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The Scottish First Ministers from 1999 to 2014: Role, Power and Leadership

Les Premiers ministres écossais de 1999 à 2014: rôle, pouvoir et leadership

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This article is an updated version of a chapter published in Agnès Alexandre-Collier and François Vergniolle de Chantal (eds.), *Leadership and Uncertainty Management in Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). For many decades, Jacques Leruez has been an inspiring and friendly figure in French academic circles specialized in British institutions, who paved the way for many researchers in Scottish politics. In his seminal book *L'Écosse, une nation sans État* he forged the widely acclaimed concept of stateless nations, and then relentlessly updated the problematics of territorial governance, from the devolution years to the recent debate on Scottish independence. He will be missed greatly for his expertise and his human qualities.

Introduction

- ¹ The implementation of the Devolution settlement in 1999¹ created a legislative body, the Scottish Parliament, as well as a separate political executive, composed of a First Minister and a Cabinet, which comprises about two dozen senior and junior ministers. Although a great deal of research² has been devoted to the functioning and achievements of the new Scottish Parliament, very few political comments have focused upon the executive power and the devolved ministers. More strikingly, the coverage and analysis of the position and achievements of the Scottish First Ministers since 1999 have been extremely limited.

- 2 This article aims at understanding the political leadership of the Scottish First Ministers in the original context of Scotland's newly-created devolved institutions. It will focus on the conditions which have framed political leadership, the way successive First Ministers have built their legitimacy and influence, faced challenges and constraints, interacted with their followers, dealt with public opinion and the media. Under which circumstances have Scottish politicians acceded to leadership? To what extent have Scottish leaders been visible and efficient? What have they brought to the new Scottish institutional framework? Why have they failed or been successful? Stability providers, game-changers, communicators or “grassroots-connectors”: how have the Scottish First Ministers fitted into this leadership typology? In order to answer these questions this article will provide an overview of the role and actions of the successive leaders between the start of the devolved institutions in 1999 and the 2014 Referendum on Independence, which put an end of the first phase of the devolution process. The article will study the First Ministers’ political initiatives and assess their performances, explore the way successive incumbents have embraced their function in order to establish a political domination upon the Scottish stage. The analysis starts with a description of the place of the Scottish Executive and First Ministers within the framework of the newly devolved institutions, with an exploration of the political environment and the institutional limits and constraints upon them. It then focuses on the successive Scottish leaders’ backgrounds, legitimacy and profiles. It finally moves to an evaluation of their record and legacy as political leaders, trying to outline a typology of their leadership style.

The Scottish leaders and the devolved institutions

- 3 The post of First Minister (FM) was created by the Scotland Act 1998. Under this settlement the FM is the leader of the Cabinet and primarily responsible for the formulation, development and presentation of Scottish Government policy. Appointed by the Queen amongst Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), he is directly accountable to it for his actions and those of the wider government. He has the power to choose his Ministers, who must be members of and nominated by the Scottish Parliament. In practice the First Minister has an almost free rein in order to appoint and dismiss the members of his team, and complete liberty to intervene in the policy fields according to his priorities. The First Minister is also assisted by a Deputy First Minister, a post which was originally created for the leader of the junior party in the prospect of a coalition government. The Scottish Cabinet operates in the Westminster style and on the principle of collective responsibility with weekly meetings and the assistance provided by the work of a small number of Cabinet committees.
- 4 Between 1999 and 2014 Scotland had four First Ministers as well as one acting First Minister. Labour leader Donald Dewar, the main architect of the Scotland Act, was the first FM from May 1999 until his sudden death in October 2000. Then Labour Henry McLeish occupied the post until he decided to resign in November 2001 over accusations of office expense irregularities. He was succeeded by another Labour leader, Jack McConnell, who held the position of First Minister until his party came in second at the May 2007 Scottish elections. Following the electoral success of his party, the SNP leader Alex Salmond became First Minister and remained leader until his resignation in November 2014, being the longest-serving Scottish First Minister. On

three occasions, due to Donald Dewar's sickness and then following Donald Dewar's death and Henry McLeish's resignation, the Liberal-democrat Deputy First Minister Jim Wallace assumed the role of "Acting" First Minister for a short period of time. The office of First Minister was thus characterized by great instability during the first three years of devolution.³ Since 2002, however, McConnell – five years and a half as FM – and Salmond – seven years and a half in office – have managed to secure their position and establish their leadership on a long-term basis.

Constraints upon the leadership

- 5 From 1999 to 2007, with no single party holding an absolute majority in Parliament, devolution was characterized by coalition governments between Labour – the leading party at Holyrood – and the Liberal-Democrats. Under a coalition⁴ the Scottish Executive must negotiate a policy platform at the beginning of each parliamentary session. In 1999 the establishment of this programme was subject to rather difficult bargaining between the two coalition partners, notably over the questions of university fees, free personal care for the elderly and land reforms. In 2003 the negotiations between the two political parties were easier and shorter, but the Lib-Dems were in a stronger position to impose their policy priorities on Labour First Minister Jack McConnell, notably on the issue of the introduction of proportional representation in local government. Coalition management also implies that the First Minister has to work closely with the deputy FM in order to deliver the Executive Partnership's programme, both leaders being responsible for the policies engaged. Furthermore, the coalition allows the leader of the junior party to select its own ministers and give a veto over their dismissal. The power of appointment and dismissal of the FM is therefore reduced. On the whole, the political autonomy of the first three FMs has been constrained by the realities of coalition government.⁵
- 6 Between 2007 and 2011 the scenario changed with the advent of an SNP-led minority Government.⁶ Although the Scottish Executive was freed from coalition bargaining and recovered some flexibility in policy-making, it had to find a majority of MSPs for each piece of legislation. The new First Minister Alex Salmond had to make concessions in order to have his program approved by Parliament while avoiding to face a vote of confidence. From this perspective the vote of the first Budget of the new administration was crucial. While the budget was initially defeated in the Scottish Parliament by a coalition of Labour, Lib-Dem and Green MSPs, the Scottish Executive did not resign and Salmond demonstrated his leadership skills by calling a media briefing, directly challenging the opposition by threatening to call new elections. Eventually a week later a new Budget deal was passed in Parliament with the support of both Labour and the Liberal-Democrats and the authority of the new FM upon the Scottish political stage was firmly established for the following months⁷. During his first term as FM, Salmond was also able to propose consensual policies – such as the removal of tuition fees, the defence of the National Health Service or the protection of universal benefits or free care for the elderly that could be accepted by a majority of MSPs whatever their political obedience.
- 7 After 2011 the absolute majority gained by the SNP at the Scottish elections enabled FM Alex Salmond to have a free rein in order to promote his priorities and consolidate his leadership.⁸

Relations with London

- 8 In addition to the Scottish situation, the UK political context has also been of some importance for the political autonomy of the First Minister and the assertion of his authority. Between 1999 and 2007 the successive Labour-dominated coalitions and Labour-led executives in Scotland coincided with New Labour governments and Tony Blair's Premiership in London. There were close links between Labour ministers in London and Edinburgh, the presence of several important Scottish ministers in the UK Government such as Gordon Brown, Robin Cook or Alastair Darling facilitating these connections.⁹ In practice, Scottish ministers often had to refer to their London counterparts or contemplate what the Labour Party leadership in the centre would think of their initiatives.
- 9 Because of his previous experience as a long-serving Westminster MP and member of the Labour Cabinet between 1997 and 1999, Donald Dewar was naturally at ease to deal with the London leadership when he became First Minister. However, he got involved in a turf war with the first post-devolution Scotland Secretary within the British Government John Reid. Henry McLeish could also rely on his experience as an MP and on his London networks established as a Minister of State for the Scottish Office from 1997 to 1999.¹⁰
- 10 As for Jack McConnell, he was a political outsider to Westminster lacking the networks of contacts in London and the FM least dependent on London for his position.¹¹ Nevertheless he chose to align himself as much as possible with London and stick to the New Labour Government, as was the case when he decided to put the issue of the "ned culture" – anti-social behaviour – at the forefront of the Scottish political agenda. Even when Scottish policies diverged from those implemented in England, as in public-system provision for instance, McConnell kept a low profile and refused to play up the issue before the British Government, contrary to the situation at the same moment in Wales, where First Minister Rhodri Morgan openly capitalized on traditional "Old Labour" values, claiming to put "clear red water" between him and Blair.¹²
- 11 In 2007 the situation changed with different parties at the two executive levels. The establishment of an SNP government in Edinburgh was a major test for the devolution settlement. Although many observers had anticipated regular internal conflicts and a possible breakdown of the system in the context of divided party control, informal links and a working collaboration were gradually established between ministers in Edinburgh and in London. At First Minister level Alex Salmond worked hand in hand with the British government on issues of UK importance such as the Glasgow Airport terrorist attack in 2007 or the 10th anniversary of the foot-and-mouth crisis in 2011. However, on regular occasions there were real arguments between the Scottish Executive and Westminster, on topics such as energy policy, the removal of Trident submarines or Treasury funding. During the financial crisis Alex Salmond expressed a clear divergence with the solution implemented by Gordon Brown in order to save the Scottish banks HBoS and RBS. But the high-profile row between Salmond and London concerned the future of the convicted Lockerbie bomber Abdelbaset al-Megrahi – who was later released by the Scottish Government on compassionate grounds on account of his terminal illness in the face of huge criticism from the US and others. After 2010 with the Conservative David Cameron in charge in London, Salmond often "played the

Scottish card” in order to resist Westminster cuts, and the renewed legitimacy provided by his electoral triumph at the 2011 elections enabled him to directly challenge the British Prime Minister in the negotiations around the terms of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum.¹³

Taking policy initiatives

- 12 In order to assert their authority upon the Scottish political stage, the successive First Ministers have used their office in order to put their stamp on Scottish politics by promoting specific and/or symbolic policy initiatives.
- 13 At the beginning of his mandate Henry McLeish decided to put the emphasis on the issue of free health care for the elderly, a social measure that should be funded by the Scottish Executive. Although the idea was rather popular among Scottish opinion, it was very controversial within Scottish and British politics. Notably the previous FM Donald Dewar, the majority of the members of McLeish’s Cabinet including his Health Minister and the majority of Labour MSPs as well as the Labour Government in London, were all favourable to the idea that the state should finance health care costs for elderly people through means testing. But McLeish decided to do otherwise on this prominent welfare issue. By doing so he distanced himself from his predecessor and asserted his leadership within the Executive as a whole.¹⁴ He also demonstrated the autonomy of Scottish policy towards the UK Government in front of Scottish opinion and could claim it as the major achievement of his term.
- 14 During his time in office FM Jack McConnell also chose to pursue distinctive flagship policies. He first made a personal political mark by promoting “environment justice” as a cross-cutting issue influencing the work of the whole Executive. Besides he promoted a series of symbolic initiatives intended to strike opinion and/or change its behaviour. There was first “One Scotland-Many Cultures”, a campaign designed to tackle the on-going problems of racism and sectarianism within Scottish society; then the “Fresh Talent initiative” aimed at arresting Scotland’s demographic decline and attracting young and skilled immigrants to come to live and work in Scotland; last but not least there was the campaign to ban smoking in Scottish public places, an initiative that gave Scotland the leadership within the United Kingdom and can be considered as McConnell’s most far-reaching achievement.¹⁵
- 15 As for Alex Salmond his accession to the post of First Minister in 2007 was soon followed by a spectacular gesture aimed at changing the name of the “Scottish Executive” into that of “Scottish Government”. That move had been previously tried by Henry MacLeish in 2001 but quickly stopped by Labour at Westminster. There was again some resistance to the initiative from opponents in London as well as in some Scottish media. But Salmond stayed firm and the symbolic change was soon implemented. At the same time the FM decided to drastically cut down the size of the Cabinet from twelve to six members, a way to demonstrate his willingness to put his mandate on the bases of coherent and efficient governance rather than political bargaining.
- 16 A few weeks after his accession to the post of FM Alex Salmond unveiled the Independence White Paper and launched a “National Conversation” with the Scottish people on Scotland’s constitutional future.¹⁶ For the new First Minister that was an opportunity not only to maintain his party’s push for independence – the SNP’s “*raison d’être*” – but also to set Scotland’s political agenda and take Scottish – as well as British

leadership on the key issue of the future of devolution for the years to come. Between 2007 and 2014 Salmond managed to keep the lead on the constitutional debate while adapting to the electoral realities of Scottish politics and the preferences of Scottish opinion¹⁷: first by supporting from the start the idea of a multi-option referendum including the choice of “enhanced devolution”; then two years later by promoting “fiscal autonomy” in Scotland while offering the possibility of “devolution max”, the most popular constitutional option within Scottish opinion; later by giving up the idea of delivering a referendum in 2010 while separating the issue of Scotland’s constitutional future from the 2011 Holyrood election campaign; and eventually by using his new enhanced position following the 2011 elections to impose the referendum of 2014 on the issue of Scottish independence.

Scottish leaders in the international environment

- 17 In order to assert their leadership successive First Ministers have tried to give their office some international visibility, by promoting Scotland abroad and developing a role in European and external affairs.¹⁸
- 18 First Ministers McLeish and McConnell were particularly active in personally promoting “Tartan Day” in New York and the United States. After 2007 Salmond downplayed this controversial celebration criticized for giving a stereotyped image of Scotland based on outdated “tartanry”, however he continued to promote Scotland abroad – this time more as a modern and serious nation – through the concept of the “Scottish Week”.
- 19 McLeish and McConnell have also been keen to develop a Diaspora strategy as the Scottish Executive launched the wider networks “Global Scots” and “Global Friends of Scotland”, in order to identify expatriates who could help through investment and/or development. Inspired by the success of the Irish experience this strategy encouraging the Scottish diaspora to invest in or return to Scotland was continued after 2007 by the SNP with 2009 being declared the year of “Homecoming”.
- 20 Concerning European matters Labour First Ministers sought to make the Scottish Executive sign cooperation agreements with European regions such as Catalonia, Tuscany, Bavaria, North-Rhein Westphalia or Flanders, and to develop economic partnerships with Nordic countries on common concerns or with new EU incomers such as Estonia or the Czech Republic on European structural fund matters. In 2001 McLeish signed the Declaration of Flanders with the “constitutional regions” of Europe, calling for a recognition of their position within the European Union. Throughout his mandate McConnell was personally involved in the Conference of Presidents of Regional Legislative Assemblies of Europe and was President of RegLeg (European regions with legislative powers) for one year, hosting Regleg’s 5th annual meeting in Edinburgh in November 2004.
- 21 From a more global perspective in line with his commitment to put the emphasis on environmental policy McConnell attended the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, subsequently developing an economic link between Scotland and the South African region of Eastern Cape. Throughout his mandate McConnell also demonstrated a constant interest for Malawi, forging development programs with this developing country historically linked with Scotland.

Eventually McConnell played a prominent role in securing the hosting of the 2014 Commonwealth Games for Glasgow.¹⁹

- 22 On the whole Scottish First Ministers and their executives have progressively implemented a “paradiplomacy”, based on the forging of international links and partnerships mainly in economic, commercial and cultural fields. After 2007 with the SNP in office the emphasis continued to be on a strategy of economic promotion, trade development and inward investment. However it can be argued that there has been a shift towards the emergence of a more political “protodiplomacy”, with Scotland no longer promoted as a European region or a sub-state government but as a nation-state in the making.²⁰ Thus for instance the existing links with German Länder were minimized while those with Catalonia or Flanders – two highly autonomous regional components engaged like Scotland in the process of nation-building – were highlighted. Managing to appear as a head of state Salmond put Scotland on a par with small independent states in northern Europe, praising the example of the “arc of prosperity” – until Ireland and Iceland happened to be seriously affected by the financial crisis of 2008 – or promoting the Norwegian model. There was also more open competition between the First Minister and the London Government in the struggle for attracting foreign investments, for example with China, a country for which Salmond has demonstrated a special interest, paying three personal visits there between 2007 and 2014.

Political legitimacy and styles of leadership

- 23 Each of the four successive Scottish First Ministers occupied the position with his own political legitimacy, personality and leadership style.
- 24 The first incumbent, Donald Dewar, was very popular and uncontested at the beginning of his mandate, his position as first First Minister in a devolved Parliament looking almost like a matter of historical inevitability.²¹ Highly respected within his own party and Scottish politics as one of the key men who kept the devolution cause alive in Labour circles over the previous decades and the one who eventually brought back a Scottish Parliament three centuries after its dissolution, his commitment to the devolution cause has gained him the label of “Father of the Parliament” or even “Father of the Scottish nation”.²² In his first speech for the opening of the new institutions he caught the mood brilliantly.²³ But that initial iconic status was soon challenged by the numerous problems of his new administration, embroiled in the access-to-ministers scandal, the spiralling cost of the Holyrood building, the row over the repeal of Section 28 on homosexuality or the exam results fiasco. Dewar had to face harsh criticisms from sections of the Scottish press who had decided devolution was a mess and achieving nothing. Although his integrity, decency and fairness were never contested in the public opinion and despite the fact that he remained close to his followers and could rely on his party’s backing, Dewar failed to be convincing with regard to the fact that, had he been the right man to deliver devolution, he was the right one to run Scotland. Reasonable, moderate, supremely cautious, not confrontational, working in a collegiate style, he was something of a reluctant leader, suspected of lacking the “messianic zeal” and authority over his team. In fact, being mainly preoccupied by the setting up of the new institutions, Dewar had little time to sponsor a personal policy area or to establish the power of the Executive facing the

stronger legitimacy of the Scottish Parliament. Acting as a link and a buffer between Edinburgh and London he also devoted much time finding a breathing space and a workable relationship with the Secretary of State for Scotland, a position he had occupied before 1999 and from which he seemed to find it difficult to distance himself as First Minister.

- 25 When he became First Minister in October 2000, Dewar's successor Henry McLeish could rely on his background as a Westminster MP and as Minister for Devolution in the Scottish Office before 1999, as well as his experience as a holder of a prominent ministerial post within the Scottish Executive after May 1999. Considered as Gordon Brown's "protégé", he was seen as a safe pair of hands and backed by the Labour leadership in London to take over the reins following Dewar's death. But like Dewar before him, McLeish had to share the position of Scottish Labour leader with the Secretary of State for Scotland – this time Helen Liddell – as well as to manage the new Executive in the context of a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. The rather confused situation over the status of the First Minister with the Scottish Labour Party – with one leader for Scottish elections, and another leader for British ones – affected McLeish's power and authority, especially as, unlike Dewar, he had not faced a Scottish election as Scottish leader.²⁴ As a natural conciliator he adapted to the electoral reality by taking up the policies which seemed to have majority support in the Scottish Parliament, like free personal care for the elderly and putting a distinctive Scottish stamp on policies. But he failed to establish the authority of the Executive before Parliament as well as his own over the Labour party in Scotland.²⁵ His inability to control rebellion within his own ranks proved lethal to the First Minister when he got caught in the row over his Westminster constituency expenses. His inability to resolve the "Officegate" in the eyes of the public and the media, describing his actions as "a muddle, not a fiddle" led to his quick fall after only one year in office.²⁶
- 26 Contrary to McLeish, McConnell was in a stronger political position within the Scottish Labour Party when he became First Minister, having used his years working in Labour's Scottish headquarters to build a network of supporters in order to prepare for a leadership contest at some future date. He had also demonstrated his ambitions by challenging McLeish for the post of FM in 2000, gaining the support of most Labour backbenchers during the leadership contest. McConnell did provide stability for the Scottish Labour Party when he became leader, his grip on his own supporters being also eased by the decreasing importance of the Secretary of State for Scotland within the British Government after 2003. McLeish was really eager to assert his authority upon the Scottish Executive, beginning with a purge of prominent members of the Dewar and McLeish cabinets and their replacement by his own supporters when establishing his first team. Having no Westminster connections but significant experience in the previous executives as a former Finance Minister and then Education, Europe and External Affairs Minister, McConnell constantly sought to readjust the balance of power within the devolved institutions in favour of the Executive, as demonstrated by the unilateral decision to ban smoking in enclosed public places imposed by the FM in October 2004.²⁷ He also extended the reach of the Executive within Parliament by creating the posts of Ministerial Parliamentary Aides (MPAs) and by being personally involved in the selection of members and chairs of parliamentary committees, all of whose initiatives contributing to a useful extension of his patronage power.²⁸ Furthermore, McConnell also wanted to bind the Scottish bureaucracy closer to his Executive and accountable only to him, although it has remained part of the UK public

service. On the whole McConnell managed to develop a core Executive in Scotland and expand his own support mechanisms within it.²⁹

- 27 If McConnell demonstrated political shrewdness and authority in extending the role and resources of the office of First Minister, he had more difficulties in imposing himself as a “national leader” toward Scottish opinion. His modest credo about “doing less, better”, as well as his absence of proposals on the constitutional debate about Scotland’s future, failed to capture the people’s imagination and fuelled the criticisms about his “lack of vision” and his “New Labour conformism”. His absence of personal charisma, which had already been striking during the 2003 elections when his “recognition factor” was rather low and comparable with the one of marginal left-wing activist Tommy Sheridan, had later to suffer from the comparison with SNP’s leader Alex Salmond after 2004. During the 2007 legislative campaign although the Labour Party and the SNP were neck and neck in the polls, 43% of Scottish respondents claimed that Salmond would make the best FM, whereas only 23% supported McConnell.

Alex Salmond’s charismatic leadership

- 28 According to the classical Weberian definition, charismatic authority can be described as a power legitimized by a leader’s exceptional personal qualities, which creates a strong personal relationship between the leader and the political environment and inspires loyalty and obedience from followers. To what extent did Alex Salmond’s domination over the Scottish political stage during a decade or so fit into that leadership category?
- 29 Before becoming First Minister Alex Salmond had managed to build up a strong leadership within his own party as well as a high profile in London where he relentlessly promoted the nationalist case at Westminster and in numerous broadcast political programmes.³⁰ By the time of the 2007 Holyrood elections he had clearly become a major electoral asset for the SNP, with polls showing him to be far more popular than the incumbent First Minister, Jack McConnell. This prompted the SNP to emphasise the contrast between the party leaders, a strategy that culminated in the party using “Alex Salmond for First Minister” instead of “SNP” as the main party identifier on the regional ballot paper.³¹
- 30 Following the result of 2007 elections Salmond’s first coup was the decision to go for a minority government, calculating it by seizing the machinery of power while maintaining party integrity, he could consolidate the SNP’s advantage.³² The decision illustrates the profile of Salmond as a risk-taker, a feature that he had the opportunity to demonstrate on later occasions, notably on the course towards the independence referendum, his major gamble.
- 31 When in power Salmond and his minority Government promoted an agenda based on competence, consensus and change. They produced evidence of their capacity to govern within the constraints of the devolution settlement, to make some difference on significant issues, such as transport, health, education, energy or the economy, and to implement a social contract in keeping with the values of the Scottish opinion.³³ At the same time they put forward a vision of the future for Scotland and managed to keep the constitutional debate alive, by focusing on the opportunities that further steps in the devolution process would provide for Scottish interests.³⁴ Thus the renamed Scottish Government positioned itself as an efficient alternative to the previous coalition within

the present constitutional settlement as well as the best embodiment of the dynamics of devolution.

- 32 As head of the Executive Salmond could rely on an astonishing loyalty from his followers, without any dissent inside the SNP where his supremacy had been unchallenged since 2004. Within the devolved institutions and under the constraint of a minority Government he displayed at the same time authority, tactical sense, pragmatism and an ability to exploit opportunities, demonstrating his leadership skills on numerous occasions: by using the threat of a vote of confidence throughout the first three years of his mandate in order to get his policies approved by a majority of MSPs ; by showing the capacity to adapt to the situation when he decided to change the referendum agenda in 2010; or by proving his resilience and ability to take difficult decisions in the case of the release of the Lockerbie bomber. Salmond also behaved as a British leader, through the British-Irish Council, developing relationships with Cardiff, Belfast and Dublin, claiming a seat in the party leaders' TV debates and proposing a "Lib-Lab-Nat" coalition at Westminster during the 2010 general election campaign.
- 33 Long before his accession to the position of First Minister, Alex Salmond had been acclaimed by the Scottish media altogether not only as an efficient and talented politician, but also as a charismatic and magnetic leader, capable of capturing the people's imagination and inspiring fervour.³⁵ Salmond's charismatic domination over the Scottish stage, fuelled by his communication skills, media performances and presidential style campaigns, found in the position of First Minister an ideal environment to flourish. As Scottish Government leader, he developed a stirring, hope-inspiring narrative, finding sometimes messianic accents to evoke Scotland's potential – like for instance in the field of renewables – and future. In a Gaullist posture he often managed to put himself above party politics. Eventually his active proto-diplomacy promoting Scotland as a nation-state in the making also contributed to making him largely identified with Scotland and reach the head of state's status, a dimension that even David Cameron, when trying to disparage him as "El Presidente Salmondo"³⁶, was implicitly forced to admit.
- 34 Salmond's personal aura and statesmanship played a large part in the electoral triumph of the SNP during the 2011 Holyrood elections, which turned into a personality contest and a presidential race.³⁷ From 2007 to 2011, whatever the fortunes of his party Salmond had benefited from permanent net positive ratings in the polls and on polling day, 52% of the Scottish electorate thought Salmond would make the best FM, against 33% supporting one of the four alternative possibilities and only 17% supporting his main rival Ian Gray.³⁸ Salmond's charismatic domination over the Scottish political scene had reached an unprecedented height.³⁹

Conclusion

- 35 Since 1999, the successive First Ministers have struggled to put their stamp upon Scottish politics within the framework of the devolved institutions. The initial constitutional settlement was largely favourable to the Scottish Parliament, considered as the democratic embodiment of Scottish society and the main source of legitimacy for Scottish policies. Successive FMs had thus to reverse the balance of power between the executive and legislative powers, as well as to impose their grip within a Cabinet system of government. The establishment of their leadership had to go through a

number of identified institutional hurdles and within a complex and multi-level environment involving their internal legitimacy within their own party, the control of their political majority at Holyrood, the communication with Scottish opinion and media as well as a potentially problematic relationship with the British Government. On the whole one of the most visible trends of Scottish politics since 1999 has been the rise of the executive power and the affirmation of its leader, on the British model and following recent trends in contemporary democracies.⁴⁰

- 36 By reference to the initial typology suggested in the introduction of the article, successive Scottish FMs can be mostly seen as game-changers, creating then strengthening the newly established Scottish Executive in search of legitimacy. The first two FMs were in post for a short period of time, the first one at a time of transition during the early months of devolution. Three out the four FMs occupied their position in a context of coalition governments and of similar majorities in London. The fourth FM had to deal with a situation of a minority government before eventually obtaining an absolute majority, in both cases with a diverging majority at Westminster. If Dewar was the architect of the new institutions and had little time to develop the office of FM, following leaders tried to establish their power and increase their resources, largely building on the arrangements they inherited. As heads of government as well as party leaders, they notably sought to distance themselves from collective responsibility within their Cabinet, develop their core executive, extend their initially limited patronage power, increase their grip on policy making, promote specific flagship policies and establish their visibility on the European and international stage. McConnell was particularly active and innovative in establishing the Scottish FM power within the devolved institutions in the specific context of a coalition government.
- 37 Salmond brought a new dimension to the office of Scottish First Minister. If like Dewar before him, he could rely on a strong partisan and popular legitimacy before taking the position, he managed to display management credibility and to develop a dynamic relation with his followers and the opinion when becoming FM. His aptitude to communicate a strong and positive narrative, his uncontested authority within his own camp and his capacity to exploit the Scottish card when dealing with London, all brought the conditions for an effective leadership in Scotland, despite the restrictive context of a minority government. Eventually Salmond's personal charismatic domination over the Scottish political stage made the First Ministerial position turn presidential, a situation which has been reinforced after 2011 in the unprecedented context of a one-party majority government.

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NOTES

1. The 1998 Scotland Act established a Scottish Parliament of 129 members (MSPs) – 73 elected by the first-past-the-post for individual constituencies and 56 elected proportionally from party lists in regional constituencies, all elected for a fixed four-year-term with high hurdles against dissolution at any time. The Scottish Parliament was given extensive powers of primary legislation in "devolved areas" such as education and training, housing and planning, health, social work, law and order, economic development and transport, local government, the administration of European structural funds as well as limited fiscal powers confined to the possibility of varying the British rate of income tax by up to 3p in the pound. Meanwhile the Westminster Parliament was keeping the reserved powers in the main fields of defence, foreign affairs, social security, fiscal and monetary policy, employment relations, immigration, energy, nuclear safety and the constitution. Besides a Scottish Executive was established, led by a First Minister chosen among the MPs and submitted by the President Officer to the Queen for formal

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4. A coalition government was made almost inevitable by the importance of proportional representation within the electoral system. The first Scottish Parliament elections in 1999 resulted in the election of 56 Labour, 35 SNP, 18 Conservative, 17 Liberal-Democrats, 1 Socialist, 1 Independent and 1 Green MSPs. Although being the leading party with 39% of votes, the Scottish Labour Party had to conclude an alliance with the Lib-Dems in order to secure a majority in the first Holyrood Parliament. The following elections in 2003 resulted in an even more diversified representation (the so-called "rainbow Parliament"), with the Labour Party losing 7 seats, and an electoral coalition between Labour (50 MSPs) and the Lib-Dems (17 MSPs) being necessary again in order to reach the majority of 65 MSPs at Holyrood.

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ABSTRACTS

This article analyses the achievements of the Scottish First Ministers in the original context of Scotland's newly-created devolved institutions between 1999 and 2014. It notably focuses on the role and power of these political leaders, the conditions which have framed their leadership, the way successive First Ministers have built their legitimacy and influence, faced challenges and constraints, interacted with their supporters and dealt with public opinion and the media.

Cet article analyse l'action des *First Ministers* écossais dans le cadre des nouvelles institutions décentralisées entre 1999 et 2014. Il étudie notamment le rôle joué et le pouvoir exercé par ces leaders politiques, les conditions qui ont permis à leur leadership d'émerger et de se développer, la manière avec laquelle ces dirigeants successifs ont construit leur légitimité et leur influence, fait face aux défis et contraintes liées à la fonction, interagi avec leurs partisans et communiqué avec l'opinion publique et les médias.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Premiers Ministres écossais, dévolution, pouvoir, leadership

Keywords: Scottish First Ministers, devolution, power, leadership

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