

## **POLITICAL JOURNALISTS AND NATIONALIST PARTIES IN SCOTLAND AND QUEBEC**

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In studies of nationalism, journalists are frequently identified as important figures in the promotion of national identity. They are, says Tom Nairn, among 'the loose screws who cause the trouble' (Nairn 1997, p. 188), the symbol-operators who communicate the vision of a national movement by translating it into everyday political and social realities - or so the theory goes. But is this what actually happens? A closer study of the relationship between journalists and modern nationalist political parties would seem to indicate that the process is much more complex than that, subject as it is to the influence of a variety of social, political and economic factors. In the case of Scotland and Québec, political journalists have played quite different roles in the promulgation of nationalism. Francophone journalists in Québec, for example, were supporters of the independence movement from its earliest beginnings, and have long seen it as their responsibility to examine both federalism and sovereignty equally, while Scottish journalists have taken a much more critical stance towards independence, and, until very recently, have not seen the necessity of exploring the independence option in depth. The reasons lie in deep-rooted cultural and social differences, which have affected how Scots and Québécois see themselves, and, in turn, how the journalists in these two places report nationalism. To understand why this is so, it is necessary to examine not only their respective cultural and political norms, but also the social norms of the Québec and Scottish media.

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## QUÉBEC JOURNALISTS AND NATIONALISM

The reluctance of the Scottish press corps to support - or even report - independence presents a striking contrast to the attitude of Québec journalists in the early days of the province's independence movement. During the 1966 provincial election, for example, the francophone press were highly critical of the provincial Liberals (who operate independently of the party's federal wing), while the fledgling separatist party, Reassemblement pour l'Indépendance Nationale (RIN), precursor to the Parti Québécois, received only positive coverage (Siegel 1996, p. 220). When the Parti Québécois was first coming to the fore in the 1970s, Québec journalists were fully on side with the independence option, so much so that in the 1973 election the PQ platform received more media coverage than that of the Liberals, the party in power. In 1976, the year the Parti Québécois won, **Le Journal de Montréal**, the province's biggest tabloid daily, and a supporter of the party, 'covered the PQ platform more fully and favourably than the programme of the Quebec Liberals, the party of the outgoing government.' (Charron 1991, p. 97) Although some would argue that the media support enjoyed by the PQ enabled their success, it is more likely their success came from the fact that the PQ was the party which best represented the aspirations of Québécois at that particular time in history, aspirations shared by the political journalists of the day. Although that initial enthusiasm for the sovereigntist cause has been tempered over the years (Hazel 2000), political journalists in Québec still feel obligated to cover both sovereignty and federalism with equal seriousness, and have continued to do so, despite accusations of bias from their anglophone colleagues and the federal government. The reason, one veteran francophone reporter explains, is that

In French, both sovereignty and federalism are assumed to be valid options that deserve fair treatment. In English, federalism is assumed to be good and sovereignty evil. Ninety-nine point nine per cent of English-speaking [reporters] are openly federalists. What kind of society would Quebec be if the same was said of French-speaking journalists? At the very least, it would be a society whose media is completely divorced from it.

(Interview with author 1997)

Thus, if journalists in Québec are to do their job properly, they must be seen to reflect the society in which they live, where, as Keating (1996) says, 'nationalism in its various forms has become a hegemonic set of ideas' (p. 77). This hegemony is reflected in the extent of the community base enjoyed by the Parti Québécois and its federal counterpart, the Bloc Québécois,

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established in 1991, whose combined total memberships reached close to 225,000 in 1993 (Cornellier 1995, p.78), and the support for independence found in trade unions, professional groups, and francophone businesses (Keating 1996).

The strong sovereigntist perspective of Québec journalists grew out of the major social changes that occurred during *la révolution tranquille*, in which the traditional bearers of cultural values in Québec - the church, the family and the educational system - were supplanted by the mass media and what Siegel calls 'the global youth revolution' (1996, p. 230). The reporters in the 1960s were themselves part of that youth revolution, and, along with the new class of teachers now operating in a state-run education system, rather than one administered by the church, became a major influence in Québec's burgeoning separatist movement, and as a result, 'played central roles in the PQ leadership' (ibid.).

In addition, Québec journalists were more inclined to union militancy than their anglophone counterparts, because, as francophone reporters in a predominantly English-speaking society, they had fewer career options. If they did not like the working conditions at a particular paper, there were only so many places they could go; heading off to another position somewhere else in North America was not a possibility, and Québec had - and has - a more limited number of media outlets. As a result, the 'solution for Quebec journalists was therefore to dig in their heels and struggle, getting as much support as they could from their colleagues, their unions and their professional associations' (Charron 1991, p. 91). This social solidarity reinforced the progressive ideas that they had learned in the province's universities during the Quiet Revolution, ideas shared by those in the PQ, which added to their 'ideological affinity - a great many journalists and PQ members were of the same generation, had been educated in the same places, shared a similar lifestyle and interests' (1991, p. 94), and believed in the same social-democratic ideals.

Their ability to promulgate sovereigntist politics was facilitated by factors unique to Québec francophone journalism, which, in its opinion-based, analytical reportage, was reminiscent of European, and particularly French, journalism. This tradition, developed during the beginning of the francophone press in the 18th century, was taken from France's journals of opinion, and fostered a media culture in which journalists were seen as intellectual and political leaders. This political role was reinforced by the lack of opportunity for ambitious, educated French Canadians, as Québec journalist Lysiane Gagnon explains:

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French Canada's first great journalists were, first and foremost, politicians and debaters. This was, of course, a result of the fact that politics was, from the outset, the one field above all others in which outstanding French Canadians could assert themselves, since industry and commerce had been monopolized by the English since the conquest. (Cited in Siegel 1996, p. 219)

The close relationship between activist journalists and the members of the intelligentsia was established during the 1950s in Québec, when the media provided the platform for the new political ideas that led to the modernizing changes of the Quiet Revolution. It also produced the leaders who later became prominent figures in the province's politics, such as Pierre Trudeau, co-founder of the alternative journal, **Cité Libre**, and later prime minister; and René Lévesque, anchor of the television news programme, **Point de Mire**, who first became a cabinet minister in the Liberal government and then went on to found the Parti Québécois, becoming premier in 1976. This cross-over between the worlds of journalism and politics proved to be a continuing theme in Québec public life and reinforced the media's 'intense political involvement' (Siegel 1996, p. 219), particularly with sovereigntist ideas.

The result was a different form of political journalism from that practised in English-speaking Canada, where journalists adhered to more American-style notions of objectivity and straight reporting of facts. The linguistic isolation of the Québec media, and its relative lack of economic resources, also meant that coverage has, by and large, focused on what was happening within the province rather than across Canada, and on French reaction rather than American for international issues, thus reinforcing francophone identity further. In addition, the editorial leadership provided by the sovereigntist newspaper, **Le Devoir**, founded by nationalist Henri Bourassa in 1910, helped create a unified point-of-view among the francophone media (Siegel 1996). **Le Devoir** differs from the other francophone papers in that it is independently-owned, and is not part of a pan-Canadian media empire as are the broadsheets **La Presse** and **Le Soleil**, and the tabloid **Le Journal de Montréal**.

The francophone media's commitment to reporting both sides of the Québec political story has created difficulties for them both professionally and politically. Their colleagues in the anglophone press have criticized them for following 'kindergarten rules' of reporting in which the definition of balance is covering 'the guys who say this and the guys who say that', without investigating the truth of what each side in the federalist-sovereigntist debate

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is saying (Interview 1997). Allegations of political bias by Pierre Trudeau and federal cabinet ministers from Québec following the PQ victory in 1976 led to an inquiry into the television coverage by the French-language division of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Société Radio-Canada, in 1977. Although no evidence of such bias was found, it made Québec journalists more circumspect in reporting independence issues, particularly during the 1980 referendum, when, one editor recalled, 'the press learned how to walk slowly and carefully on eggs, without making an omelette' (Siegel 1996, p. 234). This cautious objectivity has been a feature of francophone reportage ever since; but although Québec journalists may have to walk a fine line between the two camps, at least both sides are fully reported. As one francophone editor explained: 'our readership is split in two so our duty is to be totally fair between the two parties, and we cannot survive if we don't do that' (Interview 1997). Scottish political editors, however, do not take this same approach.

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The situation has been quite different in Scotland, where, historically, 'most of the Scottish media largely ignored the nationalist movement for as long as they could' (Kerr 1978, p. 93), and where journalists have had a profoundly ambivalent relationship with independence. Although the Scottish press wants to be identified as national, it is not comfortable with being identified as supporters of independence, unlike the press in Québec, and this has created a certain amount of conflict - if not confusion. As Smith (1994) explains:

Newspapers need a nationalist tone to Scottish politics, in order to define Scotland's 'difference' from the rest of the United Kingdom. Yet leader-writers, guardians of the papers' very soul, cannot bring themselves to condone much of what nationalism might mean to those who vote SNP.

It is a relationship of extremes. The happy couple - press and party - are walking up the aisle one day, only to turf each other from the honeymoon bed the next.

(p. 101)

The Scottish National Party provides good copy, but not good policy, as far as most political journalists are concerned. The SNP is seen as being a single-issue party, and the issue - independence - is not one they support (Interviews 1996 and 1997). As a result, the SNP has never had any consistent editorial

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voice: there has been no tradition of an independence-supporting newspaper like **Le Devoir** in Québec, which is the journal of sovereigntist opinion, read by the province's cultural and political elites; or **Le Journal de Montréal**, a tabloid with the biggest circulation of Québec daily papers and founded in 1964 by Pierre Péladeau, an avowed *indépendantiste*, which in the past has favoured the PQ.

The picture has been much different in Scotland, where there is not the same tradition of editorial leadership in the newsroom as in Québec, and where most political journalists have never shared the commitment to independence now expressed not only by Scottish National Party supporters but also by some of those of Labour and the Scottish Liberal Democrats. In fact, if anything, such support would have hindered their careers, for it has long been a job requirement for political editors in Scotland that they be Unionist. **The Herald's** Scottish political editor Murray Ritchie (1998) explains why:

But what of the Scottish media which remains defiantly and unanimously Unionist? It does seem odd - not to say anti-democratic - that the second political force in Scotland in terms of votes, suffers a complete lack of editorial sympathy while the political Establishment of Tories and New Labour/Lib Dem pact partners, bask in the full constitutional endorsement of the press.

The roots of this perversity are deep in Scotland. Some of us are old enough to remember the **Bulletin** newspaper which flirted with nationalism in the 1950s. Its fate was to be closed while reportedly profitable and its editor fired. The lesson was not lost on succeeding generations of Scottish editors.

The tradition in Scotland has been instead that rather than coming from the newsroom, support for nationalism comes from management, but strictly as a marketing tool (Kerr 1978; Smith 1994; Marr 1995; Mitchell 1996). The first instance of this, of course, was when Lord Beaverbrook (himself a Canadian) published a letter on the front page of the **Daily Express** pledging his support for Scottish Home Rule on 14 July 1932 in the hopes of defeating the **Daily Record** in the ongoing circulation battle between the two newspapers. Sixty years later the **Scottish Sun** declared its support for Scottish independence, for precisely the same reason, and when Rupert Murdoch decided that he was going to back Blair in the 1997 election, the independence cause was dumped within 24 hours.

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Branding themselves as Scottish has been an essential strategy for marketing newspapers in Scotland: **The Scotsman's** masthead displays the national symbol of the thistle, and the slogan, 'Scotland's national newspaper', while the **Daily Record** had bumper-stickers that proclaimed, 'Real Scots read the Record'. The price wars that have had such a negative effect on the quality of London-based newspapers have in fact had a positive effect in Scotland by reinforcing the national identity of Scottish newspapers. Unable to compete on price, the Scottish press has 'responded to the challenge of growing circulation for non-Scottish papers by reasserting their Scottish identity and ability to cover Scottish news and features.' (Lynch 1996, p. 10)

However, this does not include an editorial commitment to independence, or even necessarily devolution, in the case of **Daily Record** and **The Scotsman**. Under the direction of Andrew Neil, long known for his 'adamant opposition to independence and his dismissive views of what he sees as Scotland's "monotonic" left-of-centre consensus' (Schlesinger 1998, p. 65), **The Scotsman** promoted the defence of the Union with considerable vigour, if not venom. During the 1999 Scottish parliamentary elections the SNP, which was perceived as a serious rival for Labour, was subjected to a much more critical examination of its policies than before, something which party strategists had not expected. The coverage, 'which ranged from the sceptical to the outright hostile' (Jones 1999, p. 5), certainly did not demonstrate the same kind of commitment to fairness and balance found in present-day Québec journalism. The one paper that was committed to objective journalism in its reporting of the campaign, **The Herald**, found itself boycotted by Labour, which withdrew £100,000-worth of election advertising from its pages, and was reportedly described by then Secretary of State for Scotland Donald Dewar as 'an out and out nationalist newspaper' (Ritchie 2000, p. 91). The negativity of the coverage was perhaps to be expected, given the past history of hostility between Labour and the Scottish National Party, but the intensity and savagery of it was not. As Iain Macwhirter (1999) noted: 'The SNP was never going to get an easy ride from the overwhelmingly Labour-supporting Scottish print media - though the ferocity of the assault ... took even seasoned hacks by surprise.'

Following the election, the **Record's** highly critical - and also inaccurate - stories about MSP holidays and pay prompted parliamentary presiding officer Sir David Steel to take the offensive, saying that the tabloid press was guilty of 'bitch journalism'. The relentless attacks on the parliament and its conduct that appeared in the **Record** while Martin Clarke was editor did not seem to reflect the Scottish public's point-of-view, judging by the attendance at the parliamentary debates: 'On most days the public galleries are well attended,

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even for some of the less riveting debates. Cynicism among pundits is not necessarily shared by the people' (Ritchie 2000, p. 212). The anti-devolution stance of the two papers also did not help their circulations; **The Scotsman's** figures declined to fewer than 75,000, down 25,000; while the **Record's** daily circulation dropped to below 600,000 (Kemp 2000) from a high of 750,000.

In these circumstances, the reluctance of Scottish journalists to take the independence option seriously is understandable, given the unfavourable political climate and the career difficulties that doing so would create for them, but, still, it is worrisome that independence, which regularly receives poll support of more than 30 per cent, and on occasion has been as high as 50 per cent, has not been examined more thoroughly up until very recently. Political journalists in Québec have seen it as their responsibility to examine both federalism and sovereignty equally, despite the hostility that this generates from their anglophone media colleagues in the rest of Canada, because this reflects the views of Québécois. Scottish journalists, at least up until now, have not seen the necessity of exploring the independence option in depth, although, with the arrival of devolution and the Scottish parliament, this has changed, but the scrutiny is still coming from an anti-SNP and pro-Unionist perspective.

However, there are other reasons why Scottish journalists have not had the same influence on nationalist thought as have other symbol-operators in Scotland - artists, academics, intellectuals - and as have journalists in Québec. First, Québec journalists are seen as part of the intelligentsia, whose ideas play an important role in the province's debate on sovereignty. Scottish political journalists, generally, are not. Second, Scottish journalists have a different cultural approach to objectivity. Unlike the Québécois journalists of the 1960s and 70s, they cannot openly identify with a cause, but, like anglophone Canadian journalists, are expected to sublimate their own political beliefs as a professional requirement. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, when the press was more partisan (Dornan 1991; Levine 1993), journalists could take a more activist role; their inclusion as key figures in the dissemination of nationalist ideas was valid. But in 20th century journalism, with its tradition of non-partisan objectivity, the situation has been different. In Québec, where objectivity is defined as giving equal weight to discussions of both federalism and sovereignty as valid options, nationalism can be taken seriously - but not so in Scotland. As Smith (1991) points out, not all members of the intelligentsia want to be involved in promulgating nationalist ideas: 'Many are concerned with their own career prospects' (p. 120).

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Another reason is that there is not the same national cohesiveness in Scotland as there is in Québec, where 'issues are debated largely within the context of Quebec and appraised by their impact on Quebec. All parties are thus forced to play on the nationalist field' (Keating 1996, p. 77). In Scotland, says Kemp (1993), 'the "magic circle" of those enjoying power and patronage in Scotland is deeply committed to the Union, as is the business class and the financial community (with only a few exceptions)' (p. 74). Support for independence is largely confined to members of the SNP and the Labour Party, and is not found in business, trade union or civic organizations to the extent that it is in Québec. It is also true, as Keating notes (1996), that Scotland's civic culture is more divided by class and regional conflicts than it is in Québec, where language has reinforced cultural solidarity, and these divisions have made it difficult to develop a clear vision of Scotland's identity both at home and abroad. Thus, although the anti-independence and pro-unionist views of the **Record** and **The Scotsman** may not reflect the views of the Scottish people, they do reflect those with power, and that explains a great deal.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Scottish National Party is now the official opposition in the Scottish parliament, and political journalists in Scotland, like their counterparts in Québec, will have to learn how to deal with the consequences of this new political reality, and that requires critical scrutiny of both the unionist and independence options. This may be difficult, but not impossible; for, as Negrine (1996) says, 'the task of interpretation cannot be abdicated by journalists though it may be one that they cannot sometimes undertake, perhaps for professional reasons or reasons of competence' (p. 21).

Both the Scottish National Party and the Bloc Québécois, the federal nationalist party in Québec, have had to battle a hostile or indifferent press during their recent election campaigns, but significantly for the Bloc, and the PQ, its provincial counterpart, they have enjoyed, if not always a supportive press, one that was willing to take them seriously within Québec. Those who argue the case for media influence on political outcomes would say that the francophone media's less-hostile coverage has enabled the relative electoral success of these two parties; however, this writer does not share that view. The key difference between Scotland and Québec is that the journalists in Québec had the same social, cultural and political values of their sovereigntist political colleagues, which arose out of a shared sense of national identity. This is not the case in Scotland, and will not be until the

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SNP has established the same deep roots in the Scottish community that the sovereigntists in Québec have - and that is also a matter of political organization as well as identity.

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