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Chapter 1

What is Scottish Politics?

The election of the Scottish National Party (SNP) majority administration in 2011 was a watershed moment in Scottish politics and pushed the constitutional issue to the fore. It is likely to earn its place in the Scottish history books regardless of what follows. It may be marked as the beginning of the end of Scotland's membership of the United Kingdom, or the end of the beginning of devolution. It was historic in many ways – it was Scotland's first majority administration; it was the first time a majority on the floor of the Scottish Parliament favoured independence; and it could signal what Hassan and Shaw (2012) term the end of 'Labour Scotland'. It undoubtedly reconfigured both external and internal understandings of 'Scottish Politics'.

This book places recent developments within a broader, historical, societal, economic and political context. It aims to give the student of Scottish politics a comprehensive introduction to the context, institutions, processes and policies that are important in Scottish political life. As a starting point it is useful to clarify what 'Scottish politics' means.

What is 'politics'?

The common-sense view of politics defines it by reference to institutions, calling to attention a particular arena in which politics takes place. The answer therefore appears self-evident – Scottish politics is about what goes on in the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament. The focus is on the formal machinery and operation of government and the capacity of governing institutions to shape the behaviour of their population. This approach to studying politics is often criticized as too limiting and state-centric. It is referred to as an 'institutional' approach and is often criticized as offering a distinctly narrow view of 'the political', failing to acknowledge the broader societal context in which politics can take place, for example within the family, relationships, school, community and workplace.

Yet, as this book shows, using an institutional focus as a starting point to introduce a political system is useful. Why? The executive, bureaucratic and legislative branches of government are usually the arenas where political control, influence and **authority** are located in any political system. The modern state derives this power from the elected status of its

Authority: The power to make and enforce laws or decisions.

2 *Scottish Politics*

Legitimacy means that a political institution is generally recognized to have the right to exert authority.

decision-makers. This sense of democratic **legitimacy** gives it a source of authority – the public generally accepts the right of elected politicians to use their political authority and make laws. However, while politicians and institutions may have the legal authority to make laws, their authority may not always appear to be legitimate. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s Scottish home-rule campaigners questioned the legitimacy of the Conservative-led UK Government to govern Scotland, because of the Conservative Party's weak representation there.

Nation: People identified by the sense of a common collective identity, often based on culture, ethnic origin, religion and/or geographic birthplace (or residence).

State: The sum total of governmental institutions and its personnel – including the intelligence services, the central bank, the police, state broadcasting, courts and armed forces – which has a monopoly of political authority.

Devolution: The transfer of political power from central to 'regional' or local government.

The institutional picture is complicated in Scotland by the existence of separate branches of government at both Scottish and UK levels. Scotland is a **nation**, but not a **state**. The Scotland Act 1998 sets out a clear list of reserved powers which UK state institutions in Westminster and Whitehall retain, with the rest falling under the jurisdiction of the Scottish Parliament and Government. There do, however, remain a number of policy areas where it is not possible to draw clear lines of demarcation between Scotland and the UK or Europe (see Box 1.1). The 1999 **devolution** settlement involved the transfer of powers to Scotland's governing institutions: the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament. Without a basic knowledge of the institutional environment of Scottish politics it is difficult for any student of it to make sense of what is going on.

This book will set out in detail the context within which Scottish politics operates. In an introductory text, historical and descriptive detail is important as it forms the bedrock of information from which more ambitious and theoretical work on Scottish politics can take place. An understanding of political institutions is important as they tend to set the 'rules of engagement' and the agenda of Scottish politics. Institutions are also the public face of politics. The Scottish Government, Parliament and political parties therein are the arenas in which the public perceive Scottish politics to take place. However, as a number of chapters in this book show, the Scottish Government and Parliament are not the only sources of power.

Discussions of institutional power can be supplemented by a range of other definitions of politics which draw attention to the wider policy process. For example, 'politics as management' definitions focus on the 'production' part of politics – politics exists because people want to 'do things'. A key part of the SNP Government's aim since 2007 is to project a strong image of governing competence.

Box 1.1 Reserved and devolved policy areas from 1999

Policy areas reserved: international relations, defence, national security, fiscal and monetary policy, immigration and nationality, drugs and firearms, regulation of elections, employment, company law, consumer protection, social security, regulation of professions, energy, nuclear safety, air transport, road safety, gambling, equality, human reproductive rights, broadcasting, copyright.

Policy areas devolved: health, education and training, economic development, local government, law and home affairs, police and prisons, fire and ambulance services, social work, housing and planning, transport, environment, agriculture, fisheries, forestry, sport, the arts, devolved research, statistics.

In many policy areas, the divisions between reserved and devolved responsibilities are ‘blurry’ at the edges – a fact further complicated by the Europeanization of devolved areas such as agricultural and environmental policy (see Table 10.1).

Governance

highlights informal relationships and the blurring of boundaries between public/private action and levels of governmental sovereignty. Decision-making authority is dispersed and policy outcomes are determined by a complex series of negotiations between various levels of government and other organizations.

Interdependent relationships

Where political actors/institutions are reliant upon each other to achieve their goals.

Home rule

Although the term suggests independence, it is often used to refer to the self-government of a nation within a wider state.

Governance definitions of politics highlight the reliance of governments on a wide range of other institutions (e.g. commercial and voluntary sector, local authorities) and the **interdependent relationships** that are established between them.

To this we can add *democratic definitions* of politics which focus on how collective interests are aggregated and how these processes can be improved. The **home-rule** campaigners had in mind a ‘more democratic’ Scotland when they campaigned for a change in constitutional arrangements. The emphasis is on transparency, participation, deliberation, exchange and compromise and the absence of secrecy, self-interest and violence in the resolution of conflict.

Socio-economic definitions widen the definition to include social relations in the family, workplace and community – relatively removed from the institutions of government. Politics often occurs at a ‘micro’ level in these environments, with cleavages such as gender, ethnicity and class deemed of importance in establishing systematic forms of power.

Politics is fundamentally about interaction between social forces, political **ideologies** and interests. Any individual or institution which engages in Scottish politics has the aim to promote their own particular interests (see Box 1.2). Within Scotland, this can

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Ideologies: Bodies of ideas which tend to underlie political action, e.g. nationalism, liberalism, conservatism, unionism, socialism, fascism, communism.

include very broad forms of influence through education or culture, systematic influence through political parties or the media, or power exerted in particular areas by interest groups. The role of external actors, such as the UK state, the EU or other global institutions, may also shape the agenda of Scottish politics.

The most succinct *power definition* and description of politics is Lasswell's (1936) classic assertion that 'politics is about who gets what, when and how'. This broad definition leaves open almost any avenue of enquiry for the political researcher since almost any human activity and exchange tends to involve some degree of power. It also allows analysis to extend beyond formal institutions. As Marsh and Rhodes note:

Politics is about more than what governments choose to do or not to do; it is about the uneven distribution of power in society, how the struggle over power is conducted, and its impact on the creation and distribution of resources, life chances and well-being. (1992a: 9)

Indeed, any attempt at a narrow definition of the appropriate subject matter of politics could itself be interpreted as an exercise in power. The phrase 'this is a private matter' should always raise critical attention (Cairney, 2012a: 53). For example, when a Scottish business(wo)man declares politicians should not be 'meddling in the commercial world', he or she is trying to narrow the scope and agenda of politics (see Box 1.2), presenting it as distinct from commercial operations. However, it could be that his or her workers have a less demarcated view of the public/private divide. As Hay argues:

The political should be defined in such a way as to encompass the entire sphere of the social ... All events, processes and practices which occur within the social sphere have the potential to be political. (2002: 3)

What is 'Scottish'?

If defining politics is not straightforward, then surely some comfort can be drawn from the fact that the 'Scottish' element of it is self-evident. Scottish politics is politics that takes place in Scotland – or is it? If only it were that simple. The broad definitions outlined above suggest that events with an impact on Scottish politics can take place anywhere and everywhere.

Most notably, Scottish Government is not controlled solely by policy-makers in Scotland. Scotland is not a nation-state – there is not a direct correspondence between the geographic boundaries of the Scottish 'nation' and the (UK) state. It is not alone in this regard – 'nations' such as Catalonia, the

Box 1.2 Power and agenda-setting

Agenda-setting refers to the types of problems which capture the attention of decision-makers and the solutions which are considered. Since there is an almost infinite number of issues and solutions which *could* be considered, the choice of a small proportion represents the power of organizations and individuals to ‘set the agenda’ (see Cairney, 2012a: 183–9). Power is exercised not only when an issue is raised to the top of the agenda, but also when a decision is made to ignore an issue completely (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). Political power may be difficult to observe if directed towards the shaping of preferences or a common ‘taken-for-granted’ understanding of what is important in political life (Lukes, 1974). A key concern of political science is the extent to which the exercise of power is diffused across the population or restricted to a small number of elites. In modern liberal democracies such as Scotland we can point to a trend towards pluralism in the control of knowledge and to a diffusion of power associated with governance and the interdependent nature of politics. The Scottish Government (or any other political institution) is unlikely to achieve its aims unless it forms relations with other bodies in Scotland.

Basque Country and Palestine also lack state structures. Some national populations such as Albanians, Serbs and Kurds are spread throughout more than one state. The position of Scotland as a stateless nation, whilst unusual in the comparative context, is not unique.

We may also question the catch-all nature of the term ‘Scottish’ because, within Scotland, there are various interests with opposing views. For example, the interests of the populations of Highland and Lowland may not coincide. The urban, suburban and rural populations may offer different perspectives on issues such as transport and the environment. Religious groups and their leaders (e.g. Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, atheist, etc.) may offer differing views on education and moral issues. Different economic interests (e.g. the unemployed, trade unions, employers, pensioners) may differ in their assessment of tax and public expenditure priorities. Scottish politics is as much about how these differences are mediated and resolved *within* Scotland as, for example, how different Scottish attitudes are from the rest of the UK.

Externally, decisions relevant to Scottish politics take place at many different levels and not necessarily within the formal machinery of government. These decisions could be taken at community, local, regional, Scottish, UK, European or global level. We live in an era of multi-level governance (Chapter 10) and political decisions that impact on Scotland can be taken in many arenas. Numerous external institutions can impinge, constrain or even dictate the agenda of Scottish politics – for example the UK Government, the **European Union (EU)** and the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)**. Intergovernmental bodies are also contributing to

European Union

(EU): The union of 27 states and 495 million people designed to foster closer cooperation and economic and political ties between countries in Europe.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO):

A military alliance created in 1949 initially to defend Western Europe against a possible Soviet invasion. Its membership grew to 24 in 2004 and its mission changed to intervention and peace-keeping. At its 2012 conference, the SNP debated Scotland's ability to remain a part of NATO if it refused to provide a home for nuclear weapons.

Globalization: The intensification of worldwide economic, social and political convergence made possible by technological advances in communication and transport.

G8 summit: A gathering of the 'most economically advanced' countries – Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States – to discuss global policy issues.

World Trade Organization (WTO):

An organization sponsored by the United Nations to facilitate international trade.

denser connections between countries – a process described by the (rather vague) term **globalization** (see Cairney, 2012a: 119).

There are obvious political arenas – the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government, local councils in Scotland, the House of Commons at Westminster, the UK-based civil service in Whitehall, the UK Cabinet, the UK Prime Minister's office, the European Commission in Brussels. There are other not so obvious arenas – international trade negotiations such as the **G8 summit** and the **World Trade Organization** (WTO); supranational bodies such as the United Nations (UN); and major pressure groups such as Amnesty and Greenpeace. Other possibilities are the headquarters of multinationals with significant interests in Scotland, such as Amazon, BP, RBS and HBOS. Therefore, decisions that impact on Scottish politics may be taken in London, Brussels, Washington, Beijing, Strasbourg or almost any other major city in the world or any institution, public or private, with interests in Scotland.

The state in Scotland manifests itself at many levels, and most of the key institutions of the state (MI5, the Bank of England, the Armed Forces, the BBC) fall within the realm of reserved powers. Therefore, in territorial politics, a distinction tends to be made between the **centre and periphery** of a political system. The traditions of the British state could be described as elitist and hierarchical; democracy has come from above not below. Ministers still represent 'The Crown'. Indeed one could argue that the Scottish Parliament is an arena of **low politics** (social policy, transport, local government and the like), since issues of **high politics** (economy, foreign and defence policy, border control) remain located at British state level (see Bulpitt, 1983). Therefore, a cynic may argue that devolution is the British state's response to an internal challenge from Scottish nationalist forces – it is an accommodation to those interests, but one that leaves the fundamentals of the UK state intact.

This focus of 'territorial politics', which emphasizes both Scotland's place within the UK and the decentralization and devolution of power to a stateless nation, is also found in a range of Western democratic states (see

Table 1.1 *Levels of governance in Scotland*

<i>Level of governance</i>	<i>Institutional examples</i>
International	United Nations, World Trade Organization, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, multinational corporations, international interest groups
European	European Union, EU institutions, European interest groups
UK state	UK Parliament, UK Ministries, UK interest groups
Scotland (state)	Scottish Parliament, Scottish Government
Scotland	Scottish Agencies, Non-Departmental Public Bodies, UK state agencies (e.g. HM Revenue and Customs, Jobcentre Plus), Scottish interest groups (e.g. Scottish Council for Voluntary Organizations)
Regional	Strathclyde Passenger Transport Executive, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Health Boards
Local	32 local councils
Local community	Community councils, tenants' organizations

Centre and periphery:

'Centre' usually refers to the part of government in which power is concentrated; 'periphery' refers to local, regional or territorial governments.

Low politics:

Policy matters deemed peripheral to the centre and devolved to territorial and local governments.

High politics:

All matters that are vital to the survival of the state, such as defence, foreign affairs, security and economic concerns.

for example Keating, 1998; Bogdanor, 1999; Bradbury, 2006). 'Territories' like Quebec in Canada, Flanders in Belgium and Catalonia in Spain have all enjoyed increased levels of political autonomy in recent decades (and many are watching recent developments in Scotland with great interest). The UK itself is based on three territorial unions: England and Wales (1536); Scotland (1707); and Britain and Ireland (1800), replaced with the six counties of Northern Ireland (1921) after the 26 counties of Ireland negotiated their exit from the union.

Territorial politics, like many other branches of political science, has a predominant focus on institutions and their relationships with each other. If we shift our attention to wider issues such as political participation and identity then we may come to different conclusions about the distinctiveness of Scottish politics. In recent decades, perceptions of 'Scottishness' have been growing at the same time as 'Britishness' has been diminishing. **Unionism** has been the glue that binds Scotland with the rest of the UK. In the days of the British Empire and the dominance of British economic interests around the world it was easy to see why the concept of the union and Britain was appealing. With the end of

Unionism:

Attachment to the principle of a unity of the United Kingdom. A 'hard line' suggests no sympathy to home-rule sentiments, while the unionism expressed by parties in the Scottish Parliament refers to devolution within the UK as an alternative to independence.

that Empire and Britain's relative economic decline, that appeal is no longer as readily apparent and British identity as a source of collective participation may not have the appeal or resonance it once had (Nairn, 2001). Indeed, levels of Scottish national identity provide a key background to the study of attitudes to constitutional change (Table 12.3).

The Scottish politics of difference

Scottish politics has in recent years developed its own agenda, separate from that of British politics. Its defining feature has been the issue of constitutional change, but there are also issues (e.g. education, local government, land reform) that have always had a uniquely Scottish angle. The party system has diverged from the UK norm, with the SNP emerging as a major party and the Conservatives demoted to minority status. The **neo-liberal 'laissez-faire'** politics of Thatcherism in the 1980s were perceived as alien by the majority of Scots (and many in the rest of the UK). Scottish political attitudes are also different. However, whilst opinion polls have tended to demonstrate a more 'progressive' attitude to issues such as income redistribution (Paterson *et al.*, 2001), they also highlight few differences in moral views (Park, 2002).

Neo-liberal 'laissez-faire':

A broad strategy to 'roll back the state' or reduce public provision in favour of the private sector and the market.

Political differences in Scotland have the potential to be magnified by new post-devolution arrangements. For example, Scotland's proportional electoral system has helped produce a multi-party system with a reduced likelihood (when compared with Westminster) of single party majorities (a fact that may currently seem ironic when Scotland has a single party majority and the UK a coalition government). The Scottish Parliament has working methods and practices that deliberately eschew those of 'old Westminster'. Scottish difference also extends to the role of the state. The public-sector presence in Scotland – if measured in terms of key indicators such as expenditure, employment and housing – is more significant, and the impact of commercialism on the provision of services such as education and health is less well-developed than south of the border. Fewer state activities have tended to be outsourced to the market. Therefore, devolution has provided Scottish politics with the *potential* to diverge further from UK politics – and a key aim of this book is to assess the extent to which this has occurred.

Placed in a broader comparative context Scotland does not appear so exceptional – indeed it is the UK, rather than Scotland, which appears unusual. Scottish politics is actually quite a bit like that of other small European democ-

Asymmetrical constitutional settlement:

The uneven nature of the UK devolution settlement, with no English regional devolution and different arrangements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (see Birrell, 2012; Cairney, 2012c).

racies. For example, the dynamics of executive coalition politics, minority government, the electoral systems used, the multi-party system, the Parliament's working procedures, the **asymmetrical constitutional settlement**, the interdependencies and intergovernmental relations between Scotland and the UK all have parallels in Continental Europe. Similar arrangements exist in areas such as Quebec, Catalonia and Flanders – all of these 'territories' exist within the context of claims for more governing autonomy from their respective states. As a book primarily about Scottish politics, we do at various points seek to place Scottish

politics within the broader comparative context.

Of course most answers to the multitude of questions that Scottish devolution has raised will be provisional. It has been suggested that a full analysis of policy change may take 'a decade or more' (Jenkins-Smith and Sabattier, 1993; see also Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973) and Scottish devolution has only just entered its teens. Further, as the former Welsh Secretary Ron Davies famously argued, devolution should be viewed as a 'process rather than an event'. Such phrases are becoming important again as Scotland's constitutional status and the current devolution settlement remain high on the Scottish political agenda.

A Scottish political system?

Before devolution, one of the liveliest debates in the literature on Scottish politics was about whether or not Scotland had a 'political system' (Kellas,

Box 1.3 Quotes about Scottish politics

'Devolution, the settled will of the Scottish people.' John Smith, former UK Labour Party Leader.

'Devolution will kill Nationalism stone dead.' George Robertson, former Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland (Labour).

'There shall be a Scottish Parliament. I rather like that sentence.' Donald Dewar, former First Minister of Scotland (Labour).

'A wee pretendy Parliament.' Billy Connolly commenting on Scotland's new Parliament.

'Devolution is not just for Christmas.' Michael Forsyth, Former Conservative Secretary of State for Scotland.

'Devolution will be like a motorway to independence with no exits.' Tam Dalyell, Labour MP.

1989; Moore and Booth, 1989; Midwinter *et al.*, 1991). In this book we suggest that Scottish politics exhibits far more features of a political system today than it did when Kellas first advanced the argument in 1973. However, the consequence of multi-level governance is that the term ‘political system’ has diminishing relevance. Although devolution has enhanced Scottish legislative and governing authority and its institutions have been transformed, most elements of ‘high politics’ are reserved to the UK, many devolved policies are Europeanized and the globalization of economies fosters a level of interdependence that transcends nations and regions (McGarvey and Cairney, 2008b).

Easton (1953; 1957; 1965) emphasized a political system as an entity which could be studied on its own. He defined it as ‘a set of interactions, abstracted from the totality of social behaviour, through which values are authoritatively allocated for society’ (1965: 57). A political system is that part of society where the ultimate collective decisions are made; where power lies. A defining feature of states is their authority to enforce collective decisions, by force if necessary. Therefore, the key question is whether or not *Scottish* political institutions (rather than those in the UK, the EU or beyond) authoritatively allocate values with a degree of authority not witnessed before devolution. Further, does this provide new forms of ‘inputs’ to the system? Almond and Coleman (1960) outline three categories of input: the structures which exist to co-opt citizens into administrative and political structures; interest articulation through voting, campaigning, lobbying and demonstrating; and the processes of interest aggregation often performed by parties and interest groups.

Sovereignty: The supreme, ultimate source of authority in society. In the UK, legal sovereignty is symbolized by The Crown in Parliament but Scottish home rule campaigners have argued that ultimate Scottish sovereignty rests with its people.

The Scottish Parliament has the authority to pass primary legislation in devolved areas. This authority has been added to pre-existing powers – regarding the legal, education and local government systems in Scotland – safeguarded by the 1707 Act of Union. Scotland also has distinct political parties, interest groups and structures of governance. However, Scotland remains a sub-system of the UK. Legal **sovereignty** remains in Westminster, and Scotland remains part of the broader UK political system. Indeed, the UK political system has survived by displaying its capacity to respond to the stresses caused by Scottish demands for home rule; by devolving some

powers while retaining others. The UK political system continues to evolve and its adaptability has probably been the key to its durability.

New politics

A main theme of much academic work immediately post-devolution was the notion of ‘**new politics**’ (Brown, 2000; Mitchell, 2000). The phrase was also

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Key: bold headword (e.g. ‘**administrative devolution**’) denotes a keyword in the text; **bold number** denotes a definition of a headword; b = box; f = figure; n = footnote; t = table.

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