

# Brexit and Scottish Nationalism

An Interview with Fiona Simpkins

*by Mélanie Cournil & Alice Bonzom*

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**The Brexit vote, welcomed with dismay in Scotland, has prompted the Scottish National Party to present itself as the only sound alternative to Westminster's policies, viewed as damaging to Scottish interests. F. Simpkins analyses the SNP's strategies and outlines the many political challenges ahead.**

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**Fiona Simpkins** is a Senior Lecturer in Contemporary British History, Politics and Society at the University Lumière of Lyon, France. Her main areas of research are devolution, Scottish politics, nationalism and the constitutional debate in Scotland. Recently, she has explored the impact of devolution and sub-national party competition on party organisation and branding. She has published several articles or book chapters on Scotland's unionist parties and focused more specifically on the resurgence of the Scottish Conservative party in Scotland after 2016. She has published her research in a variety of books and journals, including the *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, *Observatoire de la Société Britannique*, and *Etudes Ecossoises*.

**Books & Ideas: How would you explain the rise of the Scottish National Party over the last 15 years?**

**Fiona Simpkins:** The Scottish National Party (SNP) was founded in 1934 but its electoral successes were few and far between until the mid-1960s to late 1970s when the party made its first electoral breakthroughs. It was then able to argue for further autonomy for Scotland and to attract a more moderate electorate than previously—voters who did not necessarily consider themselves as separatists but who were keen on defending Scotland’s economic interests and a more democratic system of government. However, the SNP had trouble winning more than a handful of seats in general elections due to the first-past-the-post system and the fluctuating support for the party before the introduction of devolution.<sup>1</sup> The Scottish Parliament set up by the first Blair Labour government in 1999 and its semi-proportional electoral system<sup>2</sup> provided the Nationalists with a new political platform and an ideal constitutional set-up to advance the case of independence. The new Scottish Parliament in Holyrood would serve as an easier political and institutional platform to hold an independence referendum as it made the prospect of an electoral majority more likely.

After having been on the fringes of political power at Westminster for years, the SNP became Scotland’s second political party after the 2003 Scottish Parliament election. Its formation of a minority government in 2007 enabled it to assert its competence over key economic and social issues in Scotland whilst attempting to develop a support base for its flagship separatist policy at the same time. Its avowed strategy was to show that it was able to deliver on key policy pledges and boost voter confidence in relation to a further devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament, before perhaps full independence for Scotland. Yet, it was only after the SNP unexpectedly won a majority of seats in 2011 on a manifesto explicitly pledging to organise an independence referendum, that the party was able to build up on its promises and launch the Scottish independence referendum of 18th September 2014. Independence had long been the party’s *raison d’être* and been presented as its primary objective at a number of elections over time, but it was only after the SNP formed the first majority Scottish government, that Scotland’s other political parties accepted that the SNP had a mandate to call for a referendum.

<sup>1</sup> Devolution, which was introduced in the United Kingdom under Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1999, corresponds to the statutory granting of powers from the Parliament of the United Kingdom in Westminster to the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, the National Assembly for Wales in Cardiff and the Northern Ireland Assembly in Belfast.

<sup>2</sup> The electoral system adopted for the Scottish Parliament is a mix of both the first-past-the-post system and the additional member system, hence its semi-proportional character. The Scottish Parliament has 129 Members (MSPs), 73 of which are constituency members elected with the first-past-the-post system in the same constituencies as those used for UK general elections, and 56 of them are regional members elected with the additional member system (seven members are elected per region in the eight regions of Scotland).

Although its outcome was the *status quo* (55% voted No to independence and 45% voted Yes), the long Scottish independence referendum campaign appears to have converted large numbers of people to support independence from a relatively low existing base and transformed Scottish politics on a much deeper level than might have been expected. SNP membership soared as it became the third largest political party in the UK and its electoral results soon followed suit as the May 2015 general election results returned 56 SNP MPs to Westminster out of a total of 59, sending shockwaves in UK political circles. The last three elections in Scotland confirmed the profound changes that have appeared in the Scottish political debate as the SNP secured a third term in government in the May 2016 Scottish Parliament elections and remained the third largest political party in Westminster after the June 2017 and December 2019 general elections. The SNP obtained 45% of the vote in Scotland in December 2019 and 48 of Scotland's 59 seats in the House of Commons.

### **Scotland & the United Kingdom**

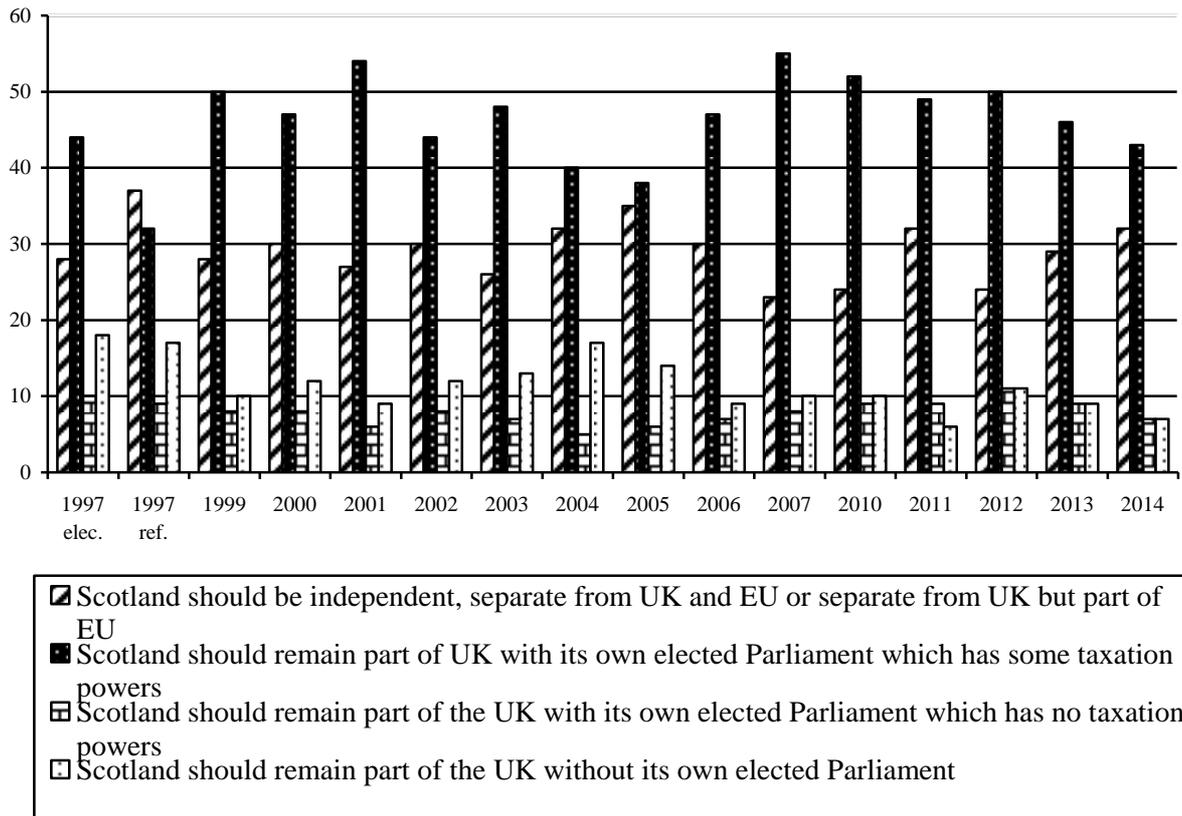
Scotland was an independent kingdom until the Treaty of Union signed in 1707 by both the Scottish and English Parliaments. Both countries had shared a single Crown since 1603 when Queen of England Elizabeth I, who had no heir, bequeathed her throne to King James VI of Scotland to ensure the permanence of Protestantism in her kingdom. The Scottish Parliament was dissolved in 1707 and its remaining members thereafter sat in the British Parliament, in London. Scotland nevertheless retained its own Presbyterian Church, as well as its own education and legal systems after the Union. It thus enjoyed a large degree of autonomy until centralisation of power and the reach of governmental politics became more marked in the early twentieth century, when suggestions for a devolved Scottish legislature first emerged.

Scotland has had its own autonomous Parliament and government since the introduction of devolution in 1999. Based in Holyrood, Edinburgh, the Scottish Parliament is a unicameral legislature which holds wide-ranging legislative powers on all matters, except those explicitly reserved to Westminster under the terms of the Scotland Acts. The latter include such matters as foreign affairs, defence, or the Constitution, including relations with the European Union. The Scottish Parliament also holds tax powers, including full control over income tax rates and thresholds, and a wide array of competences over the management of the Crown Estate in Scotland, Air Passenger Duty and most aspects of social security benefits.

**Books & Ideas: Does the political dominance of the SNP in Scotland correspond to a rising nationalist sentiment? What does the SNP represent?**

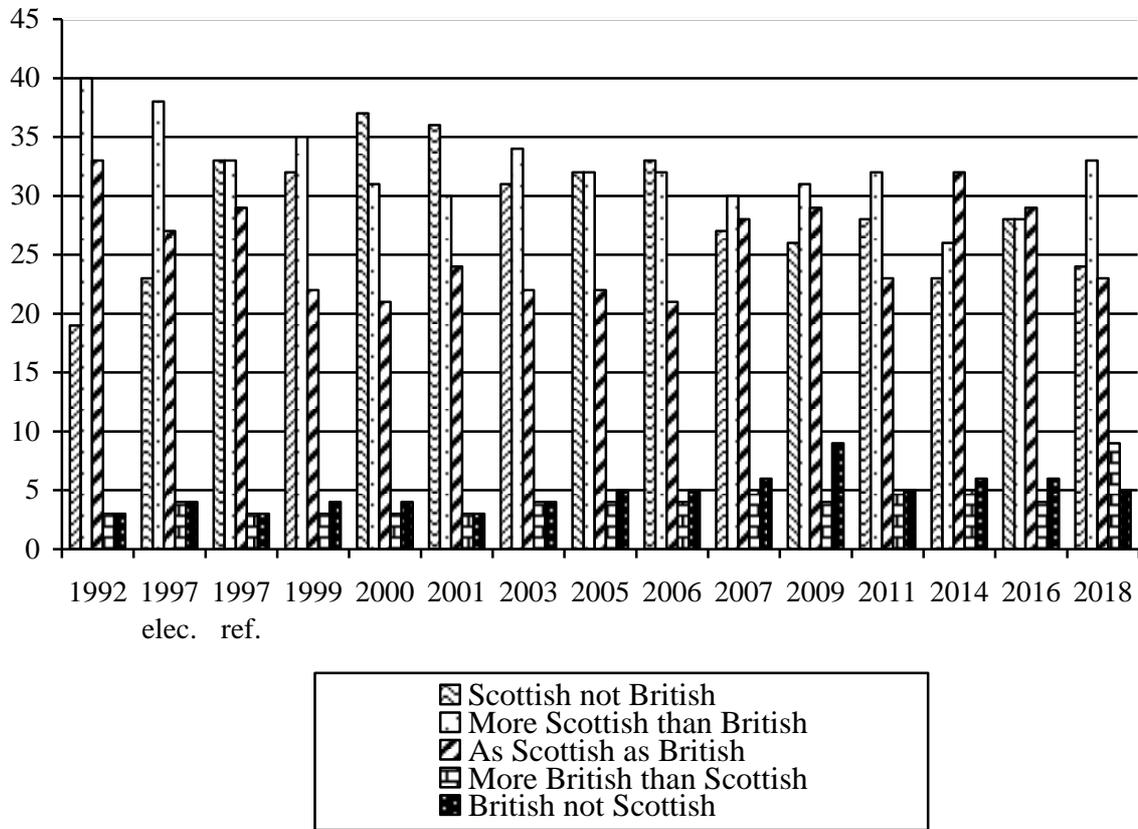
**Fiona Simpkins:** The formidable rise to power of the SNP in Edinburgh does not appear to correspond to any surge in either an exclusively Scottish identity or to separatism. The successive Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys published between May 1999, when the Scottish Parliament first came into existence, and the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 (after which the question was no longer included in the surveys) show neither a hardened sense of identity in Scotland nor stronger separatist feelings among Scots. The results of the surveys showed that there was no marked movement in favour of independence before the Scottish independence referendum of September 2014: 28% of Scots were in favour of independence in 1999 when the Scottish Parliament first opened, 23% in 2007 when the SNP was first elected in government, 32% in 2011 when the SNP obtained an absolute majority of seats in Holyrood, 24% in 2012 when the Edinburgh agreement leading to an independence referendum was signed and 32% in 2014 on the eve of the Scottish independence referendum.

Graph 1: Constitutional preference, 1997-2014



Neither did devolution affect Scottish national identity. The Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys admittedly witnessed a steep rise of the percentage of people who considered themselves “Scottish and not British” and rejected a dual identity between 1992 and the introduction of devolution in Scotland in 1999 (from 19% in 1992, when the question was first asked, to 32% in 1999). However, this can be explained by the rejection of the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s as well as initial enthusiasm for devolution in Scotland. In fact, this trend has tended to stabilise since then and has remained remarkably stable (from 27% in 2007, to 23 % in 2012, 27% in 2014 and 24% in 2018), which suggests that neither devolved politics in Scotland, SNP electoral victories or the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 have durably affected Scottish national identity in the last twenty years. In fact, according to an April 2018 YouGov poll for the BBC, the percentage of people in Scotland who strongly identify themselves as being Scottish (61%) is equivalent to the percentage of people who strongly identify themselves as being English (58%) south of the border.

Graph 2: Scottish identity on the Moreno scale, 1992-2018



Source: Results compiled from Scottish Election Studies (1992-1997), Scottish Referendum Survey 1997, Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys (1999-2016), ICM (2009), YouGov (2018).

Yet, electoral dynamics now diverge considerably on each side of the border. The main dividing line in Scotland today no longer runs between the left and right of the political spectrum but between unionism and separatism. Crucially, these two opposite views are both grounded in a centre-left political consensus and the arguments put forward by both camps tend to focus on presenting the best constitutional settlement to protect welfare and social justice. Scotland has a multi-party system and up to six different parties have been represented in Parliament since devolution was introduced in 1999: the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal-democrats, the Scottish Socialist Party, the SNP, and the Scottish Green Party. The latter two are pro-independence parties and only one of them, the Conservative party, stands to the

right of the political spectrum. All other parties are either centre-left or left-wing parties. There are in fact few differences to be found between Labour and the SNP on a wide set of issues, as both parties broadly agree on opposing cuts to public services and protecting the welfare system. This makes it particularly difficult for Labour to distinguish its political programme and brand message from the other centre-left to left parties in Scotland, notably with that of the SNP whose record in government is found satisfactory by a majority of Scots and whose leader, Nicola Sturgeon, remains the most popular political figure in Scotland. Uniquely, the SNP enjoys the advantage of being the only party with no UK-wide counterpart entirely devoted to defending Scottish interests.

**Books & Ideas: Scotland is often described as a markedly pro-European nation. Why?**

**Fiona Simpkins:** The EU accounts for 45% of Scotland's international exports (worth £14.9 bn) and Scotland benefits from a large number of bilateral trade deals which the EU has negotiated with third countries. Subsequently, EU membership also benefits Scotland in attracting foreign direct investment, as foreign firms are then able to export to the large Single Market free from import duties and other trade restrictions. Exports to the Single Market also provide an important source of jobs and activities, whilst enhanced competition between suppliers contributes to lowering the prices of goods and services for consumers. Scotland also benefits from a large number of residents originating from other Member States who currently live and work in Scotland, as well as the many EU students who have chosen to study in Scottish universities and could subsequently choose to work in Scotland. This is of particular importance for Scotland as its negative population balance and its ageing population mean that it will need to attract many more migrants in the future.

The Scottish National Party has supported various degrees of independence for Scotland since its foundation and has set its vision of an independent Scotland in various larger political unions. This has included in turn dominion status within the British Empire, self-government within a confederal union of the British Isles and, from the 1980s onwards, independence in the European Union. These successive objectives have resulted as much from the political pragmatism of the party as from an effort to appeal to the Scottish electorate at large, initially weary of severing the ties

that bind Scotland with the rest of the United Kingdom. More recently, the party has supported the establishment of a Scotland House in Brussels in 1999, together with the creation of a Scottish Minister for European and External Affairs in 2007 and of further links between the Scottish Parliament and other devolved governments in Europe. Given the central importance of EU markets to the Scottish economy and the overarching role of the European project in the political philosophy of Scotland's main political parties, it is therefore unsurprising that there were few dissenting voices in Scotland in the months leading to the referendum on British membership of the European Union, where 62% of voters voted Remain and where the Remain vote won a majority in every single constituency. The sheer political weight of the SNP in Scotland may itself have contributed to tipping the balance a little further towards Remain.

Although analyses of voting patterns in the European referendum of June 2016 show that the social divisions exposed by the referendum were clearly in evidence in Scotland as well, voters of all ages and educational backgrounds were more likely than elsewhere in Great-Britain to want to stay in the EU. One factor that may help account for the different results north and south of the border is the different political landscape of each nation: only 16.5% of Scots had voted for pro-Brexit parties at the 2015 general election (14.9% voted for the Conservative Party and 1.6% for UKIP). This suggests that Euroscepticism and Leave voices were largely absent from the political debate preceding the EU referendum in Scotland as the SNP, Labour, the Liberal-Democrats and the Scottish Green Party campaigned for Remain while the Scottish Conservative Party was officially neutral and its Scottish leader at the time, Ruth Davidson, was a prominent advocate for Remain.

### **Books & Ideas : How should the pro-SNP vote in the December 2019 general election be interpreted?**

**Fiona Simpkins:** The December 2019 electoral campaign in Scotland bore many similarities to that of June 2017 but its outcome was very different. As in 2017, the SNP chose to focus its campaign on Brexit but with a greater emphasis placed on a second Scottish independence referendum. If anything, the June 2017 general election suggested that although Scots were as a majority opposed to Brexit, it had little impact on support for independence and the Scottish electorate seemed in no mood for a

second independence referendum. However, various opinion polls over the summer and autumn of 2019 have consistently shown that the level of support for independence was approaching 49% and that a Yes vote at a second Scottish independence referendum now represents a much more realistic scenario. The Conservative governments' handling of Brexit appears to have swung some voters towards independence, turning the tide in the Nationalists' favour.

A second independence referendum and Brexit both appeared as the key issues that determined how people voted in Scotland in December 2019. The SNP benefited from a 7% increase in support among those who voted Remain while the Conservatives consolidated their support among Leave voters. Given the large majority in favour of Remain in Scotland, this was much more advantageous to the SNP. The Conservatives, on the other hand, relying on a smaller base of Leave supporters, lost 7 seats and 3.5% of the vote. The Scottish Conservatives were on their favourite battleground as they campaigned against a second independence referendum, a strategy which has enabled them to make an electoral come-back in Scotland since 2016. However, the loss of their extremely popular pro-Remain leader, Ruth Davidson, in August 2019 and her replacement by a more lacklustre acting leader, Jackson Carlaw, dented their chances of making the most of their strong unionist message. The unpopularity of Prime Minister Boris Johnson north of the border may also have hurt the Conservative vote: a series of Panelbase polls in November and December 2019 found that 59% of respondents in Scotland thought he was doing a bad or very bad job as Prime Minister compared to 44% overall in the UK. On the other hand, both the SNP and the Conservatives may have benefited from the Labour party's losses in Scotland as they shared the majority of Remain/Leave voters and Yes/No voters between them. In other words, the SNP's strength among Remain voters in Scotland left the Labour party with much less scope for advance than it had in England and Wales while the Conservatives' stronger unionist position got the backing of those who considered Scotland's constitutional position in the UK as a priority. Labour lost 6 seats and 8.5% of the vote, unable to squeeze its message between the Nationalists' strong case for Scottish sovereignty and the Conservatives' pro-Union base.

**Books & Ideas: What legal difficulties would the holding of another referendum entail? Would it be a safer bet than in 2014?**

**Fiona Simpkins:** The SNP seized its chance of calling for a second independence referendum immediately after the results of the European referendum of 2016 became clear. For a second independence referendum to be legally organised, the Scottish First Minister would first have to seek an agreement with the British government in Westminster similar to that obtained by former SNP First Minister Alex Salmond when he signed the Edinburgh Agreement of 2012 with former Prime Minister David Cameron ahead of the 2014 independence referendum. The SNP has consistently rejected setting up a referendum outside of the legal boundaries contained by article 30 of the Scotland Act 1998. It is therefore set on obtaining the legal consent of number 10, arguing that the changed circumstances of Scotland entailed by Brexit should be addressed in a second referendum.

In fact, the SNP's 2016 Scottish Parliament election manifesto provided for the eventuality of a second independence referendum after a Brexit vote as it stated that a new referendum would be held only *"if there is clear and sustained evidence that independence has become the preferred option of a majority of the Scottish people—or if there is a significant and material change in the circumstances that prevailed in 2014, such as Scotland being taken out of the EU against our will"*. The discrepancy between the results of the EU referendum in Scotland (with 62% voting Remain and 38% voting Leave) and in the rest of Britain did correspond to the change of circumstances foreseen by the 2016 manifesto upon which the current SNP government was elected. However, there was little appetite for a second referendum in 2017 and the surge in support for independence which the nationalists expected after the European referendum failed to materialise. The SNP lost 21 seats and 13.1% of the vote with some safe seats such as those of former leader Alex Salmond or Deputy leader Angus Robertson falling to the hands of the Scottish Conservatives. Interpreting the results as a clear sign that the Scottish electorate rejected her plans for a second independence referendum, Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon had to back down, declaring that she would "reset" the timetable for a second referendum.

However, the consistent rise in support for independence, as witnessed by various opinion polls since the summer of 2019, encouraged the SNP to campaign on an independence referendum platform in December 2019. Having won 48 seats in Parliament and interpreting her majority as a renewed mandate, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon wrote to Boris Johnson on 19<sup>th</sup> December to request the powers to legally stage another referendum under section 30 of the 1998 Scotland Act. She further called for the Scottish Parliament to be granted permanent powers to hold subsequent referendums on independence from the UK in a 38-page document entitled

“Scotland’s Right to Choose”. The negative answer she received on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2020 had been anticipated—and perhaps awaited—by the First Minister, who would undoubtedly prefer support for independence to continue rising first above the 50% threshold needed for Scotland to obtain its independence. While Brexit would indeed appear to be slowly eroding the basis of support for the British Union, unionists were quick to point out that the SNP’s share of the vote at the December 2019 general election did not exceed that of No voters at the 2014 independence referendum (45%), that a majority of voters had in fact voted for unionist parties and that the SNP may have benefited from the exceptional backing of unionist Remain voters. It remains to be seen how Brexit will impact support for independence after January 31<sup>st</sup>.

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