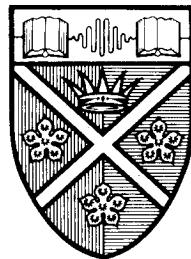


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# STRATHCLYDE PAPERS ON GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS



## *THE LABOUR PARTY IN SCOTLAND 1979: ADVANCE OR RETREAT?*

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THE LABOUR PARTY IN SCOTLAND IN 1979

ADVANCE OR RETREAT?

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There is a story that, when Richard Crossman came to Scotland during the 1966-70 Labour government to speak at a party meeting, he saw an organisation which had gone to sleep. Those attending the meeting might, in their dress and attitudes have come preserved in ice from the 1920s. This is a picture which would be recognised by many who worked with Labour during those years. Especially in Glasgow, the security of the Labour majorities was also the security of eternal slumber.

There is another image of Labour in Scotland: at least Labour in the industrial West. It is the myth of the Red Clyde.<sup>1</sup> The degree to which this is a myth can be debated. Perhaps Maxton and Wheatley and their comrades were social democratic wolves under their revolutionary sheepskin. The modern myth is of an industrial workforce more prone to strikes than virtually any other workforce in Britain.

These two popular conceptions of Labour seem to contradict each other. There is one which touches another aspect altogether. It is of a party in the seventies in full flight before a vigorous Nationalist movement. It was not simply that Labour seats fell to the SNP but also that, after stubborn resistance, Labour in 1974 took up the policy of devolution. It

was a Labour government which put the Scotland Act on the statute book but it seemed that few of the activists did so for any reason other than a desire to save seats. They saw SNP votes as a call for home rule and they hoped to spike the Nationalists' guns. Apart from anything else they believed that the vast majority of these Nationalist votes had come from Labour.

In spite of these problems, the Labour party in Scotland increased its vote in 1979. Where it polled only 36.3 per cent of the Scottish vote in October 1974, in 1979 this went up to 41.5 per cent. This was in clear contrast to the situation in the UK as a whole where in 1979 its vote fell to 36.9 per cent from 39.3 per cent in the previous election. Part of this can be explained by the collapse of the SNP vote. The fact remains that Labour in Scotland has increased its predominance over the other parties whereas in the UK as a whole it lost the election.

#### The approach of this article

This article will present an account of Labour party support in Scotland as it was in the 1979 election. It will do so in terms of two themes which, we believe, are the important ones describing the responses to that support. First, has there been  
2  
partisan dealignment for Labour in Scotland?

Ivor Crewe and his colleagues have argued that this is the most striking political aspect of the decade 1964-74. They have produced evidence to show that the combined vote for the two main parties in Britain has fallen from 87.5 in 1964 to 75.2 in October 1974 but, more important than this, is the fall in those identifying very strongly with one or other of the main parties: from 40 per cent to 28 per cent in February 1974. Crewe describes the results as signalling the end of the party stalwart. Can we say that the position of the Labour party in Scotland in 1979 illustrates partisan dealignment? On first glance it seems that this might have been the case in 1974 but in 1979 there appears to have been a move back to Labour. Despite its loosing the election in Britain as a whole, the Labour party, as we showed, actually increased its percentage of the poll in Scotland. Has there been realignment?

Another theme comes out of the Essex studies. Crewe and Sarlvik draw attention to the lower level of support for Labour policies among Labour voters than is the case among Conservative voters for Conservative policies.<sup>3</sup> This demonstrates a particularly clear decline in the policy support of precisely those groups whom one would expect to be most supportive: households where the head was a manual worker or respondents who were trade union members or who responded that they called

themselves "very strong" or "fairly strong" Labour supporters. This evidence is shown in the following table.

TABLE 1

CHANGES IN SUPPORT FOR LABOUR ON SELECTED POLICIES  
1964-1974 AMONG POST 1950 COHORTS

	All Labour identifiers	'Core' Labour identifiers
More Social Services	-29	-37
Class Ties with Trade Unions	- 2	-21
Sympathetic to Strikes	- 7	-11
Trade Unions do not have too much power	- 8	-24
See difference between parties	-15	-24

Is the rise in the Labour percentage of the Scottish vote in 1979 related to an increase in support for Labour's policies too? Can we say that this is related to a re-establishment of partisanship: that the bases of the Labour vote in Scotland is by and large what it was in the 60s and, for Labour, 1979 was a reinstating election?

We shall start to answer these questions by seeing in more detail how highly Labour voters esteem the party. We can find

whether they support it regularly even at less important contests and we can see whether they stand with the party's declared positions. If we find that the supporters have a predominantly instrumental attitude towards the party then there is a higher probability that they will move away if another party such as the Nationalists or the Social Democrats seems ready to deliver more economic and other goods.

The issue of support for Scottish devolution is also important for Labour. Perhaps its link to theory is less evident. A striking feature of some peripheral regions in Europe is that working class parties have become nationalist or at least supporters of some form of autonomy. The example of Catalonia springs immediately to mind where the PSUC and the PSC have certainly adapted this stance.<sup>4</sup> The Belgian Socialist Party broke into two linguistic wings because of this factor. In Britain there has been a suggestion that devolution was particularly attractive to the working class. We reserve judgement on this. It may be, however, that working class society is less open to influences from elite and therefore metropolitan culture. It may be that working class people feel more Scottish because they have less contacts with England, their education has not provided such a high degree of socialisation into British norms and institutions as opposed to specifically local and Scottish ones. Is it true that working class people

feel more Scottish? Does this lead to support for devolution?

#### The 1979 Scottish Election Survey

The data on which this article is based were collected during the survey of the 1979 election in Scotland. Added to this we also have information on our sample from a similar survey in October 1974 and another immediately after the referendum on the Scotland Act. Our work is thus based on a panel and permits analysis through time. We were funded by the Social Science Research Council.

5

#### The evidence for partisan dealignment

In 1979 in the UK the combined percentage vote of the Labour and Conservative parties went up to 80.8 per cent. We have already seen that the Labour percentage went up but this was true for both parties. In Scotland there was a much larger proportional rise: given the previous loss to the SNP: to 72.9 per cent. This is not quite back to the levels of the sixties but it is moving in that direction. Both the Labour and Conservative percentages went up. These data could indicate a return to the old allegiances. On the other hand, they could be the result of a temporary return to the larger parties but

without any long term identification. They might display an agreement with their policies for this election but a readiness to change when this agreement was lost. One way of tackling this is to look at the percentages of each group of voters who also identified themselves as supporters of that party. In other words, this is a measure of partisanship.

TABLE 2

	Con.votes with Lab.	votes with Lib.	SNP votes with	
Con.party ID	Lab. party ID	Lib. party ID	SNP party ID	
1974	96	96	73	72
1979	81	90	54	61

It is strikingly clear from this table that, among the voters for all parties, there is a drop in the percentage identifying as supporters of that party. The two major parties still have higher proportions of identifiers but the pattern is somewhat different. Although the percentage of Conservative voters in Scotland went up there was a decrease of fifteen per cent in identifiers as compared with 1974. This is a greater percentage drop than among even the SNP. By contrast, the Labour party did best of all with only a six per cent drop.

A second piece of evidence relevant to the discussion about partisan dealignment is the voters evaluation of his party.

Table 3 bring out this feature.

TABLE 3

STRENGTH OF PARTY IDENTIFICATION

	Very strong	Fairly strong
Conservative	19.3	44.8
Labour	22.0	51.4
Liberal	7.0	47.4
SNP	21.4	48.0

Very strong identification with one or other of the main parties is up to 1964 levels for the country as a whole, referred to by Crewe and his colleagues. The table also shows that, of all the parties, Labour voters identify most strongly with their party: 73 per cent identified either very strongly or fairly strongly. This is not a sign of a party which is losing support massively. If it is, then the other parties are doing worse.

Although the elector may turn out for his party at general elections it is less likely that he will vote at local elections. We may take it that a vote at local elections is a sign of greater commitment than one at a general election. There was no difference between the levels of reported voting among the four main parties: 70 per cent of Conservatives claimed to have voted

at local elections, 69 per cent of Labour supporters, 68 per cent of Liberal voters and 67 per cent of Nationalists. As in virtually every survey which has ever been done, people over-report their local voting. What is significant here is that there is no difference between the parties. We may assume that Labour voters do not turn out at local elections significantly less than other voters whatever the actual turnout is.

We asked our sample whether they trusted their own party usually, sometimes or never. Again there was a remarkable similarity: 37 per cent of Labour voters said that they trusted Labour usually, 38 per cent of Conservatives and 33 per cent of Nationalists. On the other hand, these findings strike a cautionary note. Earlier results pointed to rather high levels of trust and closeness of identification. These results show a more modest identification.

It might be concluded from the data reported above that 1979 was indeed a reinstating election for Labour in Scotland. We believe that the situation is more complex. In particular, if, by "reinstating election" is meant a return to the traditional and habitual Labour vote, we believe that this is not the case. Although the Labour vote goes up in 1979, the SNP still commands more votes than in the seventies. Although the level of Labour

partisanship has not fallen as much as that of other parties, it has fallen.

We can tackle this best by looking at a traditional view of the Labour party: that it is a class party and thus commands class loyalty.

Much of the analysis of this problem by the British Election Study team dealt with the importance of class for voting. They pointed to the decline in class voting. The match between social class and the vote had never been perfect but its decline had been monitored even in the early studies such as Butler and <sup>6</sup> Stokes. The 1974 situation in Scotland is shown at the table below. The manual, non-manual divide is taken as the distinguishing mark of middle and working class.

TABLE 4

CLASS AND THE MAIN PARTY VOTE IN 1974

	Middle Class	Working Class
Conservative percentage	40	16
Labour percentage	21	49
Other percentage	39	35
	—	—
	100	100

Let us compare this to the situation in 1979.

TABLE 5

CLASS AND THE MAIN PARTY VOTE IN 1979

	Middle Class	Working Class
Conservative percentage	41	20
Labour percentage	25	48
Other percentage	34	32
	—	—
	100	100

If the 1974 election was one where class was less important for voting than in the sixties, then there is no strengthening of this relation overall in 1979. The comparison between the tables is that in 1979 there is a clear decrease in the percentage of working class electors voting Labour and an increase in the percentage of middle class electors voting Labour. We may conclude that the improvement in Labour's vote in 1979 was not due to a re-established class partisanship. It is more likely to have been caused by middle class electors coming over to Labour. It is now important to see why this happened. Did they come over because of agreement with Labour policies rather than because of class loyalty? If this was the case then policy competition between the parties did not die with the decline of the SNP.

### Policy agreement and the Labour Party

A great deal of the work which we have presented in relation to partisan dealignment is relevant to the argument about the importance of policies and issues. There is, first of all, evidence of a high level of affect towards the party. It is not seen as simply something which exists to deliver certain goods. There are other sorts of material which must be taken into account. We must for example, ask whether Labour voters agree with the policies of the party, whether they see many differences between the parties and so on.

Let us look at some of the policies which a voter might consider important and would agree or disagree with his party. Two issues stand out as the ones which most concern voters: the level of unemployment and the movement of prices. We asked whether respondents felt that their own parties handled those two issues well. Labour came out in both cases better than did other parties among their own supporters: 71 per cent of Labour voters felt that a Labour government handled prices well and 67 per cent of them felt that it handled unemployment well.

The creation of a modern welfare state is indissolubly linked to the actions of Labour. This does not ignore the fact that Liberals and Conservatives made major contributions at an

earlier stage. We asked respondents whether they felt that the present distribution of welfare benefits had gone too far. Even more fundamental to a working class party is the redistribution of income and wealth. We also asked whether this process had gone too far. In the context of the present government it is easy to recognise that the policy of cutting taxes with a consequent cut in services is a right-wing policy. We asked whether they agreed that taxes should be cut. Finally we asked whether they felt that moves towards workers' control had been taken too far. Table 6 shows the results. They indicate that in every issue, except that of workers control, Labour voters were the most 'left' by clear margins. In this last issue the result is explained by the particular place which it has in the minds of many Nationalist opinion leaders. In the SNP and in Plaid Cymru workers participation and co-operatives have been seen as linked to the idea of participation by Scottish people in their own government.

TABLE 6

LEFT RIGHT ISSUES AND PARTY IDENTIFICATION

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal	SNP
% agreeing that welfare benefits gone too far	36	18	35	34
% agreeing that redistribution of income gone too far	35	10	25	17
% agreeing that workers' control gone too far	43	25	32	19
% agreeing that tax should be cut	57	36	56	36

If the Labour party is the furthest left of those we have listed, then it is significant that its voters are also furthest left.

We decided to take a wider range of issues in order to examine this and did so by the use of a factor analysis. The issues cover much more than the traditional left/right divide because many other policies seem to be more or less related. For example, there is no reason strictly why a left-wing party should support womens' rights but in general they do. We might sum this up by saying that there appears to be a tough/tender dimension as well as a left/right one. We also examined the position occupied by military and defence issues. Our full set of issues then in addition to the ones already shown in the previous table were:

attitude to the death penalty (abolition being taken as left wing or radical)

reduction of military expenditure

removal of troops from Northern Ireland

equality for all races in Britain

equality for women

the availability of abortion

treatment of criminals

A two factor model was hypothesised and an oblique rotation produced two interpretable factors. Factor scores were then given to each respondent and the results were correlated with party voting.

The first factor contained four items which loaded heavily: they were that Britain should reduce her military strength, that the death penalty should be brought back, that there should be stronger defences against Russia and that Britain should get tougher with Irish terrorists. We interpreted this as law and order, tough/tender items. The second factor was more difficult to interpret. Three items loaded on it. They were: the redistribution of income and wealth, giving workers more say in their workplace and shifting power to regions and local authorities. We interpreted this as a left/right factor.

We looked at the first factor and found that the average scores were as follows:

Conservative voters	-0.2916
Labour voters	0.2436
Liberal voters	-0.1426
SNP voters	0.0658

It appears that the Conservative votes are clearly more militaristic or tough, with Labour voters the least militaristic. Liberal voters, surprisingly for the image which the party presents, is nearer the Conservative party than to Labour and the SNP is, if anything, rather "tender".

On the second factor, the scores are as follows:

Conservative voters	-0.3662
Labour voters	0.3743
Liberal voters	0.0634
SNP voters	0.3673

If this is to be interpreted as a left-right factor then clearly Labour and the Nationalists are very similar on the left with the Conservative voters clearly on the right. The Liberal

party stands in the middle. This ordering does seem to validate the interpretation of the second factor at least and that of the first factor also seems sensible. It also seems that there is a fair amount of ideological agreement in the Labour party compared with the Conservatives. There is no support in these data for the suggestion that Labour is less ideologically coherent than the Conservative party. If there has been a loss of support for Labour policies among Labour voters, as Crewe and his colleagues suggest, this has not resulted in less ideological coherence than its main competitors.

In an earlier section of this article we pointed to the loss of working class votes from Labour to the Conservatives. We suggested that the increase in the Labour percentage was made up of middle class voters expressing support for Labour policies: let us see whether a class-party breakdown of the factor scores on the second (left-right) factor bears this out. The following are the average scores for each group on this second factor:

Middle Class Conservative	-0.3378
Working Class Conservative	-0.3784
Middle Class Labour	0.5037
Working Class Labour	0.3343
Middle Class Liberal	-0.1577
Working Class Liberal	0.3320
Middle Class SNP	0.2849
Working Class SNP	0.4180

Although Labour and Conservative voters stay on opposite sides of the divide, it is quite clear that working class Labour voters are less clearly "left" than are middle class Labour voters. They are less "left" than the two Conservative groups are "right". It is also striking that the SNP working class voters are more "left" than their Labour equivalents while middle class Nationalists, though less "left" than either of the Labour groups are still on that end of the spectrum. These data are not inconsistent with the argument that the Labour vote in Scotland in 1979 was increased by a group of middle class voters who voted Labour because of ideological agreement with the party. In general, there is no suggestion that the Labour party is an organisation with no ideological identity at all.

From these bases it must seem that among Labour party supporters there is some ideological agreement with the stand of the party. The Labour party is not like one of de Tocqueville's two bottles with different labels both containing nothing. To a great extent it commands trust and affection and it represents the views of its supporters.

#### A Scottish Working Class?

The issue of Scottish devolution was central in British

politics in the late seventies. Was this an issue of interest to Nationalists and the political elite only? Does it appear that Labour supporters took up any distinctive stand on the dimension of unionism versus independence.

One basic datum is national identification. Here we find that 54 per cent of Labour voters identify as Scots as opposed to British, compared to 42 per cent of Conservatives and 70 per cent of SNP supporters. That is more or less the result which we should expect in terms of the order of magnitude between the three.

Table 6 gives us perhaps a more tangible result: the behaviour of different parties' supporters at the referendum on Scottish devolution.

TABLE 7

PARTY AND REFERENDUM VOTE

	<u>Voted Yes</u>	<u>Voted No</u>	<u>Did not vote</u>	<u>N.A.</u>
Conservative	17	59	24	
Labour	42	26	32	
Liberal	35	42	23	
SNP	74	9	17	

Once again reports of voting are exaggerated. We can, however, gain something from the comparison of the fifties.

Certainly a large percentage of Labour voters went with the party line but it is notable that the Conservative position seemed to command more of its followers. Over a quarter of Labour voters went against the party line. On the other hand, in answer to another question about which constitutional options they favoured, 8 per cent said that they wanted no devolution, 13 per cent that they would have only an ad hoc committee dealing with Scottish affairs, 32 per cent said that they believed there should be an Assembly with some powers of government, 33 per cent wanted an Assembly with most powers, 4 per cent were for independence. In other words, given that the conditions were right, two thirds of Labour voters wanted devolution of some sort. They had, incidentally a fairly accurate view of where their party stood as it is shown in Table 8. The voters seemed to be rather more in favour of wide powers than the party leadership.

TABLE 8

THE POSITION OF LABOUR ON DEVOLUTION AS SEEN BY LABOUR VOTERS

No devolution	4.9
Ad hoc committee	12.2
Assembly with some power	48.2
Assembly with most powers	14.7
Independence	2.9

The comparison of these last three results may mean that Labour voters have become more radical on devolution since the referendum. It may be that many who voted 'No' or did not vote, regretted this by May and especially when they saw the policies of the Conservative government in Westminster.

There are further apparent contradictions in the data. When we recall that only 4 per cent of Labour voters took independence as their preferred constitution for a future Scotland, it is surprising to find that 34 per cent of them admit that it might be a good thing or even very good. The Conservative and Liberals do not agree. Only 12 and 11 per cent of these parties respectively share these views. How are we to interpret it? One explanation is that, although their first choice is devolution, about a third of Labour supporters would not be totally averse to independence if it came. This is not an unprecedented situation. Voters for a moderate social democratic party may be prepared to give socialism a chance if another party such as the communists introduce it. Moderate nationalists in the Basque National Party (PNV) feel sympathy with the claims of Herri Batasuna and ETA.

Finally, we asked whether voters favoured the SNP. Not surprisingly only 3 per cent of Labour voters did so strongly with similar low percentages among the Conservatives and

Liberals: 37 per cent of Labour supporters claimed to be mildly in favour as compared with much lower percentages among Conservatives (20 per cent) and Liberals (23 per cent).

The overall conclusion seems to be that Labour voters in Scotland are less touched by the "British" nationalism that characterises the Conservatives. 54 per cent of Labour voters identified as Scottish as opposed to 42 per cent of Conservatives. Only among SNP voters was Scottish identification higher (71 per cent). There is evidence then, that Labour voters were more "Scottish" and would support "Scottish" solutions to problems.

#### CONCLUSION

In this review of Labour in Scotland in 1979, it is clear that we are not looking at a dying party. On the contrary, it enjoys the highest level of affect of all the large parties among its members. Although there has been a great deal of comment on the apparent distance between Labour voters and Labour activists in policy terms, it is still true that Labour voters seem to see themselves as closest on issues to their own party. To a large extent, this coming together of Labour voters and the party in Scotland may have to do with the fact that Labour is less and

less a class party. Voters do not turn out for Labour simply because they believe that Labour is right. This, we believe, is the significance of the increased percentage of the middle class vote in the party.

Finally, the issue of devolution is difficult. It appears that Labour voters have moved very far towards a greater degree of home rule for Scotland. If this is the case, it is no surprise that the Labour Party in Scotland has also moved in its policies in this direction.

Perhaps behind all these points is the changing social structure of Scotland. Class lines are no longer so clearly set and parties have to operate more competitively.

FOOTNOTES

1. See R. Keith Middlemass The Clydesiders London, Hutchison 1965.
2. See Jack Brand, Duncan Maclean and William Miller The Birth and Death of a Three Party System, British Journal of Political Science (forthcoming).
3. Partisan Dealignment in Britain 1964-74, British Journal of Political Science 7(2) April 1977 pp. 129-190.
4. See Jack Brand Nation and Region in Spain, presented to the ECPR Workshop on Nationalism, Glasgow 1978.
5. Through the agency of the Scottish Election Study grant.
6. Political Change in Britain, London \* Macmillan 1969.