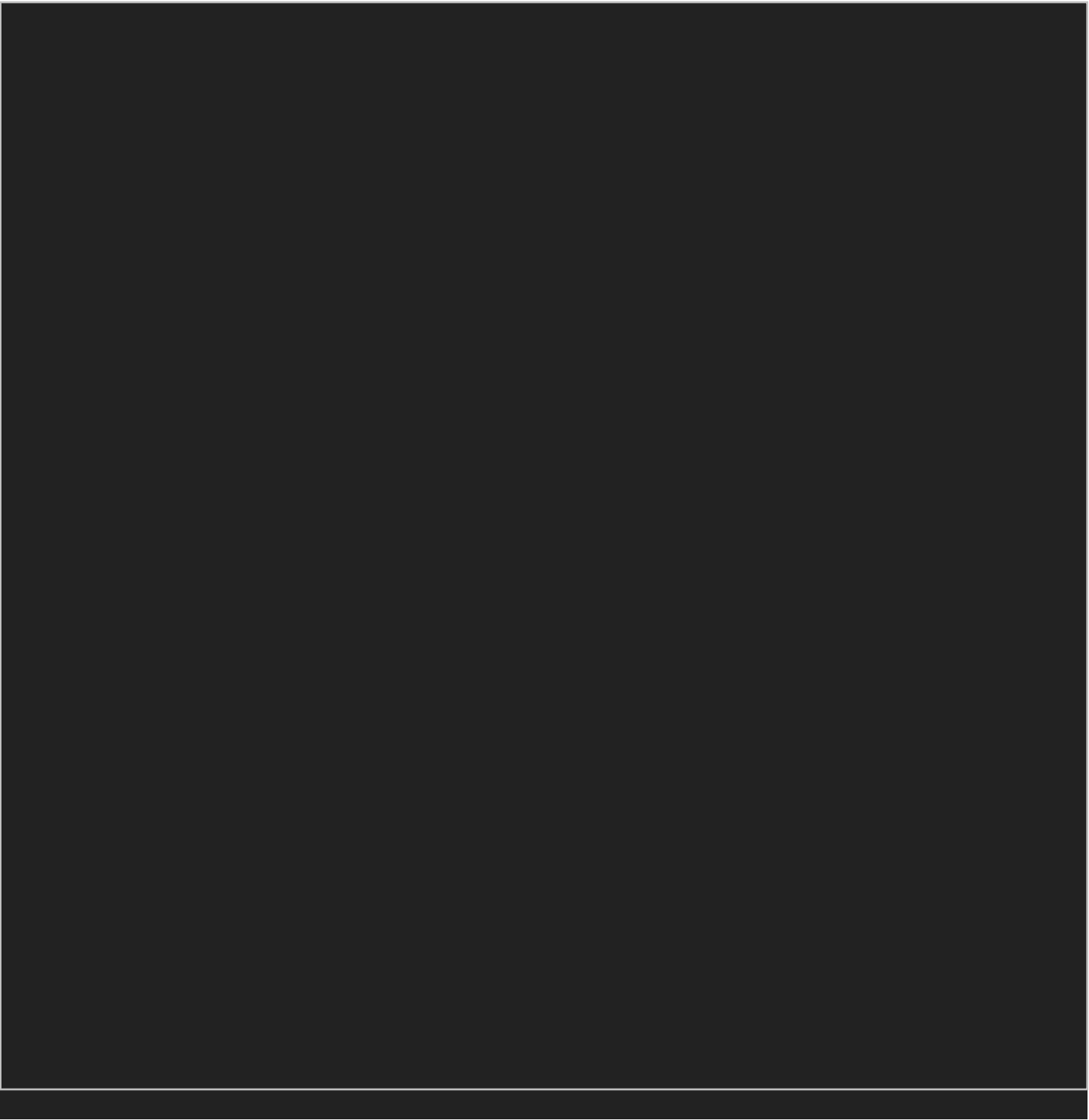


How Scotland's political parties failed to respond to devolution – Alastair Stewart





The status of Scottish political parties with UK counterparts has remained unclear, says Alastair Stewart
(Picture: Andrew Milligan/PA)

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Twenty years after the Scottish Parliament was reconvened, it's time to get real about how political parties operate within our devolved system, writes Alastair Stewart.

Boris Johnson's rejection of a second independence referendum could well be the moment the Union died. Or it could be business as usual for the foreseeable future.

The short-term impact of Johnson's decision will be nominal. The independence movement will likely see a surge in support, and there will be the usual grandstanding rhetorical battle. How that translates into material conclusions will be determined at the 2021 Scottish elections with a long 15 months in between.

Recent marches independence marches in Edinburgh and Glasgow are nothing more than a foot drill to keep the troops galvanised. This isn't to be facetious, but there is no action Nicola Sturgeon can suggest that has not already been morally demonstrated with her party's electoral returns.

Mandate mayhem reigns supreme, and the numbers are on the side of a second independence vote. Since 2015 there have been Westminster victories for the Conservative Party but, out of Scotland's 59 available seats, 56, 35 and 48 seats went to the SNP in 2015, 2017 and 2019 respectively. No one can say the SNP didn't announce their intention – the clue's in their party name.

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The in-between period will be largely shaped by how Scotland's parties respond to the impending wave of criticism coming their way.

While there are stalwarts in both Scottish Labour and the Scottish Conservatives who will never

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budge on the result of the 2014 independence vote, others see the logic of holding a second one. Even then the independence vote is one thread in what is becoming a major issue – how to find a resolution when Scottish parties disagree or take a separate policy to their UK namesakes.

Franchise or branch office?

Week after week the Scottish Conservatives and Scottish Labour stand up in the Scottish Parliament and are derided for the actions and policies of their Westminster counterparts/bosses. Ruth Davidson was in an impossible position of working with Boris Johnson, given her pro-Remain campaigning.

Deputy Labour leader candidate Ian Murray blasted shadow Chancellor John McDonnell for changing the Labour party's stance on a second independence referendum, while Scottish Labour leader Richard Leonard rebuffed party chiefs by saying it's up to Scottish Labour to make such decisions.

Both parties struggle with the perception of their hierarchy. If Jackson Carlaw becomes Scottish Conservative leader, do Scottish Conservative MPs work for him or the UK party? The situation is untenable, often leading to regular pincer movements from Nicola Sturgeon.

Even the Scottish Liberal Democrats, the most explicitly and formally federalised of all UK parties, get tarred with the same brush as the UK party with little distinction made. Scottish leader Willie Rennie stood side by side with then UK-leader Jo Swinson as the party was lambasted for its role in the introduction of tuition fees by the Coalition government elected in 2010.

All this begs the question of how to clarify if a party is a franchise, a subsidiary or a branch office. How are party finances split, is a party funded by Scots supporting only the Scots branch? How much sway do Scottish members of UK party boards have?

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Pragmatic change

Clarifying this far more explicitly seems critical to resolving the present deadlock. Most understand Scottish politics through 'Burroughs' snippets' – a vast pantheon of information from social media and the news from which they extract their own views. Politicians are alleged to hate each other, and the idea that English parties are operating in Scotland seems to be a ubiquitous problem.

The Conservative Party has a unique tradition of pragmatic change for survival. Depending on who you ask and the particular mood they're in, the party is either a subsidiary or a franchise of its larger UK namesake. Others have called for total separation, reform or a British fudge of separation with a 'confidence and supply' arrangement at Westminster. Historically this would be nothing new – it's what the Scottish Unionists, the party's forebearer before it merged in 1965, did with the broader UK party.

US political scientist Alexander Wendt's influential essay, *Anarchy is what States Make of it*, posits that countries form their founding ideas around what they disagree with, rather than with what they agree with. Tiers of the same party following different policy paths might be more respected by an electorate that thinks the one-size-fits-model is damaging to the country.

On a day-to-day basis, the Scottish Parliament – mainly through its committee system – is far cosier than the headlines and news highlights would have you believe. 'Enemies' are seldom such and, as anyone who has worked there will tell you, it's much more cordial than some might presume.

Getting real about devolution

For most people, news headlines and social media updates are what they see of their elected representatives. Arguments about professional backgrounds, class, private education will continue, but it doesn't mean the system is chronically flawed. There could be much stronger support for real change to party structures that's in everyone's interests to move debates forward.

Scotland has achieved devolution but, after 20 years, it's time to get real about how the political parties operate within it. Abraham Maslow spoke of a "hierarchy of needs" – the founding work has been achieved; it's time to go further and be visionary.

Freud said that humans associate themselves with the power of the statesman to partake in the power, prestige, and glory that the nation has in the world. If that's the psychology, then it's time to match it with political reform and move the conversation forward in Scotland.

Alastair Stewart is a freelance writer and public affairs account manager at Orbit Communications. He regularly writes about politics and history with a particular interest in nationalism, and the life of Sir Winston Churchill. Read more from Alastair at www.agjstewart.com and follow him on Twitter @agjstewart

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