# Ideology and rationality: the Europeanisation of the Scottish National Party

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## The Europeanisation of the Scottish National Party

*Dieser Beitrag beschäftigt sich mit den Auswirkungen der Europäisierung auf einen regionalen Akteur, namentlich die Schottische Nationalpartei (SNP). Der Autor analysiert die Reaktion der Partei auf den Beitritt Großbritanniens zur Europäischen Union und die Adaption ihrer Strategie zur Erlangung der schottischen Unabhängigkeit. Dazu werden zwei unterschiedliche Perioden – nämlich 1974-1979 und 1988-1997 – miteinander verglichen, in denen die Partei eine entscheidende Rolle in den Bestrebungen nach schottischer Unabhängigkeit spielte. Beide Perioden gipfelten in einem Referendum: Während die Einrichtung einer regionalen Volksvertretung 1979 abgelehnt wurde, wurde dieses Vorhaben 1997 unterstützt. In der Zeit zwischen den beiden Volksabstimmungen wandelte sich nicht nur die Haltung der SNP gegenüber der EU radikal, sondern die Partei änderte auch ihre Instrumentalisierung „Europas" im Kampf für die eigenen politischen Ziele. Während der ersten Periode nahm die SNP eine stark anti-europäische Haltung ein und stellte die Mitgliedschaft in der EU als ein zusätzliches Hindernis auf dem Weg zur schottischen Unabhängigkeit dar. Im Gegensatz dazu vertrat die SNP in der zweiten Periode eine pro-europäische Haltung und passte ihre Strategie an das nun modifizierte Ziel „Unabhängigkeit in Europa" an. Die Partei erfuhr im Zuge der Europäisierung einen Wandel von einer extrem europa-skeptischen zu einer Europa stark befürwortenden Partei. Der Beitrag setzte sich mit diesem Anpassungsprozess und seinen Konsequenzen für die schottische Unabhängigkeitspolitik auseinander. Der Autor argumentiert, dass die Reaktion der Partei auf die Europäisierung als komplexes Zusammenspiel zwischen ideologischer Überzeugung und strategischem Kalkül verstanden werden kann.*

## 1. Introduction

This article deals with the process of Europeanisation of a regional actor, the Scottish National Party (SNP), in the period between 1973 – when the UK entered the European Union[1] – and 1997 – when a devolved Scottish parliament was established. The party played a crucial role in the politics of Scottish self-government, especially in the two phases when the latter was at the forefront of the UK political agenda, culminating in two referendums: 1973–79 and 1988–97.[2]

In the first of these periods the SNP was strongly opposed to European integration and campaigned for an independent Scotland to leave the European Union as it perceived the EU as negative, in political and economic terms,

and as an additional constraint for Scottish independence. In the second period, in contrast, the party was warmly supportive of the process of integration, now seen as positive and 'progressive', and adopted the goal of 'Independence in Europe' on the grounds that the EU context was a facilitator of Scottish independence. In other words, the party underwent a deep process of Europeanisation from Euro-scepticism to Euro-enthusiasm. On the basis of a comparative analysis over time between the two periods the article identifies the determinants of the party's position at each of the two points in time and explains the change between them.

The article is organised in five main sections. The first section starts by presenting the theoretical framework, contrasting rationalist and constructivist approaches, utilised in defining

hypotheses and in interpreting the research results. It then outlines the methodology chosen to operationalise the research design, centred on content and discourse analysis of four types of primary sources: election manifestoes, party publications, speeches and memoirs of party leaders and semi-structured interviews with party leaders. The following section briefly introduces the SNP providing some basic information on the party. Section 4 and 5 analyse each of the two periods, focusing on, first, how the party perceived the EU dimension and, second, how it exploited it in its strategy. Section 5 accounts for the radical change in the party's perceptions and strategies between the 1970s and the 1990s thus offering an explanation of its Europeanisation. The final section summarises the argument and points out that neither of the two theoretical approaches, taken in isolation, can account for the Europeanisation of the party and that only an explanation which combines ideological and rationalist elements can do so.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical literature on political parties has identified three main models of party strategies: the 'vote-seeking' party, the 'office-seeking' party and the 'policy-seeking' party. Each of these models focuses on one objective parties are supposed to pursue. However, parties have long been recognised as pursuing multiple objectives at the same time as well as different objectives at different points in time. Moreover, it is worth remembering that votes have no intrinsic value for parties, which seek them only as an instrument towards achieving office benefits or policy influence. On this basis, following Strøm, I assume that parties, led by party leaders, are motivated by both office benefits and policy influence.

Though office benefits and policy influence are of course connected, as policy is best influenced by office holders, there is tension between the two, especially in the long-term as office incumbency tends to have electoral costs. Parties thus face a double trade-off: between office benefits and policy influence, on the one hand, and between the short-term and the long-term, on the other hand (Strøm 1990; Strøm/Müller 1999). These trade-offs define the specific mix of objectives that parties pursue at any given time. In turn, though, parties' strategies directed at achieving a given mix of objectives is affected, as Strøm shows, by two sets of factors: the organisational properties of the party and the institutional environment in which the party operates. The latter, in particular, provides incentives and opportunities for strategic action as well as placing constraints on it.

Strøm's general framework for conceptualising party strategies can usefully be adopted to theorise on the Europeanisation of regionalist and secessionist parties.[3] From this perspective, regionalist and secessionist parties are both motivated by the conquest of political office at state, regional or local level and by the pursuit of their central policy objective, namely regional self-government or independence. It seems reasonable to assume that these parties value policy influence more than office benefits, especially under two circumstances. First, if a regional level of government is either inexistent or weak so that the only significant office is at state level, which is difficult for them to conquer. This is likely to be reinforced, second, in the phase of initial rise of the party when the prospects of gaining office are slim and party leaders tend to be highly ideologically-driven, i.e. policy-motivated. It can thus be said that regionalist and secessionist parties are primarily motivated by the desire to gain devolved and/or independent self-government for their regions. They pursue this primary objective within the strategic environment defined by the institutional rules and structures of a given state, with their pattern of constraints, opportunities and incentives.[4] In this context, EU membership adds an extra dimension to the strategic environment in which the party operates, altering the pattern of constraints, opportunities and incentives it faces. I draw a distinction between opportunities, which facilitate actors' strategies but do not modify their preferences, and incentives, which do.

Furthermore, the SNP's strategic environment was defined by two extra factors. First, the am-

biguous strategy of the party between the ulti-mate goal of independence and the short term goal of autonomy – as an end in itself and as a stepping stone to the former – which made it at once autonomist and secessionist. Second, the fact that the party operated in a region without autonomous institutions.[5]

Putting these aspects together, we can iden-tify the following elements in the EU's dimen-sion of the SNP's strategic environment. Start-ing with constraints, the trans-national and con-tinental nature of European integration has the potential, first, to undermine a regional-nation-alist discourse by making it appear parochial and backward and, second, the EU context places limits on the very independence a party such as the SNP was pursuing. Turning to op-portunities, the single market reduces the eco-nomic costs of secession and increases the eco-nomic viability of a small state thus facilitating the demand for independence. The supra-na-tional EU institutions can also be natural allies of a regionalist actor in the strategy of under-mining the monolithic conception of state sov-ereignty and centralisation of power. Finally, decision-making at the Union level creates a strong incentive for regional representation at that level, hence for regional institutions where these are not present. Furthermore, the small-state bias in the EU's institutional structure and the pre-eminence of the European Council/ Council of Ministers provides an even stronger incentive to gain a 'state' status vis-à-vis a 're-gion' status thus strengthening the case for in-dependence.

It is worth stressing that parties act on their own *perceptions* of the European strategic en-vironment rather than on the basis of the 'ob-jective' elements identified above and that per-ceptions are shaped by, among others, two key factors. First, by the amount of information about the EU available at a given point in time; an amount which is likely to increase over time. Secondly, and most importantly, they are shaped by the ideological preferences of the actors con-cerned. Parties thus choose strategies on the basis of rational decisions 'bounded' by avail-ability of information and ideological prefer-ences.[6] This article is thus concerned with both how the EU was perceived and how it was ex-ploited for there is an intimate link between the two aspects. It would have been impossible to exploit it as facilitator of autonomy and/or in-dependence had it been perceived as detrimen-tal to these objectives.

It is thus possible to define two alternative Europeanisation paths for a party such as the SNP on the basis of, respectively, a constructivist and a rationalist approach.[7] A constructivist process would see the changes in the institutional environment brought about by EU membership – and, subsequently, by the evolution of the EU system – reaching into the party's culture, beliefs and values and altering its preferences in an EU-compatible way. In contrast, a rationalist Europeanisation would see the party maintaining its culture, beliefs, values and, especially, preferences largely unaltered but adopting a different strategy to maximise the opportunities and the incentives offered by the new dimension and to minimise its constraints. In the latter scenario, the party would ultimately undergo a process of Europeanisation only if it perceives that the maximised benefits outweigh the minimised costs.

### 3. Introducing the Scottish National Party

As its name indicates, the SNP is a regional-nationalist party founded in the 1930s with the aim of establishing an independent Scottish state outside the United Kingdom. In the 1970s, this goal was defined as independence under the British Crown and within the Commonwealth but outside the European Union. From the late 1980s onwards, as discussed below, it was de-fined as 'Independence in Europe' i.e. as a mem-ber state of the EU. Traditionally, the party in-tended to pursue this goal by gaining a majority of the Scottish seats in the House of Commons and, on that basis, claim a popular mandate to negotiate Scotland's secession from the UK. With the prospect of establishing an assembly/ parliament becoming more concrete the party also considered the option of gaining a major-ity in such an assembly and claim a mandate for secession on that basis.

This policy of independence for Scotland rested on three conceptual points. First, the party asserted the status of Scotland as a nation and the consequent inalienable right to self-determination. The assertion of Scotland's nationhood naturally implied that the United Kingdom was conceptualised as a pluri-national state rather than a nation-state. In other words, the UK was a partnership between the Scottish and the English nations rather than a fusion of them to create a British nation. Second, the party believed that the union with England had overall been negative for Scotland, despite some political and economic gains, primarily because it threatened the survival of Scotland as a distinctive nation. Being ten times smaller than England in population terms, Scotland was increasingly at risk of being 'absorbed' into its larger neighbour. Third, the party was convinced that with the end of the British Empire, with the discovery of oil in the Scottish section of the North Sea and, since its change of attitudes, with the EU customs union, it was no longer in the economic interest of the Scottish nation to belong to the United Kingdom.

The party has always put emphasis on its 'democratic' organisation which granted considerable power to ordinary members in a highly decentralised structure. Significantly, the party leader is formally referred to as 'convener' and has often acted as a chairman rather than a true leader of the party. The annual conference is the main decision-making arena and the body that elects the party's senior officers. Between conferences, policy decisions are taken by a national council meeting quarterly. The two key changes of leadership in the periods covered here – from Wolfe to Wilson in 1979 and from Wilson to Salmond in 1990 – were the result of voluntary stepping down rather than challenges. A feature of the party has long been the cleavage between a 'fundamentalist' wing of those who do not accept any compromise with the fundamental objective of independence and a 'moderate' wing taking a more pragmatic view.[8]

The core of the SNP's support has always been the Scottish nationalist vote but the party has also tended to perform a typical 'third party' role rather similar to that played by the Liberal Democrats in England. This had led in some instances, as discussed below, to mistaking support for the party for support for secession while in reality there was a large gap between the two.[9]

## 4. Hostility and Neglect: 1973–79

The period considered here is the one between the general election of October 1974 and the referendum on 1 March 1979. In this period, Scottish self-government – as a result of the Labour government's policy – became for the first time a salient political issue at the UK level and was put for the first time to the test of Scotland's public opinion. In the referendum, the proposals contained in the Scotland Act 1978 failed to attract enough support to warrant the establishment of a Scottish Assembly. The challenge presented by the SNP's rise had been the driving force behind the Labour government's policy and the party played a prominent role in this period.[10] In the October 1974 general election, the party obtained its best result ever with 30.4 percent of the vote and 11 MPs. In the 1979 election that followed the devolution referendum, support collapsed to 17.3 percent and the party lost all but two of its MPs.

### 4.1. Self-government policy

The emergence of the Labour party's policy to establish a Scottish Assembly after the October 1974 general election created an acute strategic dilemma for the party.[11] On the one hand, the party was attracted by the opportunity to use an assembly as a springboard for gaining a majority of Scottish seats more easily than in a UK-wide competition. On the other hand, it faced the risk that "the establishment of a Scottish Assembly might satisfy the electorate sufficiently to postpone the achievement of independence indefinitely" (Macartney 1981, 18). The party was split along these two interpretations of the connection between devolution and independence into 'gradualist' and 'fundamentalist' wings. The latter shared the second view

of devolution and believed that the party should stick to the traditional policy of gaining a majority of Scottish MPs, while the former had a positive view of devolution and wanted to use an assembly as a stepping-stone to secession. They thought that the prospect of the SNP gaining a majority of Scottish seats was, at best, a distant one and anything that could have made Scots more accustomed to the idea of self-government – notably a limited degree of it in the form of devolution – had to be welcomed.[12] Though the conflict between the two tendencies was never entirely solved, the party eventually settled for the gradualist strategy and reached a substantial degree of unity in support of the devolution policy of the Labour government. This policy was maintained up to the referendum campaign in January-February 1979, when the SNP went to great lengths to downplay any connection between devolution and independence in its pro-assembly rhetoric and was indeed the only party to campaign unambiguously for a Yes vote.[13]

### 4.2. Perception of the EU system

In the 1970s, the SNP had a deeply negative perception of the European Union. The prevailing view was that the EU featured, on a larger scale, the same centralising tendencies, in political and economic terms, as the United Kingdom. Therefore, the process of European integration was the continuation of the process of centralisation that had taken place at the British level and, as such, it threatened to inflict further political and economic damage on Scotland (Mitchell 1998, 112–113). In the party's eyes, such nature of European integration explained why the UK-wide parties were in favour of joining the EU. Billy Wolfe, the SNP leader in the 1970s, wrote in 1973 that "it is the aim of the Common Market to establish political domination of the whole of Western Europe and to tolerate no deviation from this line" (Wolfe 1973, 139). The SNP thus opposed entry into the EU in 1972 and campaigned for a No vote in the 1975 referendum. During the referendum campaign, the parliamentary leader of the party declared that the EU "represents everything that our party has fought against: centralisation, undemocratic procedures, power politics and a fetish for abolishing cultural differences" (quoted in Lynch 1996, 35). The referendum itself was largely seen by the party as a referendum on Scottish sovereignty in the hope that Scotland would vote against the EU while England would vote in favour (Lynch 1996, 33; Mitchell 1998, 113). After the majority of Scots had voted in favour of EU membership the party shifted its position towards acceptance of the reality of membership while keeping a negative attitude to the EU. In October 1978, the then deputy leader Gordon Wilson declared: "A massive re-think by Scots about the EEC may be needed soon. Evidence is growing that the EEC is proving hostile to Scotland's national interests".[14] The official party policy was that the issue of EU membership of an independent Scotland would be decided in a referendum with the SNP recommending withdrawal to the electorate.[15]

The SNP's hostility towards the EU in the 1970s was determined by four main factors. First, the SNP objected to Scotland not having been represented in the negotiations before entry and not having been consulted as a nation in the 1975 referendum. Strictly connected with this aspect was the issue of Scotland's representation in the institutions of the EU and the preservation of its 'national' status vis-à-vis its categorisation as a 'region'. Second, as expressed by the then leader, most members of the SNP had a negative opinion of the political characteristics of the EU which was perceived as a centralising, bureaucratic and undemocratic organisation.[16] Third, the majority in the party had a negative perception of the process of European economic integration, based on free trade and market liberalisation. This was seen as favouring the exploitation of a weak, peripheral economy such as Scotland by the dominant capitalist actors based in the core regions of southeast England and the European mainland. Last, but not least, the party was also very critical of core EU policies such as the agriculture and fisheries policies which it perceived to be very damaging to Scottish interests.[17]

Membership of the EU and the process of European integration were thus perceived as a further threat to the survival of the Scottish nation and to its economic welfare. The EU was perceived as an extension of the UK, sharing the same characteristics of centralisation, capitalism and neglect of the periphery.[18] From this perspective, membership of the EU was seen as adding an extra hurdle on the path towards achieving national sovereignty. As the process of centralisation on a European scale was perceived to be weakening Scotland even more than the process that had taken place at the UK level (Mitchell 1998, 117), secession from the latter but continued membership of the EU would achieve little. What Scotland urgently needed was secession from both the UK *and* the EU and the SNP policy in the 1970s aimed to achieve this double independence.

## 4.3. Strategic use of the EU dimension

This perception determined that the European dimension was almost totally neglected in the SNP's campaign for a Yes vote in the 1979 referendum. In so far as the EU was mentioned, it was for pointing out its negative effects on Scotland. The discourse – or lack thereof – of two senior figures of the party during the campaign illustrates the point. The deputy-leader and future leader Gordon Wilson, who would be at the forefront of the change of policy on the EU in the 1980s, failed to mention any European dimension in his case for devolution put forward in the last stages of the referendum campaign.[19] For her part, Winnie Ewing, who would later become a long-serving MEP, declared that a No vote in the referendum would clear the way for "the further takeover of Scottish land by foreigners (…) and for Brussels to dictate the final ruin of fishing and agriculture".[20]

It appears that the SNP's negative perception of the EU prevented the party from strategically using the European dimension to allay widespread fears about independence and its connection with devolution. This connection and the contradictions in the Yes front between the SNP and the Labour party were ruthlessly exploited by the No front which centred its campaign on the spectre of a break-up of the UK. The strategy spectacularly succeeded in changing the overall tone of the debate on devolution and ultimately turned what was still a 'virtual' majority in favour of the Assembly into a rejection of the Scotland Act 1978.[21] Such strategic failure cost dearly to the party in both policy and votes terms, as seen above. Data on public opinion provide further evidence of this failure. SNP identifiers were by far the most hostile to the EU in 1979 and, even more remarkably, only 37 percent of them supported the party's policy of secession from the UK and the EU.[22]

## 5. Enthusiasm and Strategic Exploitation: 1988–97

The period considered here is the one between the general election of June 1987 and the second referendum on 11 September 1997. I take 1988 as the starting point for in this year two crucial events took place: the SNP officially adopted its new policy of 'Independence in Europe' and the Scottish Constitutional Convention was set up.

In this period, Scottish self-government returned to centre-stage in British politics and was an important issue in the two general elections of 1992 and 1997. The 1997 referendum saw an emphatic endorsement of devolution and led to the establishment of a Scottish Parliament by 1999. As in the first period, the SNP was a key actor in this phase and crucially contributed to the endorsement of devolution in the referendum. In the 1992 election, the party polled 21.5 percent of the Scottish vote and gained three MPs. Five years later it increased its share of the vote to 22 percent but doubled its number of MPs.

## 5.1. Self-government policy

After the 1979 *débâcle* and a subsequent deep crisis [23], from 1983 onwards the SNP set out to moderate its stance with the twofold aim of at-

tracting increased electoral support for the party and of increasing support for independence at mass public level beyond a hard core of 'fundamentalists'. In other words, to turn the party and its core policy from 'extreme' to 'mainstream'. Central to policy revision was the change of strategy towards the EU analysed below. The other key element was the gradual abandonment of the 'automatism' of secession by making the latter – in the 1997 election manifesto – subject to endorsement in a referendum. As in the 1970s, in this period too the party was facing the dilemma of what policy to adopt towards devolution, hence towards its main proponent, the Labour party. After an initial reluctance to support it, marked by the refusal to join the Constitutional Convention, which was intended to represent the whole spectrum of Scotland's demand for self-government, the party moved closer to Labour and, under the leadership of the 'gradualist' wing of the party, played a major role in the unified Yes campaign for the 1997 referendum.

## 5.2. Perception of the EU system

The SNP's perception of the European Union in this period was radically different from that of the 1970s. The party moved from being the one most opposed to European integration to being, in certain respects, the most pro-EU of all Scottish parties, though some internal divisions remained.[24] As mentioned in the preceding section, the new leadership around Gordon Wilson set out from the early 1980s to change the party's attitude towards the EU. By 1988, not only had the party fully accepted Scotland's membership of the European Union but it had turned it into the cornerstone of its independence policy. This was based on an overall positive perception of the European Union itself and of its effect on Scotland, though some of the old doubts lingered on. As regards the economic side of integration, the party still harboured some concerns about Scotland's peripherality but overall it clearly perceived that the single market had been positive for Scotland. On the political side, the SNP also main-

tained reserves about the EU decision-making process and the agricultural and fisheries policies but these were placed within an overall positive framework perceiving the EU as a progressive supra-state political system in which small nations and regions could play a full part. In particular, in this period the SNP was explicitly comparing the European 'union' and the British 'union' and perceived the former as a 'positive alternative' to the latter, on the ground that it had different and more desirable characteristics. Above all, as explained below, in the 1990s the SNP perceived the European Union as a political system facilitating the achievement of the party's goal of Scottish independence whereas in the 1970s the EU was seen as placing additional constraints on the pursuit of such a goal

## 5.3. Strategic use of the EU dimension

On this positive perception of the EU, the SNP built a new policy of seeking secession from the UK but placing an independent Scotland firmly in the context of EU membership, under the slogan of 'Independence in Europe'.[25] The 'Independence in Europe' policy was explicitly intended to take advantage of the incentives and opportunities that the EU system was offering in order to increase the appeal of independence – hence of the SNP – at mass public level. In Gordon Wilson's words, "I wanted to make it easier for people to vote for the SNP and for independence (and) I saw Europe as a counterweight to London".[26] In the party's discourse, the European Union was portrayed as a confederal union of independent member states and contrasted with a unitary, centralised UK state with the obvious claim that the former was providing a much more favourable framework for Scotland than the latter. In the words of the party's spokesperson, Kevin Pringle, "the whole concept of a small country in Europe has become a powerful argument for us (…) Europe is a powerful campaigning tool for the SNP".[27] More particularly, the SNP claimed that the concept of 'Independence in Europe' would remove the charge of isolationism, would eliminate the

economic costs of secession and would increase Scotland's influence on policy-making at the Union level.

These claims rested on three properties of the EU political system that constituted opportunities and incentives for independence in the eyes of the SNP. At the more general level, the insertion of independence within a process of European integration, intended to transcend the nation-states, removed the negative connotations of secession, linked to the ideas of separation and isolation The European framework thus offered the opportunity to reduce the symbolic costs of secession (Sillars 1986, 182). The second opportunity offered by the EU was in the economic sphere. Here the key factor was that the existence of an EU-wide customs union and the development of the single market offered the guarantee that an independent Scotland would retain full access to the English market as this would be preserved by EU membership. The potential loss of the English market for companies operating in an independent Scotland had always been the major economic cost of independence and a stumbling block in broadening its appeal beyond the committed hard core. In Gordon Wilson's words at the 1983 conference, this aspect made the new policy a "first class way of pushing the advantages of political independence without any threat of economic dislocation" (quoted in Lynch 1996, 38).[28] The party was deeply aware that for independence ever to receive majority support the economic consequences had to be clearly addressed and the party had to be deemed capable of governing the country, as the lessons of the 1979 defeat and of the subsequent decline in support showed.[29]

Lastly, but most importantly, the party exploited the fact that the institutional structure of the EU was highly favourable to the small countries as it over-represented their interests vis-à-vis the larger member states, to argue that the European 'union' would be a much more favourable political framework for Scotland than the British 'union'. The fact that small countries are on an equal footing with larger ones in terms of presidency of the Council and the right of veto and over-represented in the power of appointing Commissioners, in the voting weights in the Council and in the share of seats in the Parliament was central to this claim. Crucially, the party was able to claim that only member-state status would give Scotland adequate representation at the Union level when the latter was becoming increasingly important with the development of the process of integration and the Conservative party's self-inflicted isolation reduced the UK political influence within the Council of Ministers. As the manifesto for the 1994 European election put it: "Scotland needs to change (…) central to that change is the need for a powerful, direct voice in Europe. An independent Scotland sitting at the top table beside the other nations of Europe will totally change our situation."[30] In Pringle's words, as the Union level acquires more and more policy-making competences, it becomes ever more important for Scotland to "maximise its voice at the European level".[31]

It should come as no surprise that in its pro-EU discourse the party ignored the fact that automatic EU membership for a seceding Scotland was far from assured and that the process of integration itself had the potential to run counter to nationalist aspirations. If, on the one hand, the EU was lowering the economic, political and symbolic costs of secession it was, on the other hand, also threatening the very national sovereignty that the party wanted to achieve for Scotland.[32]

Despite the inherent tensions, critics would say contradictions, in the SNP's position, the party's strategy was markedly more successful in the 1990s than in the 1970s. In particular, it produced three main effects. First, it shifted the preference distribution at mass public level towards the independence end of the spectrum and threatened to polarise competition between the latter and the status quo leaving the assembly option looking like an 'empty centre'. This shift forced the Labour party to react and to move closer to the SNP's position. However, the 'Independence in Europe' option also represented a 'moderation' or a 'mainstreaming' of the SNP's position which had the overall effect of narrowing the policy distance between the latter and Labour. Second, this *rapprochement*

acted as a powerful factor of unity within the pro-self-government front, enabling it – in sharp contrast to the 1979 situation – to present a united face and to campaign jointly for the endorsement of devolution in the referendum (McCrone/Lewis 1999, 27). The appeal of the 'Independence in Europe' option – in 1997 the second most popular constitutional preference – and the unitary campaign of the Yes front were the two most important determinants of the referendum result in 1997. [33] Thirdly, by exploiting the opportunities and incentives that the EU context was offering, the party was instrumental in opening a European dimension to the politics of self-government and to force the other parties to compete in that dimension. Given that by the 1990s support for Scottish self-government was associated to support for European integration, the new spatial configuration of competition gave a structural advantage to the pro-self-government front; a neat reversal of the 1979 situation.[34]

However, it is also important to point out that the SNP's success was more evident in 'policy' terms than in 'votes' terms. As mentioned above, the party's preferred constitutional status for Scotland – 'Independence in Europe' – became the second most popular option with 26 per cent support across the electorate and 54 among SNP identifiers, thus producing a radical shift in the preference distribution at mass public level.[35] This, in turn, was crucial in making devolution endorsed in the referendum. On the other hand, the SNP's share of the vote in Scotland or the percentage of voters identifying with the party did not increase in any comparable way. Identification with the SNP only rose from 10 to 18 percent between 1979 and 1997 while electoral support went from 17 to 22 percent. If the SNP managed to become the second party in Scotland and thus the effective opposition to Labour, this was due more to the collapse in support for the Conservative party than to any dramatic upsurge in the nationalist vote. Though, it is also true that the establishment of a Scottish parliament itself, of course, provided a natural avenue for the further consolidation of the SNP as Scotland's second party. This differential in the party's fortunes between 'policy' and 'votes' has been observed in relation to other cases of prominent regionalist parties and can be conceptualised as an inherent strategic dilemma for parties whose principal *raison d'être* is a change in the constitutional status of their region. Regionalist parties face a very significant risk that mainstream competitors can 'steal' the central point in their platforms and thus make them, to paraphrase Newman, 'win the policy wars but lose the electoral battles' (Newman 1995; see also de Winter 1998, 238–240).

## 6. Explaining the Europeanisation of the SNP

How can this radical shift in attitudes and in strategies be explained? Three groups of significant factors can be identified: in the UK system, at the EU level and within the party.

### 6.1. Changes in the UK system

After the 1979 referendum and the general election, the Thatcher-led Conservative governments moved the policy output of the UK system significantly rightwards by aggressively reforming social, regional and fiscal policies.[36] Furthermore, they also embarked on a process of re-centralisation, marked in particular by the emasculation of local government and explicit opposition to the idea of regional government. Any suggestion of home rule for Scotland was rejected on the same grounds. These changes inevitably affected the nature of the union between Scotland and England as the traditional understanding of the UK as a union-state appeared to be under threat.[37] Furthermore, they also moved the policy output and the institutional structure of the UK further away from the preferences of the SNP – and of the median Scottish voter – thus allowing the party to portray the UK political system as hostile to Scottish interests. On the basis of the connection between perception of the system and its strategic exploitation discussed above, the increasing 'negativity' of the UK facilitated the party's case for Scotland to secede from it.

### 6.2. Changes at the EU level

The EU changed significantly between 1979 and 1997. First of all, the level of economic integration in the EU's internal market deepened as a result of the single market programme which eliminated most technical barriers to cross-border trade and increased the ease of movement for both capital and labour. A more deeply integrated internal market provided higher guarantees for maintaining cross-border economic activities, which had particular relevance to the scenario in which a border could be established between Scotland and the rest of the UK. In other words, the deepening of economic integration further reduced the economic costs associated with secession. Moreover, negative predictions about the impact of economic integration on Scotland failed to materialise and, as integration deepened, Scotland appeared to profit from the inflow of foreign direct investments, especially from US companies. Kevin Pringle summarises the SNP's turnaround on this point as such: "There are substantial economic benefits for Scotland to gain from membership of Europe".[38]

Second, political integration also deepened considerably with EU competences expanding into policy areas hitherto reserved to the states. This deepening of political integration raised the importance of the EU as a decision-making forum and thus raised the salience of the representation of Scottish interests within it. Given the continuing pre-eminence of the Council, such an incentive affected especially the option of independent self-government vis-à-vis devolved self-government. The expectations that regions could play a significant role in EU policy-making quickly died out after the Committee of the Regions had been set up in 1994, thus facilitating the SNP's strategy of stressing the attractiveness of a 'state' status vis-à-vis a 'region' status for Scotland.

Thirdly, the shift to direct election for the European Parliament offered the SNP the opportunity to be directly represented at the EU level and in a forum that displayed a great deal of understanding for the party's cause. Through the election of one of the party's most promi-

nent leaders in 1979 an 'organic' link was established between the party and the European forum *par excellence*. This contributed significantly to making the EU appear a 'friendly' system in the eyes of the party.

Lastly, but most importantly, the European Union developed substantial social and regional policies which moved the policy output of the Union leftwards and which contributed significantly to dispel its image as a purely *laissez faire*, capitalist organisation. Scotland became a major beneficiary of the structural funds, especially those targeted to areas in industrial decline, which were just born in the late 1970s but commanded over 30 percent of the EU budget in the 1990s. For economic and political reasons – Scotland's peripherality and de-industrialisation together with the left-leaning preferences of the SNP's constituency – these policies were popular in the Scottish society as a whole and among nationalists in particular and their prominence could compensate for unpopular aspects of the EU such as the fisheries policy.[39] As for the previous points, these institutional and policy changes at the European level went a long way towards changing the perception the party had of the EU, especially in contrast to the UK.

Building on this new perception of the EU as a positive institutional environment for Scotland – and an even more so one for an independent Scotland – the SNP was then able to fully exploit it in its strategy to boost support for independence and for itself. It would have been impossible for the party to make a success of its 'Independence in Europe' strategy had 'Europe' still been perceived in negative terms by the party members and the wider Scottish society.

### 6.3. Changes within the party

Two main changes took place within the party itself. Jim Sillars, a former Labour MP and most prominent advocate of a European dimension to Scottish self-government, joined the SNP after his Scottish Labour party foundered in the 1979 election and played a crucial role in persuading the party that the European Union framework could be exploited to increase sup-

port for independence.[40] More significantly, two prominent figures such as Gordon Wilson and Winnie Ewing abandoned their sharp hostility towards the EU and were instrumental in moving the party towards acceptance of the EU first and towards embracing the policy of 'Independence in Europe' later. In 1979, the former became party leader while the latter – perhaps the most charismatic figure in the party – became MEP for the Highlands and Islands constituency.

Both Wilson and Ewing changed their positions in the wake of the 1979 referendum *debâcle* and the subsequent collapse in the party's support but their 'conversion' was also part of a broader ideological revision in respect of the conception of national sovereignty and the role of government in the economy. National sovereignty ceased to be conceptualised as a monolithic, zero-sum entity and the idea that it could be pooled or vertically segmented without relinquishing it became widely accepted. It was seen as part of the process of 'mainstreaming' the party, which entailed the abandonment of the ideal of building a semi-autarkic 19th century nation-state and which made possible the shift away from the maximalist position of secession from the UK *and* the EU.[41] As regards the role of government in the economy, the revision led to the acceptance of a liberal 'economic constitution' in which economic activities are left to market actors and the government's role is confined to regulating the market.[42] Like the other factors analysed above, this ideological revision made both the EU and a 'limited' independence for Scotland acceptable to the party and thus opened the way for their use in the party strategy.

Two interactions between these factors, in particular, appear to have been decisive in changing the SNP's perception of the EU and determining its decision to exploit it strategically. First, the 'systemic shift' between the position of the UK and the EU systems relative to Scotland's modified the whole institutional context in which the politics of self-government was framed. By bringing the EU system closer to the preferences of the median Scottish voter than the UK's, it made the European 'union' more attractive than the British 'union' with the resulting impact on the attractiveness of the 'Independence in Europe' option. Second, the 1980s' ideological revision – prominently displayed in the case of two senior leaders of the party – cleared the ideological 'fog' that prevented the party from seeing how the European Union could facilitate their strategies. It thus made visible from the late–1980s onwards what the ideological 'fog' had kept hidden from them in 1979.

## 7. Conclusions

It seems already clear that neither a rationalist nor a constructivist interpretation, on their own, can account for the Europeanisation of the SNP analysed above, though on balance the former seems to be able to explain much more than the latter.

There is some evidence that a constructivist dynamics was at play, especially in the 'conversion' of a prominent leader such as Winnie Ewing after her election to the European Parliament. It is plausible that the change in Ewing's perceptions and preferences was the result of her being exposed to 'European' culture and norms as part of a process of 'institutional learning' as an MEP. Also, the party's greater familiarity with the EU system probably contributed to the acceptability of independence within a system of multi-level governance for a nation such as Scotland. However, the overall change in the party's perception of the EU had little to do with the 'learning' of norms and values but was determined by the broad ideological revision of the left-of-centre opinion across Europe and, especially, by the 'systemic shift' brought about by the EU system moving closer to Scotland while the UK moved away.

In contrast, the decision to change the discourse on the EU and campaign on 'Independence in Europe' was in many respects a 'cold', rational move on the part of the SNP based on a careful calculation that the benefits from the move would outweigh its potential costs. The new policy allowed the party to claim that the political and economic costs of secession had almost disappeared while the constraints on

Scotland's independence would be minimal.[43] While the party's preferences changed only slightly, the strategy was radically different. On the other hand, the key features of the EU system the party decided to exploit in the 1990s – customs union, confederal nature, small states bias – were already present in 1979.[44] The fact that the SNP did not exploit them at that time clearly indicates a failure of 'rationality' which appears due to imperfect information and, especially, to ideological 'blinkers'.

Two broader points suggest themselves. First, the EU political system possesses properties that have the potential to affect the demand for self-government at the regional level, in other words to Europeanise them. These properties are both static, related to those features of the EU that are relatively fixed, and dynamic, related to those features produced by the process of integration over time. Actors demanding regional self-government are liable to be Europeanised because these properties of the EU system offer incentives and opportunities to them – as well as placing constraints – which alter the benefits/costs balance for the actor and influence its strategic action. On balance incentives and opportunities outweigh constraints thus making Europeanisation – under certain conditions[45] – a potentially empowering influence on regionalist actors. This theoretical conclusion is consistent with the empirical evidence that several other regionalist parties also abandoned their Euro-scepticism over the same period analysed here (de Winter 1998).

Second, adapting the well-known concept of 'goodness of fit' (Risse et al. 2001) to the case of regionalist actors, it can be said that the potential for Europeanisation depends on two variables: 'distance from the state' and 'distance from the EU'. By 'distance' I mean the gap between the institutional features and the policy output of the state and the EU, respectively, and the median preferences in the region demanding self-government. The potential for Europeanisation can be thus theorised as such: the smaller the distance from Europe and the larger the distance from the state, the higher the incentives and opportunities offered to regionalist actors to exploit the European dimension in their strategies to achieve self-government hence the stronger the Europeanisation of the latter.

NOTES

1  For the sake of consistency and simplicity, I use the terms European Union and EU to refer to both the present EU and what in the 1970s was variously called the E.E.C., the European Communities and the Common Market.

2  In the March 1979 referendum a Scottish assembly failed to gain enough support while in September 1997 a Scottish parliament was strongly endorsed.

3  I use the terms regionalist, devolutionist, devolution to refer to regional autonomy within the framework of the existing state and the terms secessionist, secession, independence to refer to the creation of a separate state.

4  The organisational factors affecting party strategies are not analysed in detail here as the focus of the article is on the transformation of the institutional environment.

5  Though elaborating on these points is beyond the scope of this article, the strategic environment is different for a secessionist party relative to a regionalist party and, moreover, in a region without autonomous institutions relative to a region that already has them: see Dardanelli (2002, chs 2; 8).

6  For a fuller discussion of the application of the assumptions of 'bounded rationality' to the topic dealt with in this article, see Dardanelli (2002, 52–54).

7  For a discussion of rationalist and constructivist approaches in the study of the EU, see Aspinwall and Schneider (2000).

8  On the party's organisation, see Bennie et al. (1997, 78–80) and Newell (1998); on factionalism, see Mitchell (1990b).

9  See Jaensch (1976) and Miller et al. (1977).

10  For an introduction to the politics of Scottish devolution, see Bogdanor (1999).

11  On the SNP policy towards devolution in the 1970s, see Levy (1986) and Kauppi (1982).

12  On the conflict within the party on devolution before and after the referendum, see Kauppi (1982, 333–334).

13  Naturally, the party was still seeing the assembly as a springboard for secession but avoided saying so as

it was aware that it would scare many moderate devolutionists into voting No.

14 Scottish National Party Archive, Acc 10754/27.
15 Choose Scotland – The Challenge of Independence (1979, 11).
16 Wolfe and Wilson, interviews with the author.
17 Wilson, interview with the author; see also Lynch (1996, 30).
18 See press releases by Gordon Wilson, Douglas Henderson, George Reid, Hamish Watt and Winnie Ewing between 21 October 1978 and 28 February 1979 in Scottish National Party Archive, Acc 10754/27.
19 Gordon Wilson, 'Assembly would give better value for taxpayers' money', The Courier and Advertiser, 26 February 1979.
20 As reported in 'Yes vote would be sign of confidence', The Scotsman, 7 February 1979.
21 See wider discussion in Dardanelli (2002, 266–268).
22 Ibid. (351; 335).
23 On the post-1979 crisis within the party, see Kauppi (1982) and Mitchell (1990b).
24 The attitude towards the EU was one of the internal cleavages in the party between 'gradualists' and 'fundamentalists', see Mitchell (1990b).
25 On the adoption of the 'Independence in Europe' policy, see Macartney (1990) and Lynch (1996, 37–49).
26 Interview with the author; Cunningham, interview with the author, expressed the same perception of the EU as a facilitator of independence.
27 Interview with the author. See also SNPower for Change (1994, 4; 8–9).
28 See also Sillars (1986, 184–186) and SNPower for Change (1994, 6–7).
29 On the need to address the economic aspects of secession and on the abandonment of a 19th century idea of nation-state, see Sillars (1986, 182).
30 SNPower for Change (1994, 2).
31 Interview with the author. Wilson and Wolfe, interviews with the author, expressed similar views.
32 On the legal problems raised by a seceding Scotland with regard to EU membership, see Lane (1991). For an articulate internal critique of the 'Independence in Europe' policy, see Lindsay (1991). Even those in favour of the policy are fully aware of the existence of such a trade-off, Wilson and Cunningham, interviews with the author. See also SNPower for Change (1994, 19) and Lynch (1996).
33 See wider discussion in Dardanelli (2002, 273–275).
34 Ibid. (esp. chs 3–6).
35 Ibid. (341).
36 The poll tax was the most extreme example of that trend, for its effect on Scotland, see McCrone (1991) and Barker (1992).
37 On the changed approach to the British union on the part of the Conservative party, see Mitchell (1990a; 1996) and Seawright (1996).
38 Interview with the author.
39 Cunningham, interview with the author, pointed out that the development of a social policy made the EU relevant for many ordinary working-class Scots for the first time. On the ongoing problems with the fisheries policy, see Wright (1996).
40 On the role of Ewing and Sillars, see also Lynch (1996, 37–39).
41 Cunningham, interview with the author.
42 This change mirrored the wider change in the Left's attitudes towards the European Union across Europe, see Hix (1999) and Ladrech (2000).
43 For all its enthusiasm for 'Europe' the party never went beyond a confederal vision for the EU, rejecting a federal scenario in which Scotland's nationhood might be threatened.
44 Vice-versa, two of the most hated policies of the 1970s – agriculture and fisheries – survived more or less unchanged into the 1990s.
45 See the discussion in Dardanelli (2002, 289–296) for an elaboration of these conditions.

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