Scottish Devolution, Deconstruction, and Change

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Abstract: Higgins considers Scottish devolution by critiquing the concept of devolution and the potential for future change inherent in its conception.

Keywords: Scottish devolution, intersectional conflict analysis, art, arts approaches to conflict, Agnes Scott College

The study of devolution within the United Kingdom, specifically regarding Scotland, is inherently a study of change. The term itself, “devolution,” derives from the Latin term “devolvere,” which means to roll down.¹ Devolution, in terms of the study of political science, essentially means to transfer or hand over of power to a smaller entity. Yet another definition of the term, which came about much later in the 1800s, is to degenerate. The guiding research question for this project is based in the relationship between these definitions of devolution regarding contemporary Scottish devolution. Are the two definitions mutually exclusive in the case of Scotland’s devolution from the United Kingdom? To what extent can devolution mean change, and to what extent is the

¹ Online Etymology Dictionary n.d.
devolution of the UK government an evolution in and of itself? What is the potential for change that devolution can cause?

**Scottish Devolution Since 1999**

The first major step in Scotland’s devolution from the United Kingdom in the modern era occurred in 1999, when a Scottish parliament was established following a 1998 referendum. This parliament is separate from the United Kingdom’s parliament in that it makes decisions for Scotland regarding Scottish infrastructure and issues that only affect Scotland. This development was an important first step in Scotland’s devolution from the United Kingdom in terms of rolling down some of the decision-making power to the people who would be affected by those decisions. In 2014, there was yet another referendum put to Scottish voters, this time to fully devolve from the United Kingdom, or to be a completely independent state. The votes were 55% to 45% in favor of staying in the United Kingdom, in part due to the fact that the United Kingdom was, at that point, a part of the European Union, an organization of which Scotland wanted to remain a member. One of the main reasons Scotland voted to not fully devolve in 2014 was because of the issue of the European Union and the security that the United Kingdom provided in that regard.

**Brexit and Calls for a New Independence Referendum**

In 2016, however, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union in a referendum commonly referred to as “Brexit,” made possible by the fact that the Conservative party at that time controlled the UK Parliament. However, Scotland was not well represented in this decision, with the majority of the members representing Scotland voting against it. However, that did not really matter as the populations of the other nations that make up the United Kingdom were more than enough to make up for Scotland’s dissent to leaving the EU. As such, the decision to leave the European Union was very unpopular amongst Scottish voters, causing continued calls for another referendum for independence from the United Kingdom in order to be able to rejoin the European Union.

**Class Concepts**

One important theoretical concept that we discussed in class that is relevant in Scotland’s decision whether or not to leave the United Kingdom is the concept of the nation and nationalism. Scotland is one nation within the state of the United Kingdom, meaning that it is a socially constructed unit with shared history and identity. This means that the values of the Scottish electorate are often very different from the rest of the United Kingdom. For instance, Scotland is a lot more left-leaning; the dominant party in the Scottish Parliament is the left leaning Scottish National Party, whereas the dominant party of the United Kingdom is the Conservative Party. This demonstrates a clear

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2 BBC n.d. (1).
3 BBC n.d. (2).
4 Scottish Government 2019.
5 BBC n.d. (2).
difference between what the people of each nation want, but because Scotland does not make up a large enough portion of the United Kingdom’s overall population, the Scotland’s wants and needs are often not heard in the state’s parliament.

Another example, the Scottish Parliament recently passed legislation to make it easier for transgender Scottish people to legally be identified by their affirming gender. However, this legislation was blocked by the Prime Minister of the Conservative Party that currently governs the United Kingdom on the grounds that the legislation would affect the entirety of the United Kingdom. The blocking of this legislation has been seen as a step back in devolution, as it is the first time the United Kingdom’s government has blocked a piece of Scottish legislation since Scotland got its own parliament in 1999. Though the nation of Scotland wants this legislation, it is unable to enact it due to the fact that it is not yet fully devolved, or independent, from the United Kingdom.

Another key theoretical concept from class that I considered in my project is sovereignty, or the question of who gets to make the decisions about Scotland’s future. According to the allowance of the 1999 formation of a Scottish Parliament, the power to make decisions solely about Scotland resides with the Scottish Parliament, yet the 2023 blocking of the Scottish gender identification bill says otherwise. The debate over sovereignty is intrinsically intertwined with the Scottish nation and nationalism, as the reason for complete independence would be for Scotland to have sovereignty and decision-making ability over itself and its future, including passing its own laws and having the ability to join international organizations such as the European Union.

Creative Statement

To represent the themes of devolution and change, I chose to create a miniature gown, the preliminary design of which is below: Several of the design elements are purposeful and meaningful to the concepts of Scottish devolution and independence. First, I began with a white underskirt as the base layer of the gown. This is meant to represent the union that is the United Kingdom in that I meant it to look like a wedding gown. Layered on top of the white skirt is a half skirt in a plaid pattern, meant to represent Scotland in the United Kingdom. I was fortunate enough to find a wooly fabric in a tartan pattern the same colors as the United Kingdom’s Union Jack flag. I draped this over the white skirt and fastened it with a shiny bauble to represent the value that Scotland has brought to the United Kingdom as a whole. The skirt is meant to represent the devolved government of Scotland and its relationship with the government of the United Kingdom. They are distinct, yet they are not wholly separate. For the bodice, I wanted to represent the complete independence from the United Kingdom that the Scottish National Party continues to call for. The bodice is made of the same tartan-patterned fabric as the overskirt but deconstructed and cut into tiny pieces and draped to form a spike over one shoulder. On the other shoulder is a princess-y puff sleeve made of the same lace that is on the underskirt. The juxtaposition between the two

6 Ibid
7 Marx 2023.
8 Dunne, Kurki, and Smith 2016.

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sleeve styles is meant to represent the reasons for Scottish independence and what it would mean, with the tartan spike representing Scotland and the puff sleeve representing the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom is currently controlled by the Conservative Party, so I wanted to portray it through a more traditional style on the right side of the garment. Scotland leans more towards the left in its desires for modernity, which is why I decided to portray an avant-garde style on the left side of the garment to represent the future of Scotland. Furthermore, the bodice and the style of the sleeves represent what the future of each state under Scottish independence might look like. Unlike what is portrayed by the skirt, the governments of Scotland and the United Kingdom would be separate. It would have deconstructed rather than devolved in that the United Kingdom would not be entirely the same, but neither would Scotland. Each would be their own separate entity with their own future to make. The spike that is the sleeve on the left side of the dress rises far above the puff sleeve, signifying that an independent Scotland deciding its own future could rise far above what the United Kingdom currently allows. One example is that it could join the European Union. Devolution itself allows for change but in the case of Scotland and the United Kingdom, is the promise of change through devolution enough when that promise is not upheld?

References


