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The Impact of the Scottish National Party on the Development of the Scottish Nationalist Movement in the 1960s.

Abstract:

To date, researches are made on the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. This development in the Scottish nationalist movement had its roots in the post-Second World War especially with the flourish on the SNP in the 1960s. This study seeks to show the SNP's important role in the development of the Scottish nationalist movement in the 1960s. The efforts made by the SNP were significant to push the Westminster governments to respond to the rise of the SNP, on the one hand, and to put devolution in their agendas, on the other hand. The Party's continuous struggle for independence, along with the great support from Scots, helped the movement to reach its goals. Thus, the SNP and the Scottish Nationalist Movement came to be two sides of the same coin.

Key words: the Scottish National Party (SNP), Scottish nationalist movement, Devolution, 1960s.

INTRODUCTION:

The 1960s were characterized by the rise of minority nationalism in Scotland. At the same period, Scots suffered from the downturn in economy as British governments failed to overcome the economic crisis inherited from the War. As a result, there were great sense of anger within Scots and they started to call for self-government. In the light of this situation, the SNP was capable to gain support among Scots and become a competitive political party. The emergence of the SNP as a powerful force in Scottish politics and the political discourse of Britain gave it a chance to challenge the other political parties. This became a source of contention between Scottish and British Identities.

In modern time, nationalism has become a force that cannot be ignored. This is the path followed by the Scottish nationalist movement in the decades following WWII since it emerged as a political and economic nationalism, coherent, organized and led by a political party.

The present work sheds light on the great efforts made by the SNP to develop and guide the Scottish nationalist movement in the 1960s. Scottish nationalism of the period emerged as minority political nationalism with an agenda to dissolve the union of 1707 and gain independence from the rest of Britain. The movement was led by the Scottish National Party. As a response to the success of the SNP and the rise of nationalism was devolution, which is a plan for the shift of power from the center to Scotland and Wales.

The concern here is on the SNP important role on the development of the Scottish nationalist movement in the post war era particularly in the 1960s. In a decade when the SNP emerged as a political power and come the challenge the British main political parties and how they respond to this development.

The SNP's Struggle for Electoral Competitiveness:

The Second World War was a difficult time for the SNP since its establishment in 1934. The post war years also were hard times for the SNP to survive within an atmosphere of national economic crises and reforms to overcome these crises. In this regard, the party's organization had fallen with the loss of members along with its low fortunes in gaining elections as shown in the table below:

The Nationalist vote at general Elections: 1945-1959

Elections	Candidates	Forfeited Deposits	Total Vote	Percentage of all Votes Cast in Scotland
1945	9	7	30.827	1.27
1950	9	9	13.301	0.49
1951	2	1	7.299	0.26
1955	2	1	12.112	0.48
1959	5	3	21.738	0.81 ¹

The 1960s was an important decade for the SNP to improve its position within the UK's main political parties and also to secure the party's position in Scotland. Since then, the Scottish nationalist movement became to be represented by the SNP. This latter gave strength and cohesion to the movement due to its organisation and political progress. It was in the 1960s, with economic downturn, rising unemployment and growing feeling of disenchantment toward the two main political parties which dominated Britain's political scene and the centralized UK government and economy, that the SNP's opportunity for gaining elections began to rise when external conditions improved for the party. The party's organisational and electoral prospects changed quickly, especially after it began campaigning on the oil issue in 1972. The importance here will be given to the SNP important role in the development of the Scottish nationalist movement in the 1960s in a period when the party was to become a serious political player in the British political scene capable of driving the issue of self-government in the 1960s and the coming decades.

The geographical territory of Scotland has recognised it as a distinctive nation from the rest of the United Kingdom. Barring the addition of the northern isles from Norway and conquest of Berwick-upon-Tweed on the border with England, Scotland does not have areas of territory contested with other ethnic groups or nations. The nation, therefore, is defined by Cowan and Finlay as: "a consistent territory, strong national institutions and a long sense of itself as a separate entity from the rest of the United Kingdom." And added in defining nationalism: "it is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round. Admittedly, nationalism uses the pre-existing historically inherited proliferation of cultural

wealth though it uses them very selectively, and it most often transforms them radically. Dead languages can be revived, traditions invented quite fictions pristine purities restored”². In this way nationalism is defined as a sense of having distinct national entities such as: culture, territory, tradition, language and most importantly history. Rather, the SNP represented modern phenomenon in Scottish politics. The SNP was not concerned with history, language, culture or tradition as ways of nationalism. A belief in Scottish self-government and desire for economic improvement of Scotland were the prime concerns of the SNP.

As a nationalist party, the SNP did not exist in the political scene but also represented the national movement in Scotland. Certainly, from the 1960s, the SNP was the most dominating organisation within the national movement in Scotland. The period also saw an increase in the party’s membership and electoral success with the Scottish continuous decline in relation to England. This improvement in membership was due to the strategies adopted by new members such as Ian MacDonald and Billy Wolf who had joined the party in 1959. MacDonald was a party’s organiser and set to establish branches for the party around Scotland and as stated by the historians Begg and Stewart “He brought about a growth in membership from 2.000 in 1962 to 42.000 in 1966 having more than double in each intervening year”³. An increase in membership and the joining of new influential members permitted the party for a great level of organisation and table below shows clearly the increase in the party’s membership in the 1960s:

The Growth of the Organisation and Membership of the SNP, 1962-1968

	Membership of Organised		Numbers of Organised	Membership
	Constituencies		Branches	
1962	0		21	2.000
1966	16	110	42.000	
1967	33		263	55.000
1968	62		472	120.000 ⁴

The start of the nationalist success came in the West-Lothian by-election in June 1962. The constituency was contested as a result of another SNP active member Billy Wolf. During the by-election he emphasized on local economic issues such as the decline of the shale

industry which resulted in the layout of many workers, raising unemployment in Scotland and the entry in to the European Economic Community. All these issue were not the concern of the party only but were featured in the local press also. The SNP's performance in this constituency was a surprise for other parties, especially Labour which expected to defend a safe seat .The party gained 23,3 percent and cam second⁵.

Now, the nationalists became a political force that could not be denied .This election was of great influence in the coming elections and paved the way for other victories to the party and its transformation to the a nationalist party by Billy Wolfe whose attitude to nationalism was revealing during this period and indicative of the position of the SNP as he stated: "I foresee that the party will become less obviously nationalist as it increasingly realizes that 90 percent of the people of Scotland are already nationalist and do not require to be made particularly conscious of that fact"⁶. For Wolfe, the real success for the party was to gain more public opinion and convince as much people as possible to join the party. This was as a preparation for the next elections. Though the West Lothian performance was good for the SNP, its performance at subsequent by-elections was poor. The SNP was badly squeezed in by-elections such as Glasgow, Woodside in November 1962, Kinross and West Perthshire in November 1963, Dundee West in November 1963 and Dumfriesshire in December 1963⁷. But this was not the case later on. The 1964 and 1966 general elections saw considerable progress for the SNP. The party was able to improve the number of seats contested at these two elections. An increase to 15 and then 23 seats at these elections⁸ was a real progress for the party especially when compared to the previous elections.

In 1967 came the by-election in Pollok and Hamilton. The result was significant as they demonstrated that the SNP was capable of contesting a lot of seats. It won in Glasgow-Pollok by-election 49.9 percent of the vote and gaining 46 seats of total.⁹ In Hamilton, the result was more dramatic when the SNP candidate, Winifred Ewing, defeated the Labour candidate and gained 46 percent of the popular vote¹⁰. Moreover, opinion polls after Hamilton by-election showed a strengthening of SNP support. By winning an election, the nationalists seemed to cross the first gap for its long way in fighting for Scottish independence. The victory can be considered as the beginning of the growth of Scottish nationalism and symbolizes the new challenge being posed to Britishness as a national identity.

A year later, in 1968 municipal election, the party gained 30 percent of the total vote and 101 seats¹¹. This development was marked as a real victory for the party as never marked

since its establishment in 1934. Indeed, the SNP position was secured and was able to contest more seats in the mid and late 1960s. This goal was achieved by the expansion of branches and also by the establishment of formal constituency associations (CAs). The party now came to face the two most dominating political parties in the UK and had to prepare an organized strategy to be strong enough to resist both Conservative and Labour governments' responses to its emergence in the political landscape as a political force that cannot be denied. Both Conservative and Labour governments made many responses and put Scottish Home Rule in their agendas.

UK Governments' Responses to the Development of the SNP:

Labour and Conservatives now turned to attack the nationalist rather than ignore the SNP. The party's emphasis was not yet put in challenging other political parties. The party found itself the focus of serious attention for the first time since its establishment.

As has been previously discussed in the paper, the decline of the Scottish economy as in the post-war era, especially by the 1960s, gave strength to the growth of the Scottish nationalist movement and provided support for its political voice the SNP. Nationalists chose this period because the promises of material well-being offered by the post-war consensus began to fail. As a result, voters moved away from the two dominating parties, Labour and Conservative, and looked for an alternative, the Scottish National Party. Other factors also helped nationalists to emerge in the post-war era. Deeper changes took place at the same time and 'Britishness' as a national identity had less appeal than before.

Conservative and Labour Post-War General Elections Performance in Scotland and England:

Year: Gov.	Conservatives, as %		Labour, as %	
	England	Scotland	England	Scotland
1945:Lab.	40.2	41.1	48.5	47.6
1950:Lab.	43.8	44.8	46.2	46.2
1951:Con.	48.8	48.6	48.8	47.9
1955:Con.	50.4	50.1	46.8	46.7

1959:Con.	49.9	47.2	43.6	46.7
1964:Lab.	44.1	40.6	43.5	48.7
1966:Lab.	42.7	37.7	48.0	49.9
1970:Con.	48.3	38.0	43.4	44.5
Feb. 1974:Lab.	40.2	32.9	37.6	36.6
Oct. 1974:Lab.	38.9	24.7	40.1	36.3
1979:Con.	47.2	31.4	36.7	41.6
1983:Con.	46.0	28.4	26.9	35.1
1987:Con.	46.2	24.0	29.5	42.4 ¹²

The table shows clearly that the Labour and Conservative parties started to loss votes in Scotland by the mid 1960s. The decline of both parties fortunes in Scotland forces them to change their policies, organisation and strategies and especially preparing to fight the emergence of nationalism.

The SNP's victory in the Hamilton be-election of November 1967 was considered as a watershed in Scottish politics and thus both British political parties started to loss their votes to the nationalists. The Conservative reaction to this triumph was dramatic. Consequently, a commitment to legislative devolution was a major part of Heath's attempt to revive the party in Scotland. This led Heath to make what became known as the Declaration of Perth at the Conservative's conference in 1968. In his declaration he advocated a moderate form of devolution with creating a body which would be partly directly elected and partly indirectly elected giving it powers to initiate and consider legislation but leaving the final decision to Westminster. His declaration also came as a surprise to most party members even those who supported devolution.

Prior to Conservatives' initiatives, the Labour government had to respond to the rise of nationalists sentiments throughout Scotland and reorganise party policies to meet the nationalists challenge. Under Clement Attlee leadership, the party position had changed the direction because Attlee preferred centralisation because:

Under Clement Attlee's leadership, Labour remained theoretically committed to home rule, but it was clearly a low priority, especially as experience of government, coupled with perceptions that socialism and equality required central demand management and central imposition of standards and policies, shifted the party ideological stance towards centralisation.¹³

The significant development which pushed the Labour government to respond to Scottish nationalism was related to the modernisation policy adopted by the Conservative Party as it responded positively to the nationalists. As a result, the idea of a royal commission on the constitution emerged. There was a debate within the Labour government on whether the alternative should be a Commonwealth constitutional commission or a royal commission. It was agreed that it should take evidence in public to "ensure that the Scottish and Welsh Nationalist Parties were compelled to submit specific proposals to scrutiny and public discussion."¹⁴ The final decision was the establishment of the Royal Commission on the Constitution in April 1969 recommending devolution as the 1966-1970 parliament was marked by suggestions that Scottish nationalism was a growing threat.

The establishment of the Royal Commission on the Constitution was the result of the political developments which preceded the Commission's appointment. This was, of course, due to heightened degree of nationalist activity, both in Scotland and Wales. Of the two, Scottish developments were more significant as a factor in the commission's establishment because the SNP's electoral success was in advance both in central and local government elections.

CONCLUSION

The history of the SNP in the 1960s was marked by its continuous fight for survival and growth because it was suffering from weak organisation and limited finance. Such factors were of great influence on its failure as a political party in its first years.

However, the 1960s brought more chances for the SNP. With economic crisis throughout the UK gave the Scottish nationalist movement strength to challenge the unity of the UK and became electorally competitive to the British main political parties. It was in the late 1960s

that the SNP reached its goal and win by-elections from Labour and Conservative parties. In this way, the SNP came in the political scene and emerged as a political party. The party became also the voice of the whole Scottish nationalist movement and played an important role in its improvement. Thus, the SNP was a real threat for the main parties that cannot be ignored and also to the unitary state. This was achieved through the great efforts made by the party members to organise it internally, contest more seats and became electorally competitive. The previous factors were fuelled by other external factors and pushed both Labour and Conservative governments to respond to the development of the Scottish nationalist movement.

Both parties decided to respond differently to the rise of the rise of Scottish nationalism. Ted Heath's Declaration of Perth in 1968 declared Conservative support for Scottish legislative devolution, whilst Harold Wilson's Labour government established the Royal Commission on the Constitution to investigate the case for Scottish and Welsh devolution in 1969. These responses pushed the SNP to continue the fight for devolution to Scotland and looked for other reasons which would be as a kind of strength for its long road to achieve the party's main goal, devolution.

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