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THE LABOUR PARTY IN SCOTLAND

Religion, the Union, and the Irish Dimension

Graham Walker

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Preface

Writing in the aftermath of the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014, the political journalist Iain Macwhirter asserted that the patriotism of the Scottish working class had long been held in check by a combination of the Labour Party and the Orange Order.[1] This comment gestured to the significance of religious identity and of Irish influences in Scottish life, and to the feat on the part of the Labour Party in achieving support across ethno-religious lines for many decades on the basis of an appeal to class interest. This achievement strengthened Scotland's position within a broader British political context and within the Union itself. As the historian Alvin Jackson has put it: 'Class politics were essentially unionist politics; and Labour's appeal to class effectively created a unionism in Scotland which transcended the endemic religious rivalries of the West [of the country].'[2]

Macwhirter was also hinting that the political mould was breaking up, and the electoral triumph of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the general election of 2015 duly confirmed that this was the case. Analysis of the Referendum voting has revealed that some 57% of Catholics voted 'Yes', while the corresponding figure among Church of Scotland Protestants was 41%. Although these figures are open to interpretation in various ways, this disparity in terms of the link between religious identity and support for independence requires investigation and explanation. Furthermore, it appears from the 2015 election evidence that the Catholic working class, long the backbone of Labour support in Scotland, has departed from its traditional allegiance perhaps never to return. On the other side of the religious divide, there is a section of the Protestant community, mostly

working class, that fears the growth of the SNP and the continuing threat to the Union, and laments the loss of pride in Britishness. Their alienation seems in some important ways to mirror that of the Protestant/Loyalist working class in Northern Ireland with whom they have had an intimate historical and cultural relationship. Scotland is in the throes of profound political transformation and social restlessness, and Labour's dilemmas surrounding its traditional bases of support and its capacity to contain sectarian divisions have been exposed.

This study is intended as an intervention in the discussion over Scotland's current political ferment and its uncertain constitutional future. It is an examination of Labour's historical development in Scotland and its management of sectarian tensions in Scottish society. It sheds light on the ambiguous relationship between politics and religious identity in Scotland, and explores the way religion has shaped the country's politics, and its social and cultural profile. It is concerned with the recent intense debate over sectarianism in Scotland and with the lack of attention paid by contributors of all kinds to this debate to the crucial role played by Irish influences in Scottish life, and, in particular, Scotland's close relationship with Northern Ireland. The book assesses the impact of the new political circumstances of devolution from the end of last century, and the unpicking of what had become a traditional pattern of class-based politics. It is also a study which aims to feed into discussion of the extent to which religion is part of a broader 'identity politics'[3] in contemporary Scotland.

Notes

1. *Sunday Herald*, 28 December 2014.
2. A. Jackson, *The Two Unions. Ireland, Scotland, and the Survival of the United Kingdom, 1707–2007*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 280.
3. There are many ways to define this concept. This study proceeds on an understanding of it that involves a strong sense of group commitment, clear identity markers, and a collective sense of relative deprivation. All such characteristics sustain a sense of political motivation and a desire for recognition. See discussion in S. Kettell, 'The Militant Strain: An Analysis of Anti-secular Discourse in Britain', *Political Studies*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (2015), 512–528.

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CHAPTER 1

A Century of Labour in Scotland: Struggles and Achievements

Abstract This chapter is concerned with the historical development of the Labour Party in Scotland and its relative degree of success in securing the working-class vote across religious lines. It highlights the importance of the party to the Catholic community of Irish descent in Scotland, and it examines the relationship between the party and the Catholic Church and the way that certain sensitive moral questions were played down, and other issues like education left unchallenged, to avoid any confrontation between church and party. The chapter also assesses the appeal of the party to Protestants: the extent to which it could embody a sense of Presbyterian virtue and equity, and the extent to which it could even pitch for the 'Orange vote'.

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The relationship between social class and religious and ethnic identity in Scotland is long and tangled. Labour politics has had to overcome divisions of the latter kind within the working-class, and indeed—as the party became dominant in Scotland—society more broadly. Divisions between Protestants and Catholics were shaped by Irish immigration, of both religious persuasions, during the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, although the nation's Presbyterian character following the Reformation had disposed it unfavourably to 'Popery' long before this. Moreover, Irish influences and connections remained a pertinent theme, particularly in the industrialised west of Scotland.

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Labour's progress in Scotland does not correspond to any simplistic 'forward march' narrative. In fact, its political record of achievements up until the Second World War is somewhat patchy. High points, such as the 1922 general election victories that returned ten Clydeside Labour MPs to Westminster, have to be viewed alongside the party's struggles to re-build in the economically depressed 1930s following the split with the Independent Labour Party (ILP). The latter party had indeed done much to build a popular culture of socialist activism in lowland Scotland following its formation in 1893, and historians have tended to the view that Labour politics in Scotland took a significant turn away from idealism to pragmatism in the wake of the ILP decision throughout Britain to disaffiliate from the Labour Party in 1932.[1]

The ILP, and the Scottish Labour Party founded by Keir Hardie in 1888, drew support largely from better-off Protestant skilled workers who were also likely to be committed trade unionists. The early Scottish Labour movement tapped into a tradition of Presbyterian democracy that had also influenced Liberal politics in Victorian Scotland, and pursued with a degree of evangelical fervour causes such as temperance.[2] Egalitarian values were espoused and privilege and exploitation excoriated. Land reform was an early priority, and there was much rural radicalism in the Highlands and the Western Isles that united crofters both Calvinist and Catholic, and provided links with similar Irish movements. However, the profile of this issue was to dip within the predominantly urban British political context of the post-war era.[3]

Early Labour leadership figures were aware of tensions between working-class Protestants and Catholics, particularly in Glasgow and surrounding industrial towns and villages, yet trusted to education and to better living standards to resolve them. Tom Johnston, founder in 1906 and first editor of the 'Forward' newspaper, besides seeing progressive potential in Scotland's Protestant heritage, supported the efforts of John Wheatley who had set up the Catholic Socialist Society (CSS) in the same year to convince Catholic workers that their religious beliefs were not, as the Church insisted, incompatible with socialism.[4] Wheatley belonged to the immigrant Irish Catholic community and was the key figure in directing it towards Labour politics at a time when the Catholic allegiance was habitually given to the Liberals on account of their championing of Irish Home Rule, and when the United Irish League (UIL) was impressively organised in Scotland.[5] The importance of able leadership figures such as Hardie, Johnston, and Wheatley with their propaganda, speaking, and

organisational skills, needs to be stressed. There were many others at a more local level such as John S. Taylor in Govan,[6] and the miners' champion in Larkhall, Bob Smilie, who was a Protestant migrant from Belfast.[7] Labour's growth, although not much reflected in electoral success before the First World War, was nonetheless strong enough to contain religious sectarian friction even as the Irish Home Rule controversy occasioned by the Liberal Government's Bill of 1912 raised the political temperature in the years leading up to the outbreak of war. Glasgow did not replicate Belfast for all the occasional despairing reports in the Labour press about 'Carsonism' in certain districts of the city.[8]

Labour historians have emphasised the importance of the factor of class consciousness and identity in countering sectarianism.[9] Crucial changes in the workplace gradually blurred occupational hierarchies, and the experience, or threat, of unemployment was a great leveller. Protestant-dominated occupational sectors such as engineering and boilermaking were sites of the most bitter labour disputes of the early twentieth century,[10] and paternalistic employer–worker relations enjoyed decidedly limited success on Clydeside. The eruption of the industrial trouble on the Clyde during the First World War that so panicked the Government may have been motivated by considerations of craft self-protection rather than proletarian solidarity[11]; nevertheless, its disruptive impact reflected the non-compliant temper of the workers that had developed through earlier struggles, and stubborn anti-authority sentiment that responded readily to the rousing rhetoric of yet more gifted tribunes of the people such as Maxton, Shinwell, MacLean, and Gallacher. Again, the working class did not lack leaders or persuasive advocates.[12]

The early twentieth century also saw the Presbyterian churches orientate themselves towards social problems, and the radical politicisation of some ministers.[13] Even if the motivation behind this was actually to combat the spread of socialism among the working class, the result was concern over the condition of the poor regardless of creed or ethnicity. Many of the poor and disadvantaged were Catholic and although the Catholic Church strove to keep its flock away from socialist influences, especially in the light of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, recent scholarship has revised the notion of an enclosed Catholic community tamed by its priests; rather it has been argued that here was greater Catholic participation in Scottish public life than has hitherto been appreciated.[14] Certainly, this is true of the Labour and trade union movement, and it should not be assumed that Catholic political energies were entirely consumed by Irish

issues however much the latter impinged on the wider British scene and however much the Catholic–UIL–Liberal alliance mattered in Scotland before the First World War. In short, there was considerable interaction between Protestants and Catholics around class politics and labour organisation even before the franchise extensions of 1918 gave formal clout to many unskilled, disproportionately Catholic, workers.[15]

There were other crucial social factors at play. While in certain industries provision of better quality housing for foremen and skilled craftsmen was a fact of life, there were, overall, important limits to residential segregation either on the grounds of skill or religion. Recent path-breaking research on Irish immigrants in late nineteenth century Govan and Kinning Park in Glasgow has demonstrated the extent to which both Protestants and Catholics lived in the same neighbourhood and mixed in the same workplaces.[16] Residential segregation among Irish immigrants was more apparent in areas of Lanarkshire such as Monklands and here the factor of common workplace experience and trade union organisation was much weaker.[17] In the cities, according to a leading Labour historian, 'tenement living created solidarities among workers, regardless of ethnic origin, religious persuasion or position in the occupational hierarchy, which contributed to those formed in the workplace'.[18] Such social conditions could lead to intermarriage between Protestants and Catholics, and, although not without problems and often carried out in the face of the disapproval of both sides, such unions played their part in moderating religious antagonisms over time. Certainly, in relation to residential segregation and intermarriage, Scotland bore little resemblance to nearby Ulster by the beginning of the twentieth century, and the contrast between the two places in these respects became more pronounced as the century progressed. Furthermore, a common working-class culture had by the twentieth century coalesced around patterns of consumption and leisure pursuits if to the distaste of temperance-minded and teacherly socialists such as Tom Johnston and John MacLean.

The unrest on Clydeside during the First World War encompassed rent strikes as well as industrial disputes; indeed, the former achieved the more clear-cut success in forcing government intervention to prevent landlords from raising rents in working-class areas. These protests led to increased demands for better housing, an issue that brought Protestants and Catholics together and was notable for enabling female Labour activists such as Helen Crawford and Mary Barbour to enter the forefront of public life.[19] Indeed, housing agitation was a key component of the febrile