

Book Review: Whatever Happened To Tory Scotland?

by Blog Admin

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*To those of a younger generation, it may be a surprise to learn that Scotland was once 'true-blue' Tory territory, with widespread support in the first half of the 20th Century. Yet in the second half of that century, as well as the early years of the next, this support dramatically collapsed, with seemingly little likelihood of any revival. **Whatever Happened To Tory Scotland?** explores this trajectory, unpacking a broad direction of travel through a series of essays from a range of contributors focusing on specific themes. **Andrew Crines** found much of great interest in the volume, though was surprised by its brevity.*



Whatever Happened To Tory Scotland? David Torrance. Edinburgh University Press. 2012.

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With just over 50 per cent of the vote and securing 36 of the 72 possible seats up for grabs in Scotland, the Scottish Conservatives reached their electoral peak of popular support in 1955. It was, arguably, true-blue Tory territory, representing the power of the Conservative Party over Britain at the height of their national popularity. This was a great position to be in, which makes their fall from grace to 16.7 per cent and 1 out of 56 possible seats in 2010 seem all the more dramatic. How can this massive determination be accounted for? What are the causal factors? And how, if at all, can these be addressed?

David Torrance oversees the history of Scottish Conservatism in this collection of essays presented by a range of academics and commentators, each experts in this field. They cannot all be listed here, however needless to say they bring a great deal of academic and political knowledge to the volume, giving it a great deal of intellectual interest.

The chapters examine such variables as patriotism, solidarity with the rest of the UK *vis-à-vis* Unionism, the making of Conservative Scottishness, the impact of Thatcherism, support and opposition to neoliberalism, the death of Conservative Scotland in 1997, and its subsequent inability to rise from the ashes at Westminster level. Of course, the story does not end there, with the issue of devolution, lessons from Welsh Conservatism, the role of the press in reforming Scottish national identity, and the significant impact of feminism upon Scottish Conservatism. This volume represents a broad examination of Scottish Conservatism, placing the current situation faced by the party into some degree of historical context.

As the Unionist party, the Conservatives place no stock by ideas of independence. Indeed, they were late converts to devolution, seeing it as some opportunity to garner some input into the politics of that nation. During the 1997 election campaign, John Major argued there was only "72 hours to save the Union", a point which is used by this book to illustrate the Tories ideological opposition to devolution and self-determination.

Despite this, the Tories engaged with devolution after the referenda. It was, put simply, the only way by which they could influence the political agenda in the nation. Regardless, the Tories remain the outside mainstream party, looking in as the SNP and the Labour Party dance the same dance they themselves are used to at Westminster. With the decline of Labour support during the Blair/Brown leadership, and the failure of William Hague, IDS, Michael Howard, or even the 'modernising' David Cameron to regain some



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degree of significant success north of the border, this book raises the question of why. Granted, there remains a longstanding memory of the Thatcherite period, in which both the North of England and Scotland were hit hard by the retreat of industry and the shift in the economy towards service, yet penetrations into their former tartan heartlands remains elusive.

This book advances an explanation as to why there has been no Tory revival in Scotland: “The reason for failure lies in the character of Scottish society, and the way in which the political environment north of the border is thought to be (increasingly) non-conductive to Conservative electoral success”. It is non-conductive because the ideology offered by the Conservatives is no longer attractive to that electorate. Put simply, there is no sign the Tories have been or ever will be forgiven for Thatcherism north of the border, and that they now have another choice between the Scottish Nationalists and the Labour Party.

The argument is compounded saying the industrial age and the rise of red-blooded militant trade unionists may seem to make Scotland more conducive to the Labour Party, yet this disregards the earlier success of the Tories during a more industrial age. However romantic this may sound, it should not be discarded given Alex Salmond uses romantic rhetoric to construct anti-mainstream narratives against the Westminster mainstream. He also lays claim to a new brand of Scottish social democracy based on self-determination and broadly progressive ideas of health, welfare, and social justice.

But, what of the Unionists? The Scottish Conservatives are/were the party of the Union in Scotland – with Salmond seemingly dominating, surely this superficially suggests Unionism will go the same way? To answer, “The Labour Party has exhibited both Unionist and Nationalist tendencies during its history. At present, Labour’s Unionism is in the ascendant, in part a reaction to SNP electoral success...” With Labour as the party of the Union in Scotland, one of the Tories key ideological appeals appears to have been forfeit. To paraphrase the famous Welsh orator, Aneurin Bevan, ‘the Scottish Conservatives are being sent naked into the conference chamber’, with little to offer except the memory of Thatcherism and the decline of Scottish industry.

The only quibble with this book is its size and scope. The book covers such a large range of highly interesting and deep topics, to do so in merely 182 pages leaves the reader with the strong sense that there is much more to say. And such a reader would be correct. The slimness of the volume suggests, therefore, it is introductory. However, the concepts thrown around suggest advanced foreknowledge is needed in some chapters. The book is either too advanced for its length or too short for the subjects covered. But this quibble should not detract from a well-informed, excellent evaluation of Scottish Conservatism. It would be easy to conclude that the story of Scottish Conservatism at Westminster is over. With only one seat, and no sign of recovery, that would be an easy case to advance. Obviously devolution gives them a new arena, but in the post-independence referendum world, Scottish Conservatism may still find a new voice regardless of the outcome. It is very much a story that is still playing out, suggesting a second edition after the referendum has strong validity.

Andrew Crines is a lecturer and researcher at the University of Leeds, 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.](#)