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The 1970s: a “Paradoxical Decade” for the Scottish National Party

Les années 1970: « décennie paradoxale » pour le Scottish National Party

Nathalie Duclos

- ¹ The 1970s were, in the words of a political scientist, a “*paradoxical decade*” for the Scottish National Party (SNP),¹ as the party's general election results make quite clear. The results tell a story of rise and retreat. The decade opened with a landmark in the life of the party: the 1970 general election was the first in which the party managed to win a seat (on 11.4% of the Scottish vote); until then, it had only managed to win (two) seats as a result of by-elections. Thereafter, the SNP was to win at least two seats, and over 10 per cent of the Scottish vote, at every general election. The middle of the decade saw the SNP at its strongest: at the October 1974 general election, the party won a record 11 seats on 30.4% of the Scottish vote; these were to be its best general election results until 2015.² This spectacular SNP surge led some commentators to predict the imminent “*break-up of Britain*”, in the words of Scottish philosopher Tom Nairn.³ However, the 1970s ended with the collapse of the SNP, and the 1979 general election, when the party only hung on to 2 of its 11 seats and its vote was almost halved, was to mark “*the end of the dream for many Nationalists.*”⁴

General election results in Scotland in the 1970s

	Labour vote %	Labour seats	Cons vote %	Cons seats	SNP vote %	SNP seats	Liberal vote %	Liberal seats
1970	44.5	44	38.0	23	11.4	1	5.5	3
1974 Feb	36.6	40	32.9	21	21.9	7	8.0	3
1974 Oct	36.3	41	24.7	16	30.4	11	8.3	3

1979	41.6	44	31.4	22	17.3	2	9.0	3
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Source : I. G. C. Hutchison, *Scottish Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001), p.156.

- 2 The SNP's global electoral fortunes in the 1970s were rather less straightforward than would suggest a reading limited to its general election performance (as the first part of this article will show). However, the general trend was clear: the party went "*from boom to boost*", "*from breakthrough to breakdown*".⁵ The SNP's political influence followed the same upward and downward trend: while the SNP's electoral successes in 1974 forced the Labour Party to put the issue of devolution on the agenda (despite the opposition of many Labour representatives), the failure of the devolution scheme after the 1979 referendums in Scotland and Wales coincided with the SNP's electoral collapse.
- 3 The second and third part of the article will attempt to answer the following two questions: what lay behind the SNP's rise in the first half of the 1970s, and what lay behind its retreat in the late 1970s? Why was the spectacular march of Scottish nationalism so short-lived? The main aim of this article is to attempt to draw a comprehensive list of answers that have been given to these questions, and thereby provide the reader with a historiographical and analytical account of the rise and fall of the SNP in the 1970s.

The SNP's electoral fortunes in the 1970s

The SNP's performance in general elections, 1945-1979

1945	8	0	1.2
	Candidates	Seats	% vote
1950	3	0	0.4
1951	2	0	0.3
1955	2	0	0.5
1959	5	0	0.8
1964	15	0	2.4
1966	23	0	5.0
1970	65	1	11.4
1974 (Feb)	70	7	21.9
1974 (Oct)	71	11	30.4
1979	71	2	17.3

Source: Ian McAllister, "Party Organization and Minority Nationalism: a Comparative Study in the United Kingdom", *European Journal of Political Research* 9 (1981), p. 244.

- 4 The SNP's electoral results in the late 1960s and early 1970s seemed at the time to signal the forward march of Scottish nationalism. This had symbolically started with the SNP's Hamilton by-election victory in November 1967. This was the first time ever that the party had won a parliamentary seat in a normal, peacetime context, and the second time that it had won a parliamentary seat in its entire history,⁶ though it had existed since 1934. What's more, the SNP achieved a comfortable 46.0% of the vote, in what had theretofore been a safe Labour stronghold (Labour's vote falling from 71.2% at the 1966 general election to 41.5% at the by-election). The Hamilton victory was to prove "a turning point in terms of media interest and publicity, and can be said to be the point at which the SNP ceased to be a fringe party in Scottish politics."⁷ The SNP also had very good results in the local elections of May 1968, winning 107 council seats and 30.1% of the vote across Scotland.⁸ The SNP's electoral successes were accompanied by organisational expansion, with the party claiming 142 new local branches in 1968.⁹ They also put Scottish issues, and particularly that of self-government, on the front burner. Both major British parties reacted to the SNP surge of 1967 and 1968 with their own political initiative on devolution: Conservative leader Edward Heath committed his party to a Scottish parliament (or "assembly" as it was then known) in his "Declaration of Perth" of 1968, and the Labour government appointed a Royal Commission on the Constitution to look into the merits of devolution.¹⁰ Already in the late 1960s, the major parties attempted to contain the rise of Scottish nationalism by offering devolution – or at least

offering to think about it; to Scottish Labour politician Tam Dalyell, "*the 'something has to be done' factor*" born of the SNP's progress "*in fact pervades the entire devolution saga*".¹¹

- 5 After the SNP's surge of 1967-68, the 1970 general election was generally interpreted as a disappointing one for the party. And yet, as noted previously, it was the first general election in which the SNP won a seat. It was also the first in which the SNP could claim third place in Scotland in terms of votes, before the Liberals. However, the SNP's results were still not good enough for it to pose a serious electoral threat. Despite winning 11.4% of the Scottish vote, it only took one seat, the Western Isles, and failed to hold the Hamilton seat, which reverted back to Labour. Support for the SNP seemed too spread out across the country to allow the party to make a serious breakthrough in terms of seats. The 1971 local elections added to the party's disappointment: compared to the 1968 local elections, the SNP divided its share of the vote by two, and its number of council seats by three (winning a meagre total of 30 seats on 15.9% of the vote). The dawn of the new decade was therefore a time of electoral (and organisational) contraction for the SNP.
- 6 However, its fortunes soon rose again. After its good performance in the Stirling and Falkirk by-election of September 1971 (where the party drastically reduced Labour's majority) and in the Dundee East by-election of March 1973 (in which the party was brought to within 1,141 votes of victory¹²), it won the Glasgow Govan by-election of November 1973, beating Labour in one of its safest seats (as Hamilton had been in 1967). A few months later, at the February 1974 general election, it polled over 20% of the vote in Scotland (almost doubling its share of the vote compared to the previous general election) and went from 1 to 7 seats. It managed even better results in October 1974, when, after contesting all 71 Scottish constituencies for the first time, it raised its number of seats to 11 on over 30% of the vote. Incredibly for a party that, until the 1970s, had never gained more than 5% of the Scottish vote – and had for most of its history gained less than 1% – it was now the second biggest party in Scotland in terms of votes, overtaking the Conservative Party (which nonetheless still came second in terms of seats). It was also the challenger in a further 42 seats, and it managed not to lose any deposits, "*demonstrating a remarkable distribution of votes*."¹³ Those were to be the SNP's best electoral results – by far – until the introduction of devolution in 1999, and its best general election results until 2015.
- 7 This electoral surge was once again paralleled by a growth in the number of SNP members and local branches. According to the party's official figures – which are probably overestimated, but which are nonetheless indicative of a general trend – its "*electoral successes of 1974 brought 135 new branches into existence, providing a total of 460 in Scotland*", and in early 1975, party membership "*stood at an all-time high*".¹⁴
- 8 Had the SNP finally entered the mainstream of Scottish politics? To political scientist James Mitchell, the SNP would in reality "*remain outside the political mainstream until the establishment of the Scottish Parliament*",¹⁵ for the reason that only such a development could give it governing potential. Until then, it had only had blackmail potential (in other words, the potential to influence the major parties' decisions), and this itself had been very fluctuating and limited by nature (the SNP's territorial basis being restricted to Scotland). Nevertheless, the SNP's pre-1999 blackmail potential was at its strongest in the late 1970s, when the Labour government was dependent on nationalist and Liberal votes. With its shock victory in Hamilton in 1967, followed by its breakthrough of 1974, the SNP could no longer be reduced by its political opponents to, at best, an irrelevance, and, at worst, a band of eccentrics and raving lunatics.

- 9 And yet, "*the apparent forward march of Scottish nationalism soon proved to be a chimera*",¹⁶ or so it would seem with the benefit of hindsight. After the failure of the first devolution bill (the Scotland and Wales Bill) in February 1977, the SNP initially got good results in the local elections that followed (in May 1977).¹⁷ However, "*the party's decline was evident in the regional election of May 1978 and the three by-elections held in 1978*".¹⁸ The SNP then collapsed in the general election that followed the devolution referendum, in 1979, almost halving its share of the vote and losing all but two of its seats. Its share of the vote continued to fall in 1983, though it managed to hang on to its two seats. Its decline was therefore evident. However, it should be stressed that this decline was relative, in the sense that the party did not return and was never to return to its pre-1970 state.
- 10 How can we explain the extraordinary cycle of rise and fall of the SNP in the 1970s? Over the years, several explanations have been offered which will now be presented in turn.

Explaining the rise of the SNP in the early and mid-1970s

The protest-vote interpretation

- 11 The SNP's growth in the early and mid-1970s was first explained in terms of protest voting. Denis Van Mechelen, for instance, argued in 1982 that Scottish and Welsh nationalisms were particular manifestations of a British-wide protest that had emerged in the 1960s.¹⁹ The protest-vote interpretation was based on a belief in the partisanship or partisan identification model. As one political analyst reminds us:
- 12 Until the mid-1970s, the dominant interpretation of electoral behaviour in the UK was based on the partisanship model. In this view, political allegiance and voter bonding resulted from early patterns of socialisation. Support for the major parties was transmitted from one generation to the next in the home and the community.²⁰
- 13 According to this model, most people were either Labour or Conservative identifiers, depending on their social class and patterns of socialisation. Votes for what were known as "third parties" were "*temporary 'deviations'*"²¹ from the normal pattern to be interpreted as protest votes. Early authors therefore often lumped all of the smaller parties together, speaking of a "*Liberal and nationalist revival*" in 1970-74²²: voting SNP or Liberal was not a sign of active support for those parties' policies, but rather a way of expressing discontent with the major parties; the rise of the SNP in Scotland like the rise of the Liberals in England were thus to be understood as a consequence of Labour and Conservative supporters' temporary disillusionment with their "natural" parties. However, in the case of the SNP, the protest-vote interpretation has several limitations. First, there is the fact that in the early 1970s, "*much of the backing for the SNP came from younger, often first-time voters*", which "*cannot fit the protest-vote model, which is predicated on a revolt by long-standing partisan electors.*"²³ Secondly, such an interpretation fails to explain the long-term growth in SNP voting throughout the 1960s (revealed by table n°2). Quite simply, "*[t]he nationalist vote was not as temporary a phenomenon as a 'protest vote' implies.*"²⁴ Analyses of the SNP vote in the pre-devolution years (i.e. before 1999) have consistently shown that some "*electors will vote for the Nationalists as a protest*", but that "*protesters do not form a large proportion of SNP voters.*"²⁵ Today, the protest-vote theory is mainly used to explain why the SNP performed unusually well in several key by-elections, only to lose

the seats thus won in the subsequent general election, as was the case of the Hamilton seat won in 1967 and lost in 1970, and of the Glasgow Govan seat won in 1973 and lost in February 1974.

- 14 SNP voting in the 1970s, therefore, cannot be reduced to a “*temporary deviation*” from Labour or Conservative voting. However, the rise of nationalism could still be interpreted as a consequence of a long-term “*decline of the British two-party system*” and of “*the erosion of traditional political allegiances*”.²⁶

The partisan dealignment interpretation

- 15 In the 1980s, many authors defended the thesis that the period leading to the 1974 elections was one of partisan “dealignment”, by which was meant that people were moving away from their traditional partisan loyalties. To Jack Brand, Duncan McLean and William Miller (writing in 1983), Scotland was “*a particularly clear example*” of this dramatic partisan dealignment, as evidenced by the increase in the SNP vote.²⁷ Voter disaffection with the two main British parties has remained a major explanation for the SNP surge of the 1970s. However, like the protest-vote model, this interpretation is insufficient, as it fails to explain why Scottish people opted for one minor party (the SNP) instead of another (the Liberals); in other words, it can “*explain why Scots turned away from the old parties*” but not “*why they turned to nationalism*”.²⁸
- 16 The partisanship model also influenced the way in which the SNP envisaged its own growth in the 1970s, although, within the frame of that model, the party itself was at the time very “*divided on how it had achieved its breakthrough*”.²⁹ Its election results of 1974 were interpreted in two contradictory ways. Some Nationalists “*mistakenly assumed that because [the SNP] had won more seats from the Conservatives than Labour in 1974 this meant that it had won more Conservative votes*”, which led them to argue that the party's rise was attributable to Conservative defectors; others, on the contrary, argued that in those constituencies where it had succeeded, the party had done so by “*garner[ing] together an anti-Tory coalition*”,³⁰ an interpretation which was later proven to be the correct one. However, this again begs the question of why the SNP was better able to attract the votes of people opposed to the Conservatives in 1974 than it had in the past.

The post-materialist interpretation

- 17 Another early hypothesis for the rise of the SNP was that it had benefitted from voters moving away from class politics and embracing “post-industrial”, “post-materialist” values. According to Inglehart's theory of post-materialism,³¹ the 1960s and 1970s had witnessed an inter-generational value change from an emphasis on material needs and physical and economic security to “post-material” values, which included a wide range of quality of life concerns. With this value change had come a shift away from political cleavages based on class conflict. This theory was often used in the late 1970s to explain the rise of the SNP: Scottish people who rejected the class cleavage and the two major parties which embodied it had the option of voting for a “national” party which claimed to defend the interests of all Scots, whatever their social class. However, a study conducted in 1988 demonstrated that nationalist supporters were only slightly more likely to have post-materialist attitudes than other voters; the theory of post-materialism could therefore only provide part of the answer for what the authors called the

resurgence of "*ethnonationalism*" in Britain.³² This was confirmed in later studies, which demonstrated that:

SNP support is materialist rather than post-materialist. Class remains a crucial determinant of the vote in Scotland. The material needs of the country in general, and of the working class in particular, are central issues for the Nationalist and the Labour vote.³³

- 18 Accordingly, the SNP has "*always based part of its appeal on the economic problems of Scotland*" and has had a "*mixed economic and non-economic ideology and programme*".³⁴ More specifically, the post-materialist interpretation does not sit well with the fact that the SNP had its electoral peak (in 1974) at the precise moment when the party openly presented itself as "social democratic" (and therefore left-wing) for the first time: the subtitle of its October 1974 election manifesto was "*A Programme for Social Democracy*".

The uneven development or relative deprivation interpretation

- 19 Another theoretical model that was popular in the 1970s and 1980s and that the rise of the SNP was fitted into was that of "uneven development" or "relative deprivation". The main exponent of this theory as it applied to the Scottish case was political philosopher Tom Nairn, who argued that the rise of Scottish nationalism and other peripheral nationalisms was "a political response to the uneven development of capitalism which arises in areas on the fringe of metropolitan growth zones which suffer from relative deprivation and are increasingly drawn to action against this."³⁵ In the context of a "changing capitalist world economy which has bestowed certain benefits on some regions while leaving other backward areas foundering", nationalist movements such as the SNP were interpreted as "a response to the inability of the state to rectify the problems of the 'peripheries'".³⁶ In the case of Scotland, this model has generally been found more convincing than the protest-vote or the post-materialist-vote interpretations. However, some studies of Scottish voting behaviour have pointed out that both SNP voting and Labour voting are consistent with the model of relative deprivation, and that "to explain SNP support one requires a sense of community deprivation along with a feeling that constitutional change would help redress the balance."³⁷ In other words, the relative deprivation model is only useful to explain SNP voting if it integrates a belief in the power of devolution or independence to change the material circumstances of Scotland. More generally, the problem with explanations which emphasise structural economic factors to explain SNP voting is that "[t]here is no simple causal relationship (...) between such variables as the state of the economy and the level of support for a nationalist party."³⁸

The issue voting interpretation: the importance of oil and devolution

- 20 More recently, political scientists have insisted on other factors. Today, it is generally agreed that a key factor in the rise of Scottish nationalism in the early and mid-1970s was issue voting; in other words, SNP voters were people who were "*characterised by their distinct concern for Scottish issues*".³⁹ The SNP's focus on specifically Scottish issues made it best able to "*capitalise on the failings of the main parties on economic policy and on a general feeling that Scotland was being neglected*".⁴⁰ In particular, the SNP's electoral peak of 1973-74 is largely attributed to its strategic decision to focus on the two Scottish issues of oil and devolution.⁴¹ These two momentous policy choices will be examined in turn.

- 21 Let's start by putting paid to a powerful political myth: the myth that the rise of Scottish nationalism was purely oil-fuelled. Even Gordon Wilson, who was responsible for the oil campaign within the SNP, "*reject[s] the notion that [it was] solely responsible for the rapid advance of the SNP.*"⁴² As all political analysts have noted, the rise of the SNP predated the discovery of oil in the Scottish North Sea. As we have seen, the late 1960s had been years of spectacular expansion for the SNP (triggered by the Hamilton by-election victory of 1967), in membership terms as well as electoral terms. It could even be argued that the rise of the SNP started in the early 1960s. To political scientist Peter Lynch, the 1960s, not the 1970s, were "*the decade in which the SNP arrived as a serious political force*", as evidenced by its electoral progress as well as its "*dramatic organisational expansion across Scotland.*"⁴³ To Tam Dalyell, the Hamilton by-election of 1967 was undoubtedly a turning point (and even "*one of a handful of by-elections in the 20th century which really mattered in the long term*"⁴⁴), but five years before that, the West Lothian by-election of 1962 (in which he himself had been the Labour candidate) had also been "*a pivotal moment in the rise of Scottish Nationalism*"⁴⁵ as the SNP had come second, which had been an excellent performance for the party. Whatever date one chooses to mark the beginning of the SNP surge, it undoubtedly began before the discovery of oil in Scottish waters (in 1969-1970⁴⁶), and before the SNP launched its oil campaign (in September 1972). What's more, North Sea oil only became a politically significant issue after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war had made it a viable resource; until then, "*[d]eep-sea drilling, remoteness, and awful weather [had] made for frontier conditions.*"⁴⁷ Oil should therefore be seen as an accelerant, rather than the origin or the sole cause of the SNP's good fortunes.
- 22 However, it is undeniable that the scale of its success in the years 1973-74 had much to do with its oil campaign, encapsulated in the famous slogan "*It's Scotland's Oil*".⁴⁸ The SNP's Glasgow Govan by-election victory of November 1973, for instance, came on the heels of the Arab-Israeli war which broke out in October and led to a quadrupling of oil prices. The oil campaign was significant in several respects. First, it was the SNP's "*first serious effort to diversify its campaigning appeal beyond the constitutional question.*"⁴⁹ Secondly, oil was "*the gambit that brought international recognition to the SNP.*"⁵⁰ Thirdly, and most significantly, the fact that Scotland now had at its disposal such a valuable resource as oil countered the main anti-independence argument, namely that Scotland could not survive economically outside of the UK. "*Not only could Scotland manage economically on its own, so the argument ran, but Scotland in control of offshore oil could become one of the most prosperous countries in the world, as affluent as its neighbour Norway.*"⁵¹ This did not lead to mass conversions to the cause of independence, and the rise of the SNP cannot be attributed to a rise in support for its defining issue, independence, to which the vast majority of Scottish people remained opposed.⁵² However, by making the SNP's case more credible, oil made the SNP itself a more credible alternative.
- 23 The SNP's decision to support devolution (i.e. the creation of an autonomous Scottish assembly) as a first step on the road to Scottish independence was much more divisive than its decision to campaign on oil. Since its early years, the SNP's first aim had always been to achieve Scottish independence (or "self-government"), as indicated in the second article of the party's constitution. However, Labour's devolution proposals left the SNP with little choice but to take a stand on devolution. The problem was that many SNP members could not support a constitutional scheme that not only fell well short of independence, but that was also precisely intended to kill Scottish nationalism "*stone dead*", as a senior Scottish Labour politician was later to say.⁵³ The SNP's position on

devolution was therefore very ambiguous until the February 1974 election, when it started distributed flyers (based on the policy document *SNP & You*⁵⁴) explaining that provided a devolved Scottish assembly was "*democratically elected*", the SNP would "*accept it as a first step while continuing to urge that it should have power over the Scottish economy and Scotland's oil*".⁵⁵ However, many within the party at large and within the party leadership remained unconvinced. This became obvious in 1976, when, at its annual National Conference, the SNP adopted a resolution stating that:

Conference reaffirms that independence is the goal of the SNP and, though prepared to accept an assembly with limited powers as a possible stepping stone, asserts that nothing short of independence will meet the needs of the Scottish people in whom alone the sovereign power of Scotland resides.⁵⁶

- 24 Despite this lukewarm endorsement of devolution, the party remained officially committed to its adoption. Its MPs accordingly gave the first devolution bill (the Scotland and Wales Bill) "*a cautious welcome*", on the grounds that "*although the [Scottish] Assembly [was] to be rammed into a constitutional straitjacket from the start, it still represent[ed] the greatest single transfer of responsibility back to the people of Scotland in the 269 years since the Act of Union*".⁵⁷ They also voted in favour of the second Scottish devolution bill, which was to become the Scotland Act 1978, despite what they saw as the "*blatantly anti-democratic rigging of the referendum*" on devolution.⁵⁸ The SNP then campaigned for a "Yes" vote in that referendum. According to an electoral study conducted in 1983,⁵⁹ the issue of devolution played a key part in the SNP's successes of 1974: the SNP being seen as the party of devolution, it reaped the benefits of the prominent place held by the issue in 1974. Devolution also greatly contributed to the party's popularity in the years 1976-1977, when the first devolution bill was debated in Parliament.

The organisational interpretation

- 25 Another explanation for the rise of Scottish nationalism in the early and mid-1970s, one that had already been given emphasis by several political scientists in the early 1980s⁶⁰ and that is today deemed to be pivotal, is organisational: the SNP's electoral successes of the 1970s largely stemmed from the wide-ranging internal reforms that it underwent in the 1960s. Until the 1960s, the SNP had been, in the words of one of its former chairmen, "*only the largest of the groups in the nationalist movement*".⁶¹ By contrast, in the 1960s, it had "*successfully made the transition from being a small, loosely coordinated organisation to a mass political party*", paving the way for its electoral surge of the 1970s.⁶² Among the changes made, one could mention the creation of constituency associations (in addition to local branches), the establishment within the party of a National Assembly to discuss party policy and strategy, or the recruitment of full-time staff. Such changes were a sign of the party's increasing professionalisation, and allowed it to become a more efficient electoral machine.

The "British crisis of self-confidence" interpretation

- 26 Finally, should rising support for the SNP in the 1970s be seen as one piece of evidence (amongst others) of rising disillusionment with the UK and of a common belief that Britain had become the "sick man of Europe"? Though it is difficult to demonstrate that there was a direct connection between the former and the latter, many political scientists have argued that the rise of the SNP should be seen in that context. James Mitchell, for

instance, recalls a headline from the *Economist* newspaper in which the Conservative slogan "Labour isn't working" had been replaced with "Britain isn't working", a headline which he believed "summed up a feeling which had been developing from the 1960s"; this, he added, "was not a specifically Scottish phenomenon", but what was significant in the case of Scotland was "the recognition that an alternative future existed for Scotland outside Britain."⁶³ The rise of the SNP could thus be seen as a specifically Scottish symptom of the British crisis of self-confidence of the 1970s, as argued for instance by Labour politician Gordon Brown writing in 1975: "it has been the decline of British self-confidence (...) that has created the conditions in which Scottish nationalism could become politicisable."⁶⁴ A variation on this argument is the idea that the rise of the SNP should be seen in the context of the disintegration of the British Empire:

The end of Empire is occasionally highlighted as a motivating force: no longer able to play a part in a large world power, Scots did not wish to stay with the diminished British state after the withdrawal from the Indian sub-continent and the African colonies, a process virtually complete by the early 1960s.⁶⁵

- 27 Interpreting the rise of the SNP in terms of the "decline in the power of symbols of Britishness, especially the Empire" is "tempting"; however, as noted by one Scottish historian, it "does not explain why the SNP did not put down deeper roots and why its vote fluctuated so much in the 1970s and 1980s".⁶⁶

Explaining the retreat of the SNP in the late 1970s

- 28 Considering all that the SNP had going for it in the mid-1970s:

[T]he subsequent decline of the party in the latter years of the decade is perplexing, especially as the economic condition of Britain, which had been acute in 1974, seemed nearly terminal by 1979. North Sea oil, now in full production, should have been an even more compelling card to play than in 1974.⁶⁷

- 29 And yet, with hindsight, one can see that in the SNP's successes were the seeds of its future retreat.
- 30 Let us start with the issue of devolution. The fact that voters associated the SNP with devolution was to the party's advantage in 1974-77, but fatal to it in 1979. With the failure of the Scottish devolution referendum due to the "40% rule",⁶⁸ the SNP too was "treated as finished."⁶⁹ In the 1979 general election that followed the referendum, the Scottish dimension was totally absent, contrary to what had happened in 1974. What's more, having to take a stand on devolution had exposed the party's ideological division over this issue – and without doubt, devolution was the most divisive issue that it had ever been faced with. Even when it was officially committed to devolution, the divide between "gradualists" (who believed in gaining independence by stages) and "fundamentalists" or traditionalists (who believed in nothing less than total independence and for whom devolution was a trap) was always obvious. The party could hardly appear very credible when it voted in favour of the devolution bills in Parliament, while campaigning in Scotland "around the slogan 'Only Independence Will...' for the whole three month life of the Scotland and Wales bill".⁷⁰
- 31 As for the issue of oil, which had also greatly contributed to the SNP's electoral successes of 1974, its importance in the eyes of the Scottish people greatly declined in the latter years of the 1970s. A study of Scottish people's attitudes on oil in 1974 and in 1979 concluded that in that time-frame, there was "a dramatic shift of Scots opinion towards a

more pro-British, less pro-Scots view on oil revenue", one which "occurred among supporters of each and every party". There was also a drop "in the percentage of voters who said that oil had influenced their voting choice; and, once again, this was true for SNP voters as for others".⁷¹ In summary, the two Scottish issues, devolution and oil, on the basis of which the SNP had won over many voters in 1974 failed to win them votes in 1979.

- 32 Another major reason why the SNP lost much of its power of attraction in the late 1970s was its internal divisions, which had been exposed by its parliamentary presence and which were far from limited to the gradualist/fundamentalist divide over devolution. Having a parliamentary presence for the first time meant that the party was forced to take a stand on a whole range of issues that it had not necessarily discussed until then. This revealed another crucial divide at its heart, namely that which opposed, on the one hand, the traditionalists for whom the party should remain "non-ideological" (i.e. neither left-wing nor right-wing), and who were often "fundamentalists" (opposed to devolution), and on the other hand, the left-wingers, for whom the SNP needed to appeal to Labour and working-class voters, and who were mostly "gradualists" (supportive of devolution). This dual divide largely overlapped with a third one: the organisational divide between the party's MPs (who were mainly traditionalists) and the party's National Executive Committee (or NEC, dominated by left-wingers). The London-based, 11-member-strong parliamentary group (from 1974 to 1979) occasionally ignored official party policy decided in Edinburgh by the NEC. Most famously, instead of supporting a bill on the nationalisation of the aircraft and shipbuilding industries, "some SNP MPs publicly tore up telegrams from the Scottish Trade Union Congress which had implored the SNP to support the initiatives."⁷² The ideological differences between the parliamentary group and the NEC were exacerbated by the fact that most of the senior party members, who held a seat on the national executive, had failed to be elected to Parliament in 1974, while most of the party's MPs were largely inexperienced, "previously obscure or unknown figures in the party".⁷³
- 33 These internal divisions were just one sign that the SNP had been ill-prepared for its successes of the early and mid-1970s. It had not devised a clear parliamentary strategy and had therefore been unprepared to withstand the pressures of parliamentary representation. It had also been unprepared in terms of its internal organisation. The party, which had always been suspicious of leadership, had a "chairman", not a "leader", and for much of the 1970s, its chairman William Wolfe was overshadowed by Margo McDonald, the glamorous winner of the Glasgow Govan by-election of 1973 and his deputy from 1974 to 1979. The election to Parliament of SNP MPs in 1974 created a new leadership position: that of leader of the parliamentary group. This lack of clear leadership was the main source of the parliamentary party's lack of discipline in the years 1974-79, itself a major cause of the SNP's loss of popularity in the late 1970s.
- 34 The fact that the SNP was not yet clearly associated with the left and that it attracted votes from different sections of Scottish society was also a long-term disadvantage. As noted in the *New Penguin History of Scotland*:
- 35 *One of the most remarkable features of the 1970s was the failure of the SNP to consolidate its electoral base – in face of an incumbent Labour government which had been considerably less than successful in delivering its electoral promises. The problem for the SNP was the diversity of its support. In rural areas it was small business. In the central belt it was both ex-Tories and a large segment of working-class voters – attracted by promises of jobs and welfare on the basis of the slogan 'It's Scotland's Oil'.*⁷⁴

- 36 All of these (largely internal) factors explain why the SNP surge of the 1970s was rather short-lived.

Conclusion

- 37 In the pre-devolution era, before the SNP became a potential and then an actual government party, its electoral story was "*one of peaks and troughs*".⁷⁵ The SNP's rise in the late 1960s and in the early to mid-1970s resulted from a combination of external and internal factors, as well as short-term and long-term ones. Short-term external factors included temporary disaffection with the two major British parties (protest voting) and the discovery of oil (in the late 1960s and early 1970s), followed by its politicisation after the Yom Kippur war of 1973, while the deep regional inequalities within the UK (uneven development), aggravated in the 1970s by the fact that Scotland suffered proportionately more from the economic crisis than England as a whole, were crucial long-term external factors. More controversially, growing disaffection with the two-party system, class and partisan dealignment, as well as a crisis in self-confidence due to a perceived decline of British greatness as a result of economic depression, industrial strife and the disintegration of the Empire, were also possible long-term factors. Major short-term internal factors were the SNP's launch of a big oil campaign just a year before the quadrupling of oil prices, and its (grudging) conversion to devolution as a first step on the road to independence, at a time when devolution (more so than independence) was beginning to be seen as a possible solution to Scotland's economic problems. On the longer term, the SNP's wide-ranging organisational reforms of the 1960s undoubtedly paved the way for its electoral successes of the 1970s.
- 38 By contrast, the SNP mainly has itself to blame for its collapse in the late 1970s, and external factors only played a secondary role. The one significant external factor was the failure of the devolution referendums and the eclipse of Scottish issues (including devolution and oil) in the 1979 general election. However, the SNP's bad results of 1979 were rooted in its internal divisions, both ideological (especially over devolution, but also over social and economic issues) and organisational, with the party's lack of clear leadership role and lack of preparation for having a parliamentary group leading to clashes between the party's MPs and its NEC.
- 39 The rise of the SNP in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a striking sign of electoral divergence between Scotland and the rest of Great Britain.⁷⁶ However, Scotland's voting patterns had been distinct, though less notably so, since the late 1950s, due to the steady decline of the Conservatives north of the Border, to the point that in the 1970 general election, the UK as a whole had voted Conservative, whereas in Scotland, Labour had come first (by far) in terms of both votes and seats. By contrast, the (temporary) "*ending of the Nationalist challenge, as heralded by the 1979 election, did not signify a return to the pre-1959 period of electoral congruity between England and Scotland*" – quite the reverse, as "*[t]he course of politics in Scotland after 1979 showed an accelerating deviation from the pattern in England, and also in Wales.*"⁷⁷ Not only did the Conservative vote continue to drop in Scotland (while the Conservatives were elected four times in a row throughout the UK between 1979 and 1997), but, after its low point of 1983, the SNP vote rose steadily at each British general election until the introduction of devolution in the late 1990s, after which the Scottish Parliament elections became its main focus of attention.

- 40 **Nathalie Duclos is a senior lecturer (Maître de conférences H.D.R.) at the University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès. She has published extensively on Scottish politics, and on the Scottish National Party and Scottish nationalism in particular. Her latest book was entitled *L'Ecosse en quête d'indépendance ? Le référendum de 2014* (Paris, Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2014), and she has recently edited two issues of the *Revue française de civilisation britannique*: issue XX-2 (2015) on the Scottish independence referendum, and issue XXI-1 (2016) on citizenship in the UK.**
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NOTES

1. Peter Lynch, *SNP: The History of the Scottish National Party* (Cardiff, Welsh Academic Press, 2002), p. 157.
2. In the 2015 general election, the SNP managed an unbelievable feat, winning all but three Scottish seats in the British Parliament on 50% of the Scottish vote.
3. Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-nationalism* (London, New Left Books, 1977).
4. James Mitchell, "From breakthrough to mainstream: the politics of potential and blackmail", in Gerry Hassan (ed.), *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 35.
5. *Ibid.*, respectively p. 123 ("From boom to bust: 1971-1979" is actually the title of the chapter devoted to the 1970s) and p. 142.
6. Before 1967, the SNP had only won one seat, at the Motherwell by-election of April 1945, in highly unusual political circumstances: the major parties having agreed to a truce for the duration of the war, the SNP had been the only party to compete for the seat against Labour, which had held the seat until then. In the event, the SNP had lost the seat a few months later, at the post-war general election organised in the same year.
7. Rob Johns and John Mitchell, *Takeover. Explaining the Extraordinary Rise of the SNP* (London, Biteback Publishing, 2016), p. 6.
8. Peter Lynch, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
10. See for instance Nathalie Duclos, *La dévolution des pouvoirs à l'Ecosse et au pays de Galles, 1966-1999* (Nantes, Editions du Temps, 2007).

11. Tam Dalyell, *The Question of Scotland. Devolution and After* (Edinburgh, Birlinn, 2016), p. 34.
12. Alan Sked & Chris Cook, *Post-War Britain* (London, Penguin, 1993), p. 279.
13. W. A. Roger Mullin, "The Scottish National Party", in H. M. Drucker (ed.), *Multi-Party Britain* (London & Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1979), p. 123.
14. Peter Lynch, *op. cit.*, p. 131.
15. James Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
16. I. G. C. Hutchison, *Scottish Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001), p. 100.
17. It "made 110 gains, 11 losses and won three local authorities from Labour" (Peter Lynch, *op. cit.*, p. 149).
18. *Ibid.*
19. See Denis Van Mechelen, unpublished PhD dissertation (LSE), "The Growth in Third Party Support in Britain", 1982, as referenced in Donley T. Studlar & Ian McAllister, "Nationalism in Scotland and Wales: a Post-Industrial Phenomenon?", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 11:1 (January 1988), p. 59.
20. Roger Levy, *Scottish Nationalism at the Crossroads* (Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press, 1990), p. 20.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Alan Sked & Chris Cook, *op. cit.*, p. 277.
23. I. G. C. Hutchison, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 325.
25. Jack Brand, James Mitchell & Paula Surridge, "Social Constituency and Ideological Profile: Scottish Nationalism in the 1990s", *Political Studies* 42:4 (December 1994), p. 622.
26. Ian McAllister, "Party Organization and Minority Nationalism: a Comparative Study in the United Kingdom", *European Journal of Political Research* 9 (1981), p. 240.
27. Jack Brand, Duncan McLean and William Miller, "The Birth and Death of a Three-Party System: Scotland in the Seventies", *British Journal of Political Science* 13 (1983), p. 464.
28. Roger Levy, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
29. James Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
30. *Ibid.*
31. See Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution. Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977).
32. Donley T. Studlar & Ian McAllister, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
33. Jack Brand, James Mitchell & Paula Surridge, *op. cit.*, p. 617.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Quoted in Gordon Brown, "Introduction: the Socialist Challenge", in Gordon Brown (ed.), *The Red Paper on Scotland* (Edinburgh, EUSPB, 1975), p. 16.
36. Mark V. Kauppi, "The Decline of the Scottish National Party, 1977-81: Political and Organizational Factors", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 5:3 (July 1982), p. 326.
37. Jack Brand, James Mitchell & Paula Surridge, *op. cit.*, pp. 627-28.
38. Mark V. Kauppi, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

39. Roger Levy, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
40. Ewen A. Cameron, *Impaled upon a Thistle: Scotland since 1880* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 292.
41. See for instance Peter Lynch, *op. cit.*, p. 123.
42. Gordon Wilson, *SNP: The Turbulent Years 1960-1990* (Stirling, Scots Independent, 2009), p. 87.
43. Peter Lynch, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
44. Tam Dalyell, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
46. The first major oil finds in the North Sea off the coast of Scotland were the Montrose field, in 1969, and the Forties field, in 1970.
47. Christopher Harvie, *Scotland. A Short History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 208.
48. Another catchy slogan was "Rich Scots or Poor Britons?"
49. Roger Levy, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
50. Gordon Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
51. Milton J. Esman, "Scottish nationalism, North Sea oil and the British response" (Waverley Papers, Occasional Paper 6, Series 1, April 1975), pp. 38-39.
52. Neither can the rise of Scottish nationalism be attributed to "a sudden spread of nationalist sentiment" as "national feeling is a permanent feature of Scottish culture" (Keith Webb, *The Growth of Nationalism in Scotland* [London, Pelican Books, 1978], p. 102). In other words, it wasn't the case that Scottish people suddenly started feeling Scottish, as that had always been true.
53. Though George Robertson was speaking of the devolution scheme of the 1990s, not that of the 1970s.
54. SNP, *SNP & You. Aims and Policy of the Scottish National Party* (Scottish National Party, 1974, 4th edition), p. 5.
55. SNP (Hamilton branch), flyer to join the SNP, February 1974.
56. Resolution 48, SNP's annual Conference, 29 May 1976, *ibid.*, p. 72.
57. George Reid, House of Commons debates, *Hansard*, 14 December 1976, vol. 922, cols. 1354-1355.
58. Donald Steward, House of Commons debates, *Hansard*, 22 February 1978, vol. 944, col. 1489.
59. See Jack Brand, Duncan McLean and William Miller, *op. cit.*
60. See Mark V. Kauppi, *op. cit.* and Ian McAllister, *op. cit.*
61. Gordon Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
62. Keith Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 106.
63. James Mitchell, "From national identity to nationalism, 1945-1999", in H. T. Dickinson and Michael Lynch (eds), *The Challenge to Westminster. Sovereignty, Devolution and Independence* (East Linton, Tuckwell Press, 2000), p. 158.
64. Gordon Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
65. I. G. C. Hutchison, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

66. Ewen Cameron, *op. cit.*, p. 292.
 67. *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124.
 68. This was a rule according to which the threshold for devolution to be validated was not just 50% of voters (as is the case in most referendums), but 40% of the total registered electorate; this was of course a higher hurdle due to many people abstaining.
 69. Gordon Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 198.
 70. Roger Levy, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
 71. William Miller, Jack Brand and Maggie Jordan, "Oil and the Scottish Voter, 1974-79" (North Sea Oil Panel Occasional Paper No.2, Social Science Research Council, 1980), pp. 4-5.
 72. Mark V. Kauppi, p. 232.
 73. Roger Levy, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
 74. R. A. Houston and W. W. J. Knox (eds), *The New Penguin History of Scotland* (London, Penguin, 2001), p. 486.
 75. Murray Stewart Leith and Martin Steven, "Party Over Policy? Scottish Nationalism and the Politics of Independence", *Political Quarterly* 81:2 (April-June 2010), p. 263.
 76. Northern Ireland had always had a different party system from the rest of the UK.
 77. I. G. C. Hutchison, *op. cit.*, p. 138.
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ABSTRACTS

The 1970s were a paradoxical decade for the Scottish National Party: one which gave the party its first general election seats, and therefore its first parliamentary group, as well as (in October 1974) its best general election results until 2015; but also one which ended with its collapse – though the SNP did not return to its pre-1970 state. What lay behind the SNP's rise in the first half of the 1970s and its retreat in the late 1970s? Why was the spectacular march of Scottish nationalism so short-lived? The main aim of this article is to attempt to draw a comprehensive list of answers that have been given to these questions, and thereby provide the reader with a historiographical and analytical account of the rise and fall of the SNP in the 1970s.

Les années 1970 furent une décennie paradoxale pour le Scottish National Party: ce fut celle de ses premiers succès lors des élections britanniques dites "générales", et donc aussi de son premier groupe parlementaire, ainsi que (en octobre 1974) celle de ses meilleurs résultats à ces élections jusqu'en 2015; mais le parti s'effondra dans les dernières années de la décennie, bien qu'il ne revint jamais à son état d'avant 1970. Quelles furent les raisons de la montée du SNP dans la première moitié des années 1970, et de son déclin à la fin de la décennie? Pourquoi la marche du nationalisme écossais, pourtant spectaculaire, fut-elle d'aussi courte durée? L'objectif premier de cet article est de proposer un historique des réponses qui ont été données à ces questions, et ainsi de donner au lecteur un compte rendu historiographique et analytique de la montée et du déclin du SNP dans les années 1970.

INDEX

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AUTHOR

NATHALIE DUCLOS

Université de Toulouse 2

CAS-EA801