

Book Review: Devolution and the Scottish Conservatives: Banal Activism, Electioneering and the Politics of Irrelevance

by Blog Admin

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Devolution and the Scottish Conservatives is a unique ethnographic study of devolution and Scottish politics, exploring how Conservative Party activists who had opposed devolution and the movement for a Scottish Parliament during the 1990s attempted to mobilise politically following their annihilation at the 1997 General Election. Its central argument is that, having asserted that the difficulties they faced constituted problems of knowledge, Conservative activists cast to the geographical and institutional margins of Scotland became ‘banal’ activists by burying themselves in paperwork and petty bureaucracy. **Andrew Crines** recommends the book for anyone interested in grassroots Conservative activism.



Devolution and the Scottish Conservatives: Banal Activism, Electioneering and the Politics of Irrelevance. Alexander Smith. Manchester University Press. April 2011.

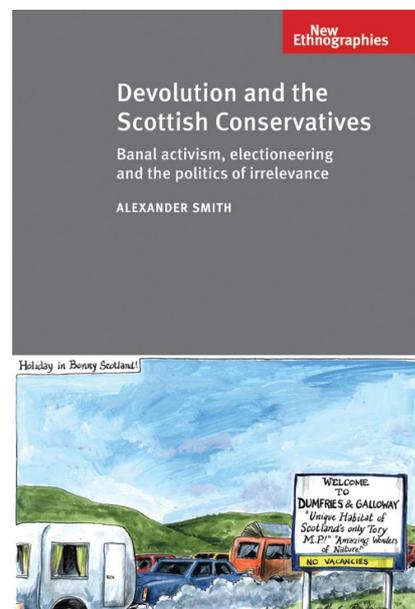
The plight of the Scottish Conservatives became a carnival of chequered misfortunes since the introduction of the Poll Tax one year early in 1989. The apparent singling out of Scotland as a ‘testing ground’ for the Community Charge is vital in appreciating the alienation felt by the electorate there, which helped reject the Conservatives in the minds of many as a party capable of understanding the needs of Scotland. Indeed, their trajectory towards irrelevance was seemingly confirmed by this, with the social effects of the recession during the 1990s compounding existing anti-Conservative sentiments.

The nationwide riots and protests which followed in large cities such as Edinburgh, London and Bristol and to small towns like Truro set in motion the demise of the Thatcher government, posing the strong probability of a devastating electoral outcome in 1992 and the return of the Labour Party to government. Despite the Conservatives subsequent victory with John Major at the helm, the Scottish Conservatives were facing the challenge of defending a party that appeared hostile to the economic and social interests of the Scottish electorate.

During the following term, the debate over devolution once more took hold of the Labour Party, whilst the Conservative Party reaffirmed its commitment to the Union and opposing the possibility of a Scottish Parliament. Although aiming to highlight a Scottish Parliament as the first step towards an independent Scotland, their argument did not consider the impact of 18 years of Thatcherism on Scotland’s economy and social cohesion. Rather, their abstract allusions to unity subverted the decline in Scottish prosperity. The argument for a Scottish Parliament highlighted the potential benefits of a local layer of political investment that appreciated circumstances faced by the electorate.

In the great story of British politics, the electoral dynamic favoured Blair’s New Labour party in 1997, reducing the Conservatives to a virtual rump of their former selves, whilst in Scotland their devastation was complete. Such a result shifted the debate towards a new referendum, ultimately leading to the resumption of the Scottish Parliament.

How to respond to this significant challenge? Now faced with the realities of the very chamber they had



opposed since the 1979 referenda and beyond, the Scottish Conservatives were placed into something of a quandary. Having fiercely opposed the chamber, they now faced virtual irrelevance in Scotland if they continued that stance. Indeed, the Scottish Conservatives were now compelled to work with the new Parliament. Moreover, without any Scottish MPs in Westminster, the Conservatives were faced with the humiliation of speaking for only a specific section of the United Kingdom's electorate, reducing their ability to reflect the needs of the UK as a whole. This untenable position compelled them in part to engage with the Scottish Parliament, and to garner relevance once more.

Devolution and the Scottish Conservatives scrutinises that situation in some depth. Through a series of interviews with party activists and analyses of the electoral dynamic, the author presents an insightful and valuable evaluation of the grass root Conservative response to the Scottish Parliament. The focus of the book is upon Dumfries and Galloway, chosen for their prior position as heartlands of the Scottish Conservatives. The key challenge faced by their virtual wipe-out was the consolidation of a disconnect between the Conservatives and the Scottish people. This lack of understanding for the issues faced by the electorate, combined with challenges to material resources, undermined the credibility of the Party and its ability to successfully challenge the Labour Party and SNP, who still had those connections to a strong electoral base. Put simply, the Conservatives lacked an activist base which it could argue with their opponents. Without a clear structure or ability to energise their supporters, the response of the Conservative activist was to become overwhelmed with bureaucracy and theorising recovery strategies. This distraction compounded the disconnect, leading to the politics of irrelevance. In so doing, Smith argues the activists became institutionally banal in their activities, focusing on paperwork rather than canvassing support, leading to an insular organisation. This challenged the confidence of the activists, undermining the credibility of the Scottish Conservatives, and with it their electoral strategy.

The value of this book derives from its uniqueness. Few other texts have examined the responses of activists to electoral challenges in the way presented by Smith. Such responses have escaped the attention of academics because they appear to be less than exciting in the body of political science literature. Indeed, the evaluation of the Scottish Conservatives presented here demonstrates the mundanity of a depressed activist base, their retreat to irrelevance, and of course their fightback. A significant caveat for any scholar interested in this book would be its historical context. Given the research undertaken was in 2003, the electoral dynamic has shifted significantly enough to date some of the findings. However, as a contributory part of the broader story of Scottish Conservative recovery, it has strong validity.

This book represents the beginning of a series of ethnographic studies of the social sciences. As the first, it provides a strong introduction to a broader sociological study of British political and social experiences, both in the UK and beyond. Consequently, this opening book would be of particular interest to scholars of the diversity of Britishness, as well as those with an interest in grassroots Conservative activism.

Andrew Crines is a lecturer and researcher at the University of Huddersfield, specialising in oratorical and rhetorical analysis across British Politics. Dr Crines has written a monograph entitled 'Michael Foot and the Labour Leadership', and is currently editing a volume with Dr Richard Hayton (Huddersfield) on Oratory in the Labour Party. [Read more reviews by Andrew.](#)

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