

THE SCOTTISH UNIONIST PARTY: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

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Between 1912 and 1965 the Conservatives in Scotland were known as the Scottish Unionist Party and it was under this appellation that the party gained its most notable success, when it achieved over half of the popular vote in 1955. Its foundation was the split in the Liberal Party in 1886 following Gladstone's endorsement of Irish Home Rule. Home Rule was a particular anathema to Scots Protestants who not only faced a substantial immigrant Irish Catholic community but also had familial links with Ulster's Protestant community. They also feared the potential threat to Scotland's trade and security from an independent Ireland. Thus Liberal Unionism proved particularly important in Scotland. Liberal support for Irish Home Rule, coupled with the party's sentiments in favour of the disestablishment of the Church of Scotland as the 'Scottish Kirk', allowed the Conservatives - through their association with the Liberal Unionists - to inherit the Liberal Party's once impeccable Presbyterian credentials.

The symbolic power of Unionism coupled with Protestantism is in no doubt. But here we examine another aspect of this cultural pillar of Unionism which all too often is ignored in explanations of the changing fortunes of the Party in Scotland - no doubt because of the difficulty in establishing a direct causal association between a party's symbolic appeal, net of all other explanations, and its electoral performance. We look at the role of the 'Unionist' term in the post-1945 period and offer an alternative explanation that Unionism in this period, through its historical development with Liberal Unionism and its emphasis on its Scottish identity and independence, had the ability to maintain a Scottish distinctiveness which the term 'Conservative' could not

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hope to achieve. The loss of this distinctive identity had major implications for the party after 1965 and it leads one to speculate about the extent of improvement in the party's fortunes if the term was restored, particularly in a post 'Scottish Parliament' Scotland.

THE UNIONIST APPEAL

That there has been a decline in the cultural symbolic power of Unionism is revealed in the campaigning language of the Scottish Conservatives. The change in the party's name in 1965 was not simply a token one. It also heralded a significant change in rhetoric. The party exchanged a form of discourse that tapped a rich vein of Scottish culture for one that ran the danger of sounding dangerously English. At the heart of the Scottish Unionist Party's ability to appeal to powerful symbols of Scots culture was its use of the label Unionist rather than Conservative to describe itself and the label 'socialist' when referring to the Labour party. Below, we conceptualise the 'unionist model' with particular reference to the party's future prospects but first we examine the importance of the changing terminology as understood by the proverbial passenger on the Maryhill omnibus. For example, the party in the post war period would place great stress on maintaining the independence of its Unionist organisation from that of the Conservatives in England. One example of such sentiment is from its yearbook of 1955: 'The Scottish Unionist Association is financially and in its organisation independent of England'. (SUA 1955, p.22) Compare this to the statement by the then deputy-chairman Bill Hughes in the **Sunday Times Scotland** on the 12 August 1990: 'We are only a branch office of the UK party and are centrally funded from head office in London. We do not account independently and are not even registered for VAT in Scotland'. Moreover, leading post-war Unionist attacks on socialism could be wrapped in rhetorical Scottish nationalism. Walter Elliot, a master at beating the Scottish drum when needed, would equate the socialist policy of nationalisation with denationalisation. For Elliot the consequence of such a centralising policy was London control at the expense of Scottish control. In a 1950 debate with the Labour Secretary of State for Scotland, Sir Arthur Woodburn, he took great pleasure in mischievously castigating Woodburn for having to ring up London for permission to use extra heating from an electric fire. He also criticised Labour in the same debate for having three English born MPs (Miller 1981).

THE HURRAH WORD

It is the emotive nuances of political communication which are of interest here. Cohen (1985) informs us that 'philosophers have long since drawn our attention to the capacity of language to express attitude as well as to denote object'. Maurice Cranston's (1954) examples of 'hurrah' words as opposed to 'boo' words can be used to highlight this practice within the Scottish Unionist party. Here we take the approach that Unionism is an example of a hurrah-word and Socialism a pejorative word or boo-word.

At the time of the name change a Dumfriesshire activist in the Glencairn Branch made the following prescient statement in opposition to the 1965 reforms:

They are acting undemocratically and we are determined to see that members - who are after all the people who win elections - have a right to make any radical changes in the association without being rushed into them and without knowing exactly what the changes will involve in the future.

(**Glasgow Herald** 23 February 1965).

In their successful years after the second world war the Unionists were careful to maintain a distinct Scottish identity separate from the Conservative party in England. The Eastern Divisional Council (based in Edinburgh) when discussing 'suggested national symbols for Unionist posters' recorded in a minute: '... it was agreed in principle the idea was good, and the council felt that whatever design was used must be distinctively Scottish' (National Library of Scotland, Acc/10424, EDC minute book No6, 8 April 1949). To emphasise the independence of their party from London, the Unionists would sometimes go to extraordinary and expensive lengths. A few examples from the Scottish Unionist Association minute books clearly illustrate this. For example the Eastern Divisional Council of the Scottish Unionist Association noted on the 16 January 1948:

It was reported that, on the instigation of the Peebles and South Midlothian Association, arrangements had been made with the central office in London for a revised Scottish edition of the leaflet 'Lifebelt for Britain'. In this the word 'Conservative' was everywhere replaced by the word 'Unionist' and certain photographs of leading members of the Scottish Unionist Organisation were inserted to give the leaflet a

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distinctive Scottish character.
(National Library of Scotland, Acc/ 10424).

The Western Divisional Council (based in Glasgow) on the 29 September 1954 recorded:

The Committee reviewed specimens of various publications which had been issued since the previous meeting. Particular consideration was given to a series of posters which had recently been sampled. It was agreed that many of those were effective but as they were all printed with the word 'Conservative' the Secretary was asked to ascertain what the cost would be to have them reprinted in the 'Unionist' version and whether there would be any objection to the 'Conservative' version being used in Scotland.

The following month's minute (25 October 1954) contained the unequivocal reply:

Complaints about the use of the word 'Conservative' in Party literature received from Rutherglen, Airdrie and Coatbridge and West Renfrewshire were considered. The secretary also called attention to a quotation for 'Unionist' versions of new posters, which exceeded the English figure by one hundred per cent.
(All National Library of Scotland).

This attitude was reflected in the Scottish MPs' Committee at Westminster which had reason to consider the issue while discussing agenda resolutions at the forthcoming party conference at Perth in 1956.

Mr Thornton-Kemsley said that he had arranged for this item [change of name] to go on the agenda in case Members wished to raise any points in connection with the resolutions to be discussed.

There was a short discussion on a resolution submitted by East Renfrewshire which sought to change the name of the Party in Scotland to 'Conservative'. Mr Walter Elliot said that he thought that the reason why this resolution had been put forward was to save money; the use of the word 'Unionist' involved special printing so far as literature was concerned. A number of Members were of the opinion that it would not be advisable to change the name of the Party, as the word 'Unionist' involved an important matter of principle.

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(Bodleian Library: Scottish Unionist Members Committee, 24 April, 1956).

THE BOO WORD

Scottish Conservatives in the 1990s complain bitterly about their opponents' ability to apply negative connotations to the Party. In short, they complain about having an alien identity imposed upon them by their political opponents:

We should not need the disturbing example of Adolf Hitler to remind us that the ability to harness myth to current political consciousness can be a powerful political talent. Yet that is precisely what the opponents of Scottish Toryism have been able to do. To equate the Scottish Conservative Party with all that Scots dislike most about 'Englishness' and root it in contemporary consciousness has been a remarkable political achievement.
(MacKenzie, 1988).

But it was the Scottish Unionists who displayed this powerful political ability in the successful post-war era. The advantages, as the party saw them, of using the term socialist are apparent in a motion submitted by West Fife to the party's annual conference in Ayr in 1947:

That this Conference desires to impress on all Unionist Constituency Associations, on Unionist Speakers and Propagandists, and on Unionist Party Headquarters that the term 'Labour' as applied to the party now in power in this country is a misnomer which encourages the mistaken idea that only that party is concerned about the prosperity of Labour and the interests of the wage earners. This Conference, therefore, recommends that in all Unionist publications, speeches, and propaganda the term 'Socialist' should be used to describe the Government Party.
(SUA Conference Agenda, Ayr 15 May, 1947)

After all, there was a historical precedent to justify such an approach. Keir Hardie had triumphed over his rivals, such as Hyndman, in having the socialist term expurgated from the infant Labour Representation Committee for the very reason that in Hardie's eyes the term socialist was foreign and its use would alienate the British worker. The Scottish Unionist Association's

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Yearbook of 1955 neatly illustrates this strategy adopted by the party; under the heading 'Origins of Socialist Theories' it states:

Nothing could be a greater misnomer than the name 'Labour' for Socialist policies. It is a name which attracts support; but let those who are misled by it ask themselves: what can the foreign doctrine of Socialism, with its denial of freedom of choice and of individual opportunity, profit the British people...
(SUA, Yearbook 1955:18-19)

CHANGING NAME, CHANGING IDENTITY?

It is significant that Unionism's distinctive symbolism and imagery were jealously guarded by the party in the fifties, to the extent that the term Conservative was expurgated from all official Unionist literature. But the use of this language began to break down even before the party changed its name in 1965. In the 1964 election many constituency parties were freely using the term Conservative to introduce their candidate in their election addresses. Although most of these were 'Introducing the Unionist Candidate' as in Glasgow Springburn, a substantial minority chose the introduction as the 'Conservative Candidate' such as in Glasgow Shettleston. This is confirmed by the amount of literature the Party in Scotland was now accepting without reservations about it including the 'Conservative' term. The Organising Secretaries of the Western Divisional Council were informed about the literature 'Now is the Time' on the 27 February, 1964: It is 'not possible to reprint Unionist version of this leaflet and constituencies wishing to use it would have to avail themselves of the Conservative version produced in London'. (National Library, Acc/ 10424)

The change can be seen quite clearly in table 1, which shows how frequently the terms 'Unionist', 'Socialist', 'Conservative' and 'Labour' appeared in the Scottish sections of the Party's Campaign Guides, published at each general election. The table shows that the terms 'Unionist' and 'Socialist' give way in the mid-1960s to 'Conservative' and 'Labour'. For example in 1964 the size of the Scottish section of the guide was roughly double that in 1955 or 1959. Yet there were fewer references to the term 'Unionist' than in either of those years. From 1970 onwards neither 'Unionist' nor 'socialist' makes much more than a fleeting appearance.

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In contrast, in England, the term Unionist was perceived as largely irrelevant by the party as early as the 1940s. Lord Woolton - the great reformer of the English organisation - ruled out the proposal of a change of name to the 'Union Party' in the late 1940s because of its similarity to the 'old but now irrelevant name of "Unionist"'. (Blake 1985). Woolton did instruct party workers to use the alien, doctrinaire term 'socialist' in preference to Labour, but the practice was discontinued in 1959 when it became apparent that some voters thought that Labour and Socialist were two different parties. However, Andrew Strang (a leading West of Scotland official at the time) offers a contrary view, arguing: 'In England it was always the Labour party but we used the term socialist'. We see from table 1 that the term was not discontinued in Scotland in 1959, with 28 references, the highest recorded.

Table 1

The Campaign Guides - Scottish Sections, 1950 -1992

	Pages	number of references to:			
		'Unionist'	'Socialist'	'Conservative'	'Labour'
1950	0.5	7	2	2	nil
1951	1.5	3	nil	1	nil
1955	12	11	10	2	4
1959	15	13	28	3	3
1964	24	8	11	7	6
1966	14	1	12	45	18
1970	29	1	1	85	24
1974	26	1	nil	13	8
1977	24	nil	5	39	14
1983	22	nil	nil	5	17
1987	28	nil	nil	17	34
1992	34	2	4	17	46

Source: Adapted from Conservative and Unionist Party Campaign Guides.

Just how different the discourse of the Party was in Scotland can be seen below. In the absence of an 'English' section of the campaign guide a

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comparison has to be made with the discourse of the Welsh party in the Welsh section. The benefits of this are twofold. The Welsh Conservative party has developed as an integral part of the organisation run by Smith Square in London and the language might reflect that 'anglicised' development. But we can also compare the development of Conservative discourse as used within the other historic nation of Great Britain.

Table 2

The Campaign Guides - Welsh Sections, 1951 -1992

	Pages	number of references to:			
		'Unionist'	'Socialist'	'Conservative'	'Labour'
1951	2	nil	nil	5	nil
1955	9	nil	3	9	1
1959	10	nil	3	7	nil
1964	10	nil	4	10	3
1966		No Welsh Section.			
1970	10	nil	nil	40	27
1974	12	nil	nil	20	21
1977	13	nil	4	51	27
1983	10	nil	1	5	11
1987	20	nil	1	9	22
1992	39	1	2	29	40

Source: Adapted from Conservative and Unionist Party Campaign Guides.

It appears from table 2 that Lord Woolton was certainly right about the irrelevance of Unionism for the party south of the border. The term unionist is used in the Welsh guide only once, and that was in a facetious capacity in the 1992 section which remarked that Neil Kinnock, the leader of the Labour party, called himself a Welsh unionist. The amount of use made of the socialist boo-word appears to bear out Andrew Strang's version of events. The Welsh section in 1955 and 1959 is two thirds of the size of the Scottish section but the references to the term socialist only appear one sixth as

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frequently as in Scotland. The evidence clearly points to the existence of a distinctive Scottish discourse until the mid-1960s.

Of course, we cannot presume that the change of language in Scotland after then was a cause of the party's decline. It may have been an attempt to adapt to changes in public attitudes. Certainly, many within the mid-1960s party elite felt that the traditional unionist appeal was anachronistic. It was argued that in an age of national (UK) television, continued use of the term led to confusion and harboured a distasteful sectarian image which they thought the party would be wise to jettison. And certainly with the decline of the Empire and the contraction of Britain's military role there is every reason to believe that some of the traditional pillars of unionism were losing their emotive power. But there was equally a danger that by scrapping its distinctive Scottish name in favour of one used south of the border the party would seem to be becoming anglicised.

THE NEW BOO-WORD

Certainly, there is no doubt that one of the problems of the party in Scotland today is that it is perceived as 'English'. After the disastrous 1987 election result, losing 11 of their 21 seats in Scotland, the Executive of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Association (SCUA) considered a damning twenty-one page document on the state of the Party in Scotland. The document was entitled 'The Policies, Questions and Options: The Way Forward' and was produced by two vice-chairmen of SCUA., Mrs Margaret Walker from the West of Scotland and Mr John Purvis, the former European MP for Mid Scotland and Fife. (**The Scotsman** and **Glasgow Herald** 10th September, 1987). The report was compiled from internal questionnaires, and with intrepid frankness declared 'that it is no use ignoring the perception that the Tories are seen as the English Party'. Mrs Thatcher and her Ministers were viewed by some as an electoral liability in Scotland, in the main because of their Englishness. The attenuated Scottish identity is evident in a **Scotsman**-ICM opinion poll published on 27 August 1990. It found a widespread belief that the Scottish Conservative Party had little relevance to Scotland and argued that 'a huge majority of Scots think that the Scottish Conservative Party is mainly an English Party'. The responses to two of the questions in the poll are in table 3.

The table clearly shows the extent of the crisis of identity facing the Scottish Party. Seventy-nine per cent agreed that the Party was mainly an English

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party with little relevance to Scotland. Confirming further the SCUA 'Way Forward' report, even 56% of 'Conservative' respondents perceived their Party as being mainly English and having little relevance to Scotland. Moreover, only just over a third of Conservatives held the belief that their party was at least ensuring Scottish interests were being served in the United Kingdom government. When such responses are received from Conservative Party supporters and in such numbers, then the Party's identity crisis is clearly evident.

Table 3

Attitudes to the Scottish Tory Party

Percentage agreeing with two offered descriptions of the Scottish Conservative Party, by party supported

	whole sample	Con	Lab	SNP	Lib Dem
It is mainly an English party with no relevance to Scotland	79	56	85	87	77
It ensures Scottish interests are properly served in the UK government	13	37	7	12	3

Note: the two descriptions were offered separately, not as alternatives

Source: adapted from the Scotsman 27th August 1990; sample size approximately 1000.

The populist Tory, Sir Teddy Taylor, commented on the situation, after a visit to his former constituency Cathcart, which he held from 1964 to 1979. He wrote in the **Guardian** (22 June 1987) that the main change was simply that the Conservatives in Scotland now seemed to be regarded in their former heartland as the enemies of Scotland. He likened his return visit to addressing a Tsarist rally of Russian émigrés after the Revolution. The people were nostalgic about 'happy history' but:

What the Scottish Tories need to do is to change their policies and attitudes so that the Scottish Conservatives can be seen to be a group rather separate from the United Kingdom Tories, and seen to be a

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Scottish party fighting for Scotland and a peoples' party interested and concerned for the whole population.

It is my contention that the Scottish Unionist Party was such a Party as Taylor describes, that its Unionist image was comfortable within the Scottish electoral environment, that it adroitly used the negative connotations of 'alien socialism' to reinforce that image, and that this advantage was lost in the mid-sixties.

BACK TO THE UNIONIST FUTURE?

Mitchell (1993) uses Rokkan and Urwin's distinction between the unitary state and the union state to show that the Scottish Conservatives have consistently been adept at incremental change - in a union state - since the late nineteenth century and that this has allowed them to celebrate such change as 'central to the union state to which they owed their primary allegiance'. He argues also that this 'proved important in maintaining a degree of Scottish political distinctiveness'. Basically, the unitary state is one of centralised power, a state which is 'one and indivisible', and a party of the unitary state simply denies the existence of a territorial problem. Conversely, the party of the union state is fully aware of the territorial implications of change. The Scottish Conservatives played a singular part in maintaining the Scottishness of the union state, from the inception of the Scottish Office in 1885 through many incremental changes until 1962 when the Scottish Development Department was set up. According to Mitchell:

What has been most important in terms of public opinion is not so much the institutional development of the union state but that the services provided by these institutions were provided on a Scottish basis...However limited the degree of autonomy offered by administrative devolution and regardless of the extent to which the state was being increasingly characterised by its unitary features, it was presented by Conservatives as a state in which Scottish distinctiveness was fully catered for. It was becoming a unitary state, but the myth of the union state was maintained.
(ibid: 29)

For Mitchell this willingness to concede change in Scotland was only in order to maintain the existing balance of constitutional arrangements, namely parliamentary sovereignty. But he also points to the historical fact of

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Conservative pragmatism: the party may not welcome change but accepts it, perhaps reluctantly.

In this context any future notion of dismantling an extant Scottish parliament after having lost the battle of existing constitutional arrangements appears impractical. Ironically, in reality the party would probably gain some immediate electoral benefit from the proposed proportional representative system of the Scottish parliament. But would that benefit be enhanced by a change back to the Unionist appellation? We know from the Unionist Members at Westminster in 1956 that a number of Members were of the opinion that it would not be advisable to change the name of the Party, as the word 'Unionist' involved an important matter of principle. But unfortunately no Unionist ever fully delineated what that important matter of principle was. I would contend that a maintenance of a Scottish identity and distinctiveness was part of that principle. A Scottish parliament may offer the opportunity for a change of name that some in the party have actively sought. For instance, after the Perth and Kinross by-election defeat in May 1995, it was reported in the press that some of the party's influential financial backers considered a change to the Unionist label a positive step forward. Two cogent further examples illustrate the same point. Ian Lang, the former Secretary of State for Scotland, in an article in the Tory Reform Group's journal, referred to the Party rediscovering its Unionist soul. As the only truly Unionist party with Unionist beliefs he argued it had the potential to tap into and build upon a rich vein of Unionism which transcends party allegiance (Lang 1992). Allan Massie writing for **Scotland on Sunday** suggested that the Unionist label could bring back what he called the Rangers vote in Glasgow (27 September 1992). The sectarian imagery no doubt inhibits some within the party to consider a change back to the Unionist label but if the Scottish distinctiveness argument was to win out then it is not beyond the realms of possibility to suggest that we will see Scottish Unionists fighting for seats in a Scottish parliament.

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