	20.1 (+1.7)	3 (-1)
Plaid Cymru	11.3 (-1.3)	3 (+1)
Conservative	26.1 (+4.7)	8 (+5)

*Northern Ireland*

	% Vote	Seats
Sinn Fein	25.5 (+1.2)	5
DUP	25.0 (-8.7)	8
SDLP	16.5 (-1.0)	3
UCU-NF	15.2 (-2.6)	0
Alliance	6.3 (+2.4)	1

In both Wales and Scotland the dominance of Labour remains in terms of seats at UK General Elections<sup>17</sup>. In Wales the coalition could point to 46.2 percent of the vote, but only 11 seats (out of 40). It was the Conservatives best performance in Wales since 1992 and the Liberals since the Liberal-SDP high point of 1983. In Scotland the coalition parties gained 35.6 percent of the vote, but only 12 seats (out of 59). There was an upward trajectory for both parties in Wales, as well as for the Conservatives in Scotland. Few questions were raised about their legitimacy to govern. In Northern Ireland Sinn Fein and the DUP continued to benefit from the peace dividend retaining 13 of 17 seats.

The 2010 General Election result and the 2011 devolved election results were yet again reminders of how political party dynamics and electoral politics were diverging from the Westminster party 'norm'. As Table 3.3 demonstrates the Conservatives have been in long-term decline in both Scotland and Wales, though in the latter some signs of revival have started to

<sup>17</sup> For further analysis of elections see Curtice Ch.19 of this volume.

emerge. These results, due to the proportional perversities of the first-past-the-post electoral system tend to mask the changing party political dynamics in devolved areas – Table 3.3 illustrates the changing party systems more sharply – the nationalist parties do much better in the more proportional election contests solely focused on their country.

**Table 3.3: General Elections in Wales and Scotland 1979-2010**

	Labour		Conservative		SNP/Plaid		Lib Dem <sup>18</sup>	
	Vote Seats		Vote Seats		Vote Seats		Vote Seats	
1979	%		%		%		%	
Scotland	41.5	44	31.4	22	17.3	2	9.0	3
Wales	47.0	21	32.2	11	8.1	2	10.6	1
1983								
Scotland	35.1	41	28.4	21	11.8	2	24.5	8
Wales	37.5	20	31.0	14	7.8	2	23.2	2
1987								
Scotland	42.4	50	24.0	10	11.0	3	19.4	9
Wales	45.1	24	29.5	8	7.3	3	17.9	3
1992								
Scotland	39.0	49	25.6	11	21.5	3	13.1	9
Wales	49.5	27	28.6	6	8.8	4	12.4	1
1997								
Scotland	45.6	56	17.5	0	22.1	6	13.0	10
Wales	54.7	34	19.6	0	9.9	4	12.4	2
2001								
Scotland	43.2	55	15.6	1	20.1	5	16.4	10
Wales	48.6	34	21.0	0	14.3	4	13.8	2
2005								
Scotland	39.5	41	15.8	1	17.7	6	22.6	11
Wales	42.7	29	21.4	3	12.6	3	18.4	4
2010								
Scotland	42.0	41	16.7	1	19.9	6	18.9	11
Wales	36.2	26	26.1	8	11.3	3	20.1	3

During its first year - the honeymoon period - the coalition relationship between the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives was cohesive and reflected a unity of purpose. The novelty of governmental office and the goodwill engendered by the coalition agreement was evident. However, at the end of

<sup>18</sup> Liberal Democrat vote in 1979 refers to the Liberal Party, and in 1983 and 1987 the Liberal/SDP Alliance

this first year there were important electoral contests: devolved elections and the Alternative Vote Referendum. The honeymoon period ended abruptly on the evening of 5th May 2011. As outlined on Table 3.4 the Liberal Democrat support collapsed in both Scotland and Wales. In Wales the party suffered a 4.2 percent decline in constituency vote share and 3.7 percent in regional vote share. It only lost one seat, dropping from six to five. Interestingly the Conservative support actually increased in Wales (though it continued to fall in Scotland).<sup>19</sup>

**Table 3.4: Scottish Parliament & Welsh Assembly Elections 2011**

	<i>Scotland</i>		<i>Wales</i>	
	Con	List	Constit.	List
	%	%	%	%
Labour	31.7 (-0.5)	26.3 (-2.9)	42.3(+10.1)	36.9 (+7.2)
Conservatives	13.9 (-2.7)	12.4 (-1.6)	25.0 (+2.6)	22.5 (+1.1)
Liberal Democrats	7.9 (-8.3)	5.2 (-6.1)	10.6 (-4.2)	8.0 (-3.7)
SNP/Plaid Cymru	45.4 (+12.5)	44.0 (+13.0)	19.3 (-3.1)	17.9 (-3.1)

The alternative vote (AV) referendum in Scotland and Wales was overshadowed by the parliamentary elections on the same day (although this did result in higher turnout). It is worth noting that the results in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales of the AV referendum were somewhat out of sync with the overall result with all three having more yes votes than the overall UK result - see Table 3.5. This may reflect that each country has had experience of more proportional electoral systems. Though noticeably 'no' was in the majority in every country.

**Table 3.5: The AV Referendum Vote in the UK, Northern Ireland, Scotland & Wales.**

	<i>Turnout</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
UK	42.2	32.1	67.9
Northern Ireland	55.8	43.7	56.3
Scotland	50.7	36.4	63.6
Wales	41.7	34.6	65.4

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<sup>19</sup> See Alan Convery, 'Devolution and the Limits of Tory Statecraft: The Conservatives in Coalition and Scotland and Wales', *Parliamentary Affairs* 2014 vol.67 no.1 pp.25-44 and James Mitchell and Alan Convery 'Conservative Unionism: Prisoned in Marble' in Torrance, D. (ed.) *Whatever Happened to Tory Scotland*. Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

Without the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives would have been forced to appoint their only MP as Secretary of State for Scotland, abandon having the post or appoint an MP from out-with Scotland. The posts of Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales itself have changed significantly since devolution. Although officially stated as being about representing the UK Government in each country, in Scotland and Wales the post has become a key party political platform in constitutional politics.

Instead of engaging with Scottish politics directly, the Conservatives chose the more politically astute option of devolving responsibility for Scotland to the Liberal Democrats who held 11 of Scotland's 59 seats. The Liberal Democrats initial choice of Secretary of State for Scotland Danny Alexander only served in post for 18 days and was replaced by Michael Moore, with Alistair Carmichael in taking over from him in October 2013. The latter change was widely reported as being about the coalition looking for a more robust combative pro-union message. Ironically, Carmichael in 2010 had suggested the Scotland Office should be abolished as its role had changed from being a 'clearing house' between London and Edinburgh Government's to being 'just a focal point for conflict'.<sup>20</sup>

The Conservatives have long struggled with their approach to devolution in Scotland and Wales. Until 1999, the party adopted an increasingly inflexible unitary unionist stance, refusing to engage in any meaningful way with the home rule agenda in both Scotland and Wales throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Post-devolution the party has engaged with the ongoing constitutional debate and worked with other parties. The Scottish Party's 2014 Strathclyde Commission Report<sup>21</sup> highlights just how far the party moved – it represents the most significant shift in any of the unionist party's policy stances on devolution - see Table 3.6. In offering full income tax raising powers the Conservatives allowed Labour to inherit the title of constitutional conservatives.

Each unionist party offered separate further devolution offerings and it was only after the first poll showing a Yes lead late in the campaign that there was some attempt to manufacture consensus and a post-referendum timetable for further devolution.

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<sup>20</sup> LSE Blog Top experts give their views on the government reshuffle 10 October 2013. [http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/archives/37039?utm\\_content=buffer64b41&utm\\_source=buffer&utm\\_medium=twitter&utm\\_campaign=Buffer](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/archives/37039?utm_content=buffer64b41&utm_source=buffer&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=Buffer)

<sup>21</sup> See <http://www.scottishconservatives.com/2014/06/strathclyde-commission-scotland-full-powers-income-tax/>

### **Table 3.6: Extending Devolution if Scotland Votes No – The Unionist Party Positions.**

#### **Labour**

- A default Scottish tax rate of 15% (covering all UK bands 20%, 40% and 45%) – rather than the 10% in the 2012 Scotland Act.
- Devolution of housing benefit and attendance allowance.
- New devolved powers in election administration, health and safety, employment tribunals, equalities policy, consumer advice and railways.
- Report specifies that 60% of Scottish Parliament spending should be covered by UK block grant to secure ‘key UK social rights’ in Scotland.

#### **Liberal Democrat**

- Income Tax wholly devolved (including ability to vary rates and tax bands)
- Air Passenger Duty wholly devolved.
- Assignment of Scottish share of corporation tax.
- Approximately 55% of Scottish spending would be covered by devolved and assigned taxes.

#### **Conservative**

- Income Tax wholly devolved (including power to set rates and thresholds)
- Examine the possibility of assigning a proportion of the proceeds of VAT
- Devolution of attendance allowance, housing benefit

As Convery notes, it marks a long journey for the Conservative Party in reconciling the competing ideological strands of conservatism and unionism.<sup>22</sup> The party’s proposals express, at one and the same time, a belief in the union and measures designed to ensure more fiscal responsibility and discipline within devolved bodies. They were designed to solve the problem of the imbalance in 1999 devolution settlement between social policy expenditure (almost wholly devolved) and tax (almost exclusively reserved). It was also thought that it could be useful in shifting the dynamic of devolved politics towards more natural Conservative terrain, placing more emphasis on achieving the correct balance between taxation and expenditure. To date, devolved politics has tended to focus almost exclusively on the latter. The social policy agenda of devolution has been dominated by issues that centre-

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<sup>22</sup> Convery, Alan. ‘Devolution and the Limits of Tory Statecraft: The Conservative Party in Coalition and Scotland and Wales’ *Parliamentary Affairs* 2014 vol.67. 25-44.

left parties such as the Scottish and Welsh nationalists, Labour and Liberal Democrats feel more comfortable operating on. The welfare state has gradually taken on a different slant with marketization given less emphasis and policies such as free school meals, free prescriptions, free personal care for the elderly, free university tuition all emphasizing difference from England.

What the new form of unionism projected by the Conservatives also did was allow the party to project itself as offering more (in terms of devolution) than Labour. The 2010 leadership contest within the Scottish Conservative Party has previously highlighted alternative visions of the future of the party in Scotland. Murdo Fraser, who finished a close second in the contest to Ruth Davidson, had campaigned for a new party in Scotland, allowing it to break away from the unionist London-periphery structure and re-invent itself. The party's previous Thatcherite unitary unionism and governing philosophy has been replaced. Cameron's post 2010 soothing rhetoric was generally well received as was the internal diplomacy surrounding the 'Edinburgh Agreement' in 2012.<sup>23</sup> The Better Together campaign threw up some strange bedfellows with the party's Scottish leader, Ruth Davidson, at one point sharing a platform with George Galloway.

The Conservatives remained a toxic brand in Scotland, and the Liberal Democrats suffered by their association with it. Post-devolution the most striking thing about the Conservative Party in Scotland is that there is little or no evidence of any potential for revival. However, the situation in Wales stands in contrast, with the Welsh Conservatives gaining votes and seats in 2011. Also, whilst the SNP in Scotland became a sole governing political party with independence dominating the political agenda, Plaid Cymru in Wales was in the doldrums – 2011 was its worst Assembly election result.

The Liberal Democrats despite their status as coalition partners remained somewhat peripheral to developments of both UK and Scottish and Welsh levels. The Liberal Democrat effect, beyond giving the UK Government enhanced legitimacy, is rather difficult to demonstrate. The Liberal Democrats in Scotland and Wales have paid a heavy representational price at both the 2011 Scottish and Welsh Parliamentary Elections and the 2012 Scottish and Welsh local government elections. If Labour were seen as the natural partner at UK level,<sup>24</sup> this was doubly the case in both Scotland and Wales were the

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<sup>23</sup> See Loughlin and Viney Ch. 2 of this volume.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Heywood *The Loveless Marriage: Making Sense of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition* 2013 <http://andrewheywood.co.uk/styled-8/index.html>

party had formed coalition in 1997-2007 and 2001-2003 respectively. The 'betrayal' of coalition with the Conservatives was felt most keenly in Scotland. Liberal Democrat willingness to enter formal coalition with the Conservatives in 2010 was contrasted with their lack of willingness to discuss coalition with the Scottish National Party in 2007. Beyond Westminster it had already ditched the perennial party of protest tag by serving in Scottish and Welsh administrations.

In Scotland the party lost much of its geographical power base. From a party of local heroes in the Highlands, Borders and other parts of rural Scotland (the Liberal Democrats had a long tradition of long-standing MPs in such areas of Scotland), their representation at the Scottish Parliament and local government was decimated. In Wales, whilst the downslide has not been so dramatic, there were similar tales of collapsing votes, lost seats, lost deposits and falling party morale. In 2015 in both countries they are largely on the periphery of mainstream politics. They face an uphill struggle to rebuild – the nationalist parties in both countries add another serious player to electoral competition, and even minority parties such as UKIP, Socialists and Green have been known to squeeze their vote into lost deposit territory.

Dommett identifies trust, identity and influence as explanations as why the Liberal Democrats have been so badly affected by the coalition.<sup>25</sup> The inflated expectations engendered by pre-election 2010 campaigning and the renegeing of high profile commitments and their complicity in the austerity agenda fed directly into negative polling in the periphery. In Scotland their partnership with the tarnished brand of Conservatism led to revised perceptions of what the party stands for. Moreover, whilst their influence on the pre-2010 Scottish and Welsh devolved coalition administrations appeared obvious (for example in Scotland in key policies such as tuition fees and care for the elderly) it appeared negligible in the UK coalition. As Dommett suggested, 'the cost-benefit analysis of the coalition does not stack up for the Liberal Democrats as they are sacrificing key principles and pledges in return for limited rewards'.<sup>26</sup> Whilst Clegg spoke of 'anchoring Britain to the centre ground'<sup>27</sup>, many previous voters in the Scottish and Welsh electorate deserted his party.

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<sup>25</sup> Katherine Dommett 'A Miserable Little Compromise? Exploring Liberal Democrat Fortunes in the UK Coalition' *Political Quarterly* 2013 Vol.84 No.2

<sup>26</sup> Katherine Dommett 'A Miserable Little Compromise: Why the Liberal Democrats suffered in coalition' <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/a-miserable-little-compromise-why-the-liberal-democrats-have-suffered-in-coalition/>

<sup>27</sup> George Parker and Kiran Steacey 'Nick Clegg says the Lib Dem aim is to bring down the two-party system' *Financial Times* 18 September 2013 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f6332a24-2078-11e3-b8c6-00144feab7de.html#axzz3DNyf585L>



The image of the Liberal Democrats has been seriously weakened in both countries. Polling data and results throughout 2010-2015 indicate a declining vote share. The Liberal Democrat experience of coalition 2010-2015 somewhat mirrors the experience of Plaid, the junior partner, in the 'One Wales' coalition 2007-2011. However, such a squeeze should not be viewed as inevitable for a junior coalition partner. In Scotland between 1999 and 2007, whilst in coalition, the party actually grew.

The union in Northern Ireland appears more secure in 2015 than at any time since the 1950s – from a unionist perspective there is no UK Government pressing for change or Irish republican armed struggle any longer.<sup>28</sup> The DUP-Sinn Fein dyarchy became further embedded. The clashes that have taken place are over identity issues and symbolic and traditional customs - the flying of the union flag over Belfast City Hall, the perennial marching season clashes and debates about the status of languages.

The Coalition Government faced Governments in all three peripheries without any Conservative or Liberal Democrat representation. This represented a basis for antagonistic relations. However, the post-devolution of parties and governments working together with the wheels oiled by the civil service has continued.

### **Continued Constitution Tinkering**

Smother territorial relations also partly reflected the post-1997 constitutional flexibility of the UK Government.. Referendums have established themselves firmly as part of the conventional constitutional landscape of British politics in a system that has traditionally viewed them with suspicion. The 2011 AV Referendum was only the second UK-wide one ever held (the first being the 1975 'Common Market' - as the EU was then referred to – vote). In Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland they have been far more common. There were constitutional referendums in both Scotland and Wales in 1979 and 1997, a 2011 Welsh Referendum and a 2014 Scottish referendum. Devolution in Northern Ireland was preceded by two separate Good Friday Agreement consenting referendums in the 26 counties of the Republic and the six counties of the North.

What these referendums highlight is the ad hoc and often instrumental manner in which referendums are being used. Although often portrayed as being about issues of fundamental constitutional importance they are more accurately viewed as political tools, a tactical device utilized by politicians to

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<sup>28</sup> Patterson above, 254.

suit their needs in particular circumstance. The Welsh vote in 2011 was not about the principle of whether or not Wales should have legislative devolution. The 2006 Government of Wales Act had already established the *de jure* distinction between the National Assembly for Wales and the Welsh Assembly Government (since 2011 the Welsh Government).<sup>29</sup> Moreover, an interim legislative dispensation enabled the National Assembly of Wales to create primary legislation. The rubicon of primary legislative powers was already crossed in 2007. The 2011 Referendum was ‘merely ... sanctioning a move to another, more expansive, form of primary law making, rather than heralding a fundamental change’.<sup>30</sup>

It was a choice between two systems of granting primary law making powers to the Welsh Assembly. The referendum was as a consequence of internal politicking within the Welsh Labour Party and the coalition with Plaid Cymru (though it should be noted the Welsh Conservatives included a commitment to a referendum on their 2010 Welsh manifesto). Back in the 1990s Blair utilized the promise of referendums in Scotland and Wales to neutralize the Conservative’s unionist line of attack. Cameron likewise utilized the referendum promise to serve political purposes in Scotland and Wales.

Wyn Jones and Scully refer to the Welsh 2011 referendum campaign as ‘generally uninspiring and at times dispiriting’.<sup>31</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the Scottish 2014 independence referendum campaign. The record 84.5 percent turnout was reflective of the high levels of grassroots activism, continual political debate via social media, town halls, cars, clubs, street corners and almost any arena imaginable. The 2014 Scottish Referendum dominated the political agenda in Scotland for over two years. Almost every political issue came under its prism. Whilst the Scottish example is a textbook referendum concerning a fundamental constitutional principle, the Welsh one clearly was not. In Scotland the process itself served to legitimate the Scottish constitutional order post September 2014. In contrast, the Welsh one took place with little public debate and participation evident.

Whilst both referendums were very different, both served to highlight the continuing shifting sands of devolution in both countries. The phrase ‘devolution settlement’ is both inappropriate and inaccurate in all three countries beyond Westminster. The term settlement is only appropriate in the sense that devolution appears now to be more fundamentally entrenched, than it may have appeared in 2010. The coalition effect, in that sense, involved

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<sup>29</sup> Wyn Jones and Scully above, 20.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 22.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

more instability and negotiation as regard the precise nature of devolution in each country. The previous settlements had not proved politically sustainable.

However, despite being much predicted - the consequences of the continual flux of devolution in the Celtic periphery - the governance of England remained largely untouched and stable, until after the campaign was over. Just after the declaration of the No victory David Cameron placed the so-called 'English Question?' at the centre of UK constitutional politics. The politics of the coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats and the serious complexities any serious examination of it would throw up insured it was remained on the sidelines of government purview until January 2015.

At the end of 2014 the long-standing issues surrounding devolution funding and representation, untouched and unanswered for so long (commonly referred to as the Barnett Formula and the West Lothian question respectively) were firmly on the UK political agenda. The durability of the Barnett formula, as the basis for calculating territorial increments (or more recently decrements) in funding, remained contested. Its durability can be explained by the fact that it kept, 'the potentially controversial issue of territorial finance out of the spotlight ... and avoid the complex and angst-ridden discussions of (territorial) finance that we find in the USA and a range of other countries'.<sup>32</sup> That said the Holtham Commission in Wales did suggest reform and that the base level of UK Government funding be protected but the method for funding distribution be reformed to be more reflective of need.<sup>33</sup> However, debates over the reform of Barnett remained largely the preserve of academics, think tanks, newspaper columnists and minor political voices in each country. Further devolution to Scotland had implications for governance in England, Northern Ireland and Wales.<sup>34</sup>

One of the over-riding narratives of the Yes campaign was dis-satisfaction with Westminster and the potential for Scotland to practice a different type of politics. This has echoes of the early days of devolution of the talk of 'new politics' in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The Better Together campaign involved the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Labour

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Cairney and Neil McGarvey, *Scottish Politics* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), 234.

<sup>33</sup> Bradbury, Jonathan 'Wales and the 2010 General Election' *Parliamentary Studies* 2010 vol. 63 no.4, 728.

<sup>34</sup> See Adam Evans 'While the Scottish people may be on the brink of the unknown, the Welsh continue to prefer familiarity' <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/wales-and-the-scottish-independence-debate/> and Lucy Shaddock and Akash Paun 'Further devolution to Scotland: What have the parties proposed?' <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/further-devolution-to-scotland-what-have-the-parties-proposed/>

working together. Led by Alistair Darling, the former Labour UK Chancellor, the Better Together campaign had consistent murmurings of unhappiness about his leadership across all three parties. For much of the referendum campaign momentum was perceived to be with the 'Yes' side with off-message mis-haps more prevalent on the 'No Thanks' (it was re-branded in mid-campaign) side. These ranged from Philip Hammond's April 2014 gaffe that sterling would be up for negotiation (despite both the UK coalition partners and Labour previously presenting a united front in dismissing a potential currency union between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom in the event of a 'Yes' vote) to the UK Treasury Report that extrapolated some research on setting up costs of government departments to arrive at a nonsensical figure for the cost of setting up government in a post independent Scotland. Late in the campaign, in reaction to the first poll showing a Yes lead, Prime Ministers Question Time was cancelled so that all three unionist party leaders could spend the day campaigning in Scotland.

The almost universal criticism of the 'Better Together' campaign was its negativity and failure to narrate a positive vision of Scotland in the Union. Despite a political consensus amongst unionists that Scotland was a viable economic and political unit (itself a significant change in tone post-devolution), there were constant dire warnings and projections of risk in terms of security and defence, economic, pension and employment risk and nomadic business flight. Much of this, of course, is par for the course in terms of the tribalism and counter-claims of referendum and party campaigning, but part of the problem was the inconsistency in tone and message from the three parties of the Union. The constant projections of uncertainty, instability and risk meant the more positive messages of common values, interdependence and shared history were diluted. At the same time, Yes Scotland were presenting a 'de-risked' version of independence – shared social and economic union, it was 'only' the political one that would change. Scotland could be rid of the Westminster elite, austerity, Trident, the bedroom tax and, best of all, the Tories (a message that resonated well with Scottish Labour voters).

The toxicity of Conservatism, combined with its lack of appeal to the crucial swing constituency of Labour voters<sup>35</sup>, meant the incursions of Conservative ministers north of the border were minimal during the referendum campaign. Despite much goading from Salmond, Cameron avoided any televised debate with him, leaving the defence of the union largely to the Darling and the

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<sup>35</sup> See Craig McAngus, Neil McGarvey and Arno Van Der Zwet 'Advocates of Scotland's Settled Will? Labour elites, affiliates and the constitutional question in Scotland' Elections Public Opinion and Parties Conference, University of Edinburgh, 12-14 September 2014.

Scottish Labour Party. At one point when he did campaign he even made reference to the fact that the referendum was not just a chance to 'give the effin Tories a kick', emphasizing that the vote had a finality unlike a protest vote in a by-election or the like.<sup>36</sup>

Surprisingly little effort was made amongst the coalition partners to present a unified set of proposals on extending devolution in Scotland (see Table 3.6). The three major parties all launched their own quite different and separate visions of devolution after a 'No' vote. This was despite the fact that the Scotland Act 2012 was based on the three parties working together post-2007 in the Calman Commission. The UK parties, and indeed the UK Government, did not have a consensual unified message of the process of devolution will involve post-2015. They did seek to project one in campaign driven joint photo-opportunities and an agreement on a Gordon Brown driven fast-track joint timetable for delivering more powers very late in the campaign (in response to the first poll suggesting the union was in jeopardy). Two days before polling they published a joint oath.<sup>37</sup> It was difficult for them to conceal the defensive, reactionary nature of this 'offer' so late in the campaign.

However, not altogether surprisingly, they emerged victorious. Prior to the final days of the campaign the question was not whether the unionist parties would win but how big the winning margin would be. A 'No' vote quickly moved from a foregone conclusion to being close to call as the polls narrowed sharply in the final two weeks. When Cameron, Clegg and Miliband rushed north (having been previously, like the UK media, rather disengaged) they were projected - somewhat exaggeratedly - as either the three wise men coming bearing gifts of more devolution in order to save the union or the horsemen of the apocalypse symbolizing the dying days of the union. In the final days of the referendum campaign the survival of Cameron as Prime Minister in the event of a Yes vote was even being questioned.<sup>38</sup> The campaigning desperation with which the Westminster class fought to maintain the union was indicative of how power over Scotland post-

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<sup>36</sup> Nicholas Watt, Severin Carrell, Terry Macalister and Julie Kollwe 'Cameron: referendum is not just a chance to 'give the effing Tories a kick' *The Guardian* 10 September 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/sep/10/david-cameron-scottish-referendum-effing-tories-kick>

<sup>37</sup> Daily Record 'David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg sign joint historic promise which guarantees more devolved powers for Scotland and protection of the NHS if we vote No' 16 September 2014 <http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron-ed-miliband-nick-4265992>

<sup>38</sup> George Eaton 'Even if the union endures, the last vestiges of Westminster's authority have been washed away' *New Statesman* 10 September 2014 <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/09/even-if-union-endures-last-vestiges-westminster-s-authority-have-been-washed-away>

devolution had drifted away from the UK office-holders of power.

**Table 3.7: The 2012 Scotland Act in summary**

- Introduces an ability of the Scottish Parliament to vary income tax by 10p in the pound and announce the Scottish rate annually.
- Devolves stamp duty and landfill tax.
- Allows the Scottish Government to borrow from the UK Government up to £2.7 billion (£500 million on current borrowing and £2.2 billion in capital borrowing).
- Administration of Scottish Parliament elections, Scottish Parliament business.
- Devolution of policy regarding air weapons, drink driving limits, national speed limit.
- Formally renames the Scottish Executive as Scottish Government.
- Gives Scottish Government more responsibility for Gaelic broadcasting and appointment of one member of the BBC Trust.
- Various other amendments and provisions relating to Crown Estate, Antarctica, UK Supreme Court, European Court of Human Rights.<sup>39</sup>

Whilst constitutional tinkering remained evident in Scotland and Wales, in Northern Ireland power-sharing, as Peter Mandelson had once remarked, remained 'the only show in town'.<sup>40</sup> The death of Ian Paisley in September 2014 was marked with reflections on how much he and the politics of Northern Ireland had changed. Working alongside Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness, the sworn enemies had developed a genuine friendship and were labeled 'the chuckle brothers' by the Irish media such was their predilection for smiling laughing together in public.<sup>41</sup>

The five years of Coalition Government was marked with more stability in the Northern Ireland Assembly after its previous years of arrested development punctuated by periods of London direct rule. The Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein both recognize, that despite their fundamental disagreement on Northern Ireland's constitutional future, power-sharing is the least worst option available to them. The UK Coalition Government inherited the legacy of the arrangements put in place by the Belfast and St. Andrews Agreements and it has largely retained a hands-off role that may reflect that the transitional period between armed conflict and 'normal'

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<sup>39</sup> For a fuller outline see Cairney and McGarvey, above, 247.

<sup>40</sup> R. Wilford 'Northern Ireland: The Politics of Constraint' *Parliamentary Affairs* Vol.63 No.1, 134-55.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 135-6.

politics may have ended.

Whilst the UK union was changing beyond Westminster it is worth noting in passing the issue of the other key union in UK politics, the European one. The EU, that great 'sleeper' issue of internal Tory Party politics – it sporadically appears to cause strife and division – is one that is framed very differently in politics beyond Westminster. The 'ever closer union' of the EU is a subject that has conjured up issues for the ever-looser union of the United Kingdom. Cameron simultaneously campaigned for a EU Referendum at UK level in 2017, while he suggested that Scottish independence would leave it 'at the back of the queue to join the EU'.<sup>42</sup> It is worth noting that a Yes vote in the Scottish referendum was implicitly accepted as a yes to Scottish independence *and* Scottish membership of the EU.

## Conclusion

Whilst the coalition effect on policymaking is immediately obvious when viewed through the prism of UK politics, it is less readily apparent when viewed from the Celtic periphery. In that respect the 'seismic change in the dynamics of British politics'<sup>43</sup> did not appear quite as such in the Celtic periphery. Coalition and multi-party politics, fixed term Parliaments, referendums and the like were not novel in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Indeed they have become very much part of 'normal' politics.

Devolution in the UK was not born out of any constitutional or political ideology or principle. The three asymmetrical systems of devolution reflect political pragmatism and circumstance in each territory, both in terms of inception and development. The union is elastic. One of the problems the UK Coalition faced was that the process of devolution and constitutional change has developed its own dynamic in each of the Celtic countries. The constitutional changes set in motion by the previous Labour Government mean that agenda control has slipped away from Westminster. Legally, devolution may mean power devolved is retained, however politically as the events of 2010-2015 demonstrate, the political agenda in each territory developed differing trajectories. These developments reflect political priorities, agendas and processes in Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh rather than London. This marginalized the coalition effect in devolved policy areas –

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<sup>42</sup> Morris, Nigel 'Scottish independence: Scotland 'would be put at the back of the queue to join the EU' says David Cameron *The Independent* 3 June 2014 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/scottish-independence-scotland-would-go-to-the-back-to-the-queue-to-join-eu-says-david-cameron-9475319.html>

<sup>43</sup> Dommett, above.

although it should be acknowledged that the austerity effect on budgets was very apparent.

The direction of travel from 2010 to 2015 was that of increased devolution. In Scotland a 'No' vote was achieved at the cost of promises (by all three UK parties) to surrender more powers to the Scottish Parliament. Events of 2010-2015 amply demonstrated that devolution was indeed a process rather than an event. The coalition has conceded more autonomy in both Scotland and Wales. Northern Ireland in this period was rather vividly described as 'something akin to a constitutional granny flat perched on the edge of the Union'.<sup>44</sup> As ever politics in the six counties of the north of Ireland appeared remote and very different. However, one could argue both Scottish and Welsh politics also appeared more differentiated, as the extenuation and enhancement of the territorialization of UK politics triggered by devolution continued.

Both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats have felt the electoral cost of being in power at Westminster, the latter party much more keenly. Both coalition parties were minority players in Scottish and Welsh politics in 2010, by 2015 they had accentuated that status. The Liberal Democrats were approaching irrelevance in the devolved politics of both countries, and the Scottish Conservatives continued to struggle to extend their support beyond their base. Only the Welsh Conservatives showed signs of revival.

Devolution and territorial governance became even more firmly embedded in UK politics. Less than two decades after its inception, opposition to devolution in each territory was so small to be politically inconsequential. The strident unionism of the Conservative Party 1979-1997 is the constitutional politics of a bygone era.

There is some evidence that the Scottish independence referendum led to some re-assertion of British identity.<sup>45</sup> Historically and comparatively, the notion of being British is an under-stated one, the Better Together campaign tended to steer clear from issues of identity, at least until late in the campaign, when the Scottish Saltire was raised above Downing Street – an indication that the politics of symbolism and flag waving is not confined to Northern Ireland. The events of 2010-2015 in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales give

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<sup>44</sup> Esmond Birnie cited in J.W. McAuley and J. Tonge 'Britishness (and Irishness) in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement' *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2010, vol.63, No.2, 274.

<sup>45</sup> Ben Riley-Smith 'Scottish independence debate triggers rise in Britishness north of the border' *The Telegraph* 11.8.14 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/scottish-independence/11026962/Scottish-independence-debate-triggers-rise-in-Britishness-north-of-the-border.html>



testimony to the pluralism of identities in the UK. The new unionism practiced by the UK Government post-2010 was more flexible and legitimate. It may be one of the areas where Liberal Democrat influence was most apparent. Without them, questions of political legitimacy would undoubtedly have been raised beyond Westminster.