

Nationalism and Islamism in Scotland

Tom Gallagher

The most visible challenge to the continued existence of the United Kingdom comes from the Scottish National Party which runs the devolved administration in Edinburgh and enjoys record popularity among Scots. This summer, commentators have been rushing to argue that Scotland is exiting the union and that the devolution of power from Westminster to a parliament in Edinburgh has been a giant miscalculation. The party's greatest asset is its leader, Alex Salmond, an accomplished populist whose media skills are currently unrivalled in British politics. He has won the affection of most Scots, including many still opposed to independence. He is trying to persuade them that independence is really the best solution for the country and that he can be trusted to preside over a painless extrication of Scotland from the British state.

In a bid to sharply erode British influence and detach Scotland from its traditional international orientation, Salmond has made some bold policy departures unusual for a West European nationalist politician. The SNP is using multicultural levers to manipulate religious identity in Scotland for electoral advantage, which I believe is likely to revive inter-confessional tensions as well as those between secular and religious interests.

The Labour Party, historically the dominant force in Scotland, looks set to be out of power for a long period. The Labour machine has collapsed in many urban strongholds, it is currently saddled with unimpressive political leaders, and sharp fault-lines are emerging between middle-class advocates of socially-liberal policies on lifestyle and personal morality issues and the more conservative views of traditional working-class areas where secularism has yet to dislodge an adherence to traditional Catholicism.

On 24 July Labour lost its third safest seat in Scotland to the SNP in a by-election in Glasgow East. One-third of the voters in the constituency are Catholics and the constituency is also home to Celtic Football Club which, since being founded in 1887, has been a potent symbol of identity and a source of pride for a community where many are still conscious of their Irish roots.

GALLAGHER | Nationalism and Islamism in Scotland

Once Labour could rely on overwhelming backing in a parliamentary seat with this kind of social profile. The party appeared to offer its working-class inhabitants social justice and it was not deaf to the religious concerns of the Catholic Church in the moral and educational spheres. But this alliance between an economically progressive but culturally conservative Catholic Church and the parliamentary left is breaking down. Now Labour finds itself in an increasingly bitter clash with much of Scotland's official Catholic leadership which has fiercely attacked the party after recent parliamentary votes defeating amendments to ban human-animal embryos and reduce the time-limit before an abortion could be permitted. [1]

The growing fault-lines between a Labour Party dominated by urban secular elites and traditional social forces has prompted the Scottish nationalists to put aside their studied neutrality on religious questions. Now they are making increasingly overt ethnic and religious appeals to Scotland's religious minorities, not just the Roman Catholics but also the Muslims, in the hope that they can be detached from their Labour allegiances.

They have mobilised not just autocratic Catholic prelates but radical Islamic politicians in the hope that by offering them group rights they will deliver an ethnic block vote to the party. This raises the spectre, in some eyes, that in a Scotland fully under SNP control, individual citizenship will count for little and the party will rule through a large bureaucracy which franchises control of education, policing, and other policy areas to mobilised factions inside and outside ethnic minorities.

This preoccupation with minority interests appears a world away from Scottish Nationalism's early days after the First World War. Then, prominent figures in the movement (which by 1934 had evolved into the SNP) flirted with anti-Catholicism at a time when there were no shortage of voices insisting that not only Irish Catholics, but their descendents, were a disruptive element in Scottish life who could never be assimilated, and ought to be encouraged to leave Scotland if not expelled en masse. [2] The values of the country were Protestant, Scottish and British and this minority appeared to flout them with their loyalty to Rome and support for Irish independence from Britain. Ever since the 16th Century Reformation, which unlike in England had been a popular movement for change, Protestantism had defined Scotland's identity and much of its everyday life. Some prominent Scottish Nationalists played the ethnic card in the 1930s after crushing blows to Scottish optimism produced by the First World War and the industrial collapse that followed. Not just Nationalists but leading figures in the Church of

Scotland looked for a scapegoat and the unskilled 'Irish' congregating in Scotland's cities filled the role. [3]

Today, I would argue, a much larger portion of the SNP is playing ethnic politics, or is relaxed about its leader doing so. The unyielding but neurotic majority nationalism of an inter-war Europe, deeply unsure of itself and hostile to minorities, has been replaced by a nationalism that is increasingly organized around minority rights. The multi-culturalist principle has catapulted minorities to the forefront of politics in democratic states which are ethnically-mixed. It obliges people to belong to groups, defines those groups by cultural, or religious attributes, gives rights to such groups, and favours the granting of privileges (subsidies, quotas, legal immunities and so on) to them, in order to reinforce their identity. Community 'leaders' are hired by the state in order to manage these groups and state agencies proliferate to shape policies around their needs. [4]

The SNP assumes that, in key respects, Scotland's 700,000 Catholics and 60-80,000 Muslims can only be engaged through their distinct cultural or religious identities. The key group is the smaller one, fast-growing in size and increasingly attached to Islam. Muslims encountered discrimination as did other non-white groups who settled in British cities from the 1950s onwards. Arguably, the hostility was less marked in Glasgow because large sections of the white working-class were absorbed in bitter intra-Christian sectarian disputes whose only other parallel was in nearby Northern Ireland. Unlike other cities, Muslims in Glasgow acquired effective political, religious and entrepreneurial leaders who worked in conjunction with the Labour Party and public bodies to oppose prejudice and discrimination that undoubtedly existed towards their community. Muslims are now located in a number of key constituencies regarded as crucial if the SNP's march to power is to succeed. Alex Salmond has cultivated young Muslim activists, as well as businessmen, for many years, but he is deaf to warnings that engaging with Muslims on the basis of an ethno-religious identity will fuel Islamist radicalism.

Policies now increasingly seen as retrograde in England have been borrowed, such as the recent establishment of a Muslim Police Association. According to Munira Mirza, the Mayor of London's adviser on cultural affairs, by creating a separate tier of police to liaise with Muslims, it encourages many of them to believe that they cannot approach non-Muslim officers with their culturally-specific problems: 'this reinforces tribalism and division, rather than helping us to overcome it.' [5]

GALLAGHER | Nationalism and Islamism in Scotland

Scotland's unifying narrative remains a hostility to England which shapes the popular culture, sometimes in ways which startle visitors. During the industrial era, due to deep sectarian tensions along intra-Christian lines, recurring class conflict and regional rivalries, a collective identity remains elusive. One, however, is being carved out by the SNP. It hails Scots not as individuals but as members of their national family first and cultural group next. Members of the white working-class have to manage with one identity, the 100,000 English living in Scotland don't yet enjoy any secure minority status, but it is the religious groups already mentioned which receive special attention. The SNP is of course the guardian of the nation and the party is expanding an already large bureaucracy to manage ethnic diversity.

Alex Salmond has chosen to ignore the advice of the recent High Commissioner for Pakistan, Dr Maleha Lodhi who, speaking at Glasgow University in 2007, urged Muslims to speak up for themselves and not allow the loudest voices to be seen as their natural representatives. [6] Instead, Salmond works largely through energetic young religious radicals who have advocated the return of an Islamic Caliphate, display an obsession with the Middle East and ending Western influence there and who support the incorporation of Sharia law into British jurisprudence. [7] Their greatest breakthrough has been to win the backing of the SNP government for state-financed Muslim schools despite their often poor record at producing pupils at ease with a secular society. This is the main goal of Scottish Islamic Foundation (SIF), a pressure group whose company papers were witnessed by a member of the SNP staff at the party's Glasgow head office. [8] The SIF has obtained a grant of £419,000 from the Scottish government while more moderate Muslim groups have been left empty-handed. This raises questions about whether such large sums of public money should be used to promote a particular religion and it indicates the proprietorial role which the SNP is showing towards the state and its resources before it even clinches power. [9]

Osama Saeed is chief executive of the Scottish Islamic Foundation (SIF) which is likely to make state-funded Islamic education its key objective. [1] He declared at its launch on 27 June that he wanted to see the emergence of overtly Islamic schools and he had researched schools in England where children are taught the Koran, girls wear the hijab, and boys and girls are segregated. [11] Alex Salmond attended the event and pledged his support for state funding for such schools. Amanullah de Soudy, a lecturer in Islamic studies at Glasgow University is in no doubt that such schools will 'leave young Muslims vulnerable to extremist pressures.' [12]

Salmond is intent on sweeping aside the arthritic Labour Party but he shows no desire to abandon its autocratic methods and reliance on bloated state agencies which make sure the recipients of their services know their place. The SNP springs from that tradition and is likely to preserve the fundamentals of machine politics if its political reign is a lengthy one. Carol Craig's 2005 book, *The Scots Crisis of Confidence* has plenty to say about the soft authoritarianism prevalent in public life which the SNP is already consolidating, using nationalism as a means of enforcing conformity. [13]

There are no strong voices pointing out that young people could be pushed towards introspection and even religious militancy through the insistence that Muslims combine a Scottish allegiance with an active search for their religious roots; nor drawing examples from other countries to suggest that tilting the Muslim community towards radicals could damage community relations in a traditionally volatile city like Glasgow.

Salmond, seeking to rebuild Scotland's international ties, in particular with the Middle East, has authorised the Scottish Islamic Foundation to be his administration's ambassador in the region. [14] It met with Wadah Khanfar, the head of Al-Jazeera in August and is hoping to persuade him to set up a permanent bureau in Scotland. [15] Salmond also hopes that money from Gulf States will fuel Scottish efforts to promote alternative energy.

Dominated by the far-left, the Scottish Palestinian Solidarity Campaign has become an influential force in Scottish life despite the militancy of its rhetoric, and few like to cross it. Mick Napier, its chairman, said in March that the West Bank Jewish theological college, Merkaz Harav (attacked in March, resulting in the killing of 8 students) was a legitimate target and the Palestinian attackers were acting in self-defence. [16]

Napier received huge acclaim when he addressed a two-day event held in the south-west suburbs of Glasgow last August entitled 'Weaving the Tartan: the Muslim contribution to Scotland.' In a typically defiant speech, Osama Saeed said that Muslims don't need lessons in democracy – they invented democracy and freedom of conscience and Islam spread so fast because it opposed tyranny. He was preceded by Nicola Sturgeon, Salmond's deputy, who warned that these were challenging times for all those who hold multiculturalism dear. Salmond himself spoke by

GALLAGHER | Nationalism and Islamism in Scotland

video-link, urging Muslim participation in politics to be stepped up and promising he could attend in person next time.

The most outspoken speaker was Aamer Anwar, a human rights lawyer who proclaimed that the roots of terrorism in the West lie in the actions of Britain and the USA in the Middle East. [17] Anwar was an activist in the Socialist Workers party and is now a human-rights lawyer. On 1 July he was cleared of contempt of court after a judicial hearing had deliberated whether a speech he delivered in September 2007 at the end of a trial in which the student he was defending, Mohammad Atif Siddique, was found guilty of providing material on bomb-making and weapons, and threatening to become a suicide bomber, and was sentenced to eight years in prison. Anwar insisted that his client had not received a fair trial and he went on to denounce the judge, the jury, the police and one prosecution witness. [18] The judges strongly criticised Anwar's conduct but refused to take further action after a campaign in his defence involving rallies and the intervention of high-profile figures like Tony Benn as well as a brief re-union of the divided forces of the Scottish far-left.

For several years both Anwar and Osama Saeed have been the figures the BBC in Glasgow has invariably turned to whenever it wants a local Muslim viewpoint on an issue. In the days after the 2007 airport attack, both men dominated the airwaves. Such editorial decisions suggest to non-Muslims that their radical views are the norm and does nothing to build community harmony. Within the Muslim community, this editorial policy boosts radicals, as the uncommitted assume that it is only such views which count in Scottish life.

The two main Scottish daily newspapers, the *Herald* in Glasgow and the *Scotsman* in Edinburgh, increasingly exist in a bubble. They have stripped the size of their journalistic staff to the bone to maximise the profits of their US and offshore owners. Previously, there would have been local government and crime reporters to report on 'hurting communities' and signs of incipient social tension, but no longer. Despite supposedly being pro-union in outlook, these newspaper defer increasingly to the SNP and are reluctant to criticise its leader's controversial initiatives.

Nor do the universities in Scotland have many voices prepared to speak up about the damage being caused by the state using religious figures to manage communities. There are no strong proponents of secular liberalism comparable to A.C. Grayling in England. This is hardly surprising since identity politics

was legitimised first in academia and then by state service-providers. Recently, Edinburgh University's Islamic Studies department received a huge bequest from a Saudi Arabian foundation. My own visits to the holdings of the premier centre of Islamic studies in Scotland reveal a paucity of works that examine Islam, and especially its politicisation, in a critical light.

Scotland has always suffered when Scots have been organized into religious factions, with individual citizenship being sacrificed in favour of sectarian group identities. It is acceptable for Mr Salmond to look for votes among Muslims. But he should approach them as individual citizens whose religion is only one aspect of their identity and not necessarily the primary one. To franchise out the community to religious radicals and to use his party and the state agencies it now controls to buttress a religious identity is a highly irresponsible act. It means that a sectional outlook is likely to become entrenched in the community as it is placed in the control of religious gatekeepers. The opportunities for misunderstanding and friction with other Scots will surely abound.

Tom Gallagher is a Professor at the Department of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His book, *The Illusion of Freedom: Scotland under Nationalism*, is forthcoming.

References

- Barnes, Eddie 2008a, 'Salmond hit by "cash for cronies" row,' *Scotland on Sunday*, 13 July.
- Barnes, Eddie 2008b, 'SNP helped set up publicly funded Muslim group,' *Scotland on Sunday*, 20 July.
- Barry, Brian 2000, *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism*, London: Polity Press.
- Bowditch, Gillian 2008 'A reluctant fundamentalist?' *Sunday Times* (Scotland), 22 June.
- Brown, S.J. 1991, 'Outside the Covenant: The Scottish Presbyterian Churches and Irish Immigration,' *Innes Review*, pp. 19-45.
- Commission for Social Cohesion 2008, *Scottish Islamic Foundation launch*, London, 25 June.
- Craig, Carol 2005, The Scots Crisis of Confidence, *Big Thinking*, Scotland.
- de Sonny, Amanullah 2008, 'Alternative take,' *Scotsman*, 2 July.
- Gallagher, Tom 1987, *Glasgow The Uneasy Peace: Religious Tension in Modern Scotland*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Hamill, Jasper 2008. 'Modernising Muslims sign up as Scottish ambassadors to Islam,' *Sunday Herald*, 31 August.

GALLAGHER | Nationalism and Islamism in Scotland

- Harry's Place 2008, 'What is Going On Inside the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign?' 14 March. www.hurryupharry.blogspot.com
- Howie, Michael 2008, 'Salmond backs first state-funded Islamic school for Scotland,' *Scotsman*, 27 June.
- Macmillan, James 2008, 'Labour will Lose Glasgow East,' *Daily Telegraph*, 8 July.
- Malik, Kenan 2008, 'Mistaken Identity,' *New Humanist*, July-August.
- Progressive Scottish Muslims.blogspot.com, 2007, 6 August. (This is the blog of Amanullah de Soudy a lecture in Divinity at the University of Glasgow.)
- Rhodes, Mandy 2008, 'Big mouth,' Holyrood, 30 June. www.holyrood.com.
- Weaving the Tartan: the Muslim Contribution to Scotland, Transcript of proceedings, 5-6 August 2007, Eastwood, Glasgow, (copy in possession of the author).

Notes

- [1] See Macmillan 2008.
- [2] Gallagher 1987.
- [3] Brown 1991.
- [4] For a critique of the role of multiculturalism in public service provision, see Barry 2000, and Malik 2008.
- [5] E-mail communication, 27 May, 2008.
- [6] Progressive Scottish Muslims 2007.
- [7] See Bowditch 2008; and Commission for Social Cohesion 2008.
- [8] Barnes 2008b.
- [9] Barnes 2008a.
- [10] Osama Saeed has been outspoken in his criticism of terrorism in Britain, but he also has a track-record of collaborating with UK Islamist bodies, such as the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) and defending the outspoken views of well-known Islamists abroad, such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi who was denied entry to the United Kingdom in 2008 as 'a danger to the common good.' His political track-record before leaping to prominence in the SNP is documented by the Centre for Social Cohesion's detailed press statement entitled 'the Scottish Islamic Foundation: A New Front for the Muslim Brotherhood?' published in June 2008. <http://www.socialcohesion.co.uk/pdf/ScottishIslamicFoundation.pdf>
- [11] Howie 2008.
- [12] de Soudy 2008.
- [13] Craig 2005.
- [14] Hamill 2008.
- [15] Hamill 2008.
- [16] Harry's Place 2008.
- [17] Weaving the Tartan 2007.
- [18] Rhodes 2008.