

The Oxford Handbook of Scottish Politics, edited by Michael Keating

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Some might wonder how come a stateless territory that fights for its population not to fall below 5 million people is so special as to deserve an Oxford Handbook. What makes Scotland special? As the handbook's editor, professor Michael Keating, laments in his opening chapter, scholars of territorial politics frequently have to put an extra effort into justifying the study of stateless nations—as opposed to states—in general, and regular suspects such as Scotland in particular. This is partly due to the protracted methodological nationalism that has characterised political science as a discipline for most of the 20th century, often owing to widespread ideas that somehow involved the end of nations, or the end of the territorial divide. Yet the territorial divide is alive and kicking, the 21st century has been anything but boring for Scotland, and this book explains it.

There are three major events that nearly qualify as critical junctures for Scotland's recent history: first of all, devolution, with the Scottish parliament being “re-convened” in 1999. Secondly, the 2014 independence referendum, and, thirdly, the Brexit process. It is now that we can gain a full grasp of what, how, and the extent to which Devolution had, and has, an impact on Scottish politics and the Scottish political system, but also on the United Kingdom as a whole and the very concept of the Union. While in contrast the independence referendum and the unfinished Brexit are still the subject of intense research, most of the Handbook's chapters make an effort to incorporate in one way or another questions and answers regarding these three key events.

The book is divided into five parts. The first of these—Understanding Scotland—includes chapters that review key topics of the Scottish political landscape. Scottish national identity is not only dissected in D. McCrone's first chapter, but enriched by contributions that revolve around the concept of Union and belonging, where we must welcome the inclusion of important chapters that examine political identity and incorporation from a gender, age and diversity perspective. Scotland has traditionally been portrayed by scholarly work as virtually the ideal type of civic nationalism. But anyone who has visited Scotland will have seen that there is more to Scottish identity than respect for civic values, living there, and wanting to be Scottish. Interestingly, S. Hames' last chapter of the handbook's first part separates political from cultural nationalism and proposes them as 'twin locomotives working on parallel tracks' and not always in the same direction, and offers a rich overview of the—often downplayed—latter concept.

The second part—Parties and elections—offers an excellent account of the Scottish electoral system and its main actors. These chapters are essential to understanding Scots' overall political behaviour, as well as how the major events have deeply impacted—and shifted—the electoral fortunes of the major parties, namely the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Labour Party. Interestingly, A. Convery explains the complex imbrication of the Scottish Conservatives in this multi-level system, and the independence referendum was indeed an opportunity for this party to temporarily capitalise on the unionist vote. The section is completed with chapters on smaller parties, including the Scottish socialists or the Greens, but also on politics of important issues such as ethnic diversity and religion. Given the importance of independence, and the unlikelihood that the issue will fade away in the near future, this part could very well have been complemented with pieces with a more explanatory take on patterns of both voting behaviour and party strategies.

Institutions and the policy process is the theme of the third part, which starts with M. Harvey reviewing devolution and, as will sound familiar to the Spanish politics scholar, explaining how this cannot be confounded with federalism as a form of territorial distribution of power, with an interesting reflection on Brexit's potential to shake some of Devolution's pillars. But what has Devolution delivered? Many of the chapters tackle this question, such as P. Cairn's chapter on the so-called 'Scottish approach' to policymaking, which turns out not to be so distinctive. Devolution was also about the renewal

of the political class, and this is precisely what Keating et al analyse in the next chapter that reveals that some of Westminster's flaws concerning the representativity of the political class were reproduced at the Scottish level.

Part four—multilevel politics—takes politics on in a more dynamic manner than section two on party politics. Each of the chapters look at governmental dynamics, and intergovernmental relations, but also include essential pieces referring to Europe and independence. K. Hughes' chapter on Scotland and Europe analyses the impact of Brexit on Scotland, with a focus on the move from Scots' preferences for a soft or differentiated Brexit, to calls for independence. In the closing chapter, M. Keating and N. McEwen review the 2014 referendum from the point of view of events, actors, issues at stake, finishing with an overly brief discussion on a potential second referendum. Arguably, the authors could not know that the often called 'shambolic' management of UK's withdrawal from the EU would be joined by the stark differences between Scottish and British management of the pandemic for Scottish nationalists to capitalise on to gain support for independence.

The fifth part—Whither Scotland?—finalises the handbook with two complementary chapters by N. Ascheron and A. Ansari where both actors reflect on where Scotland stands today, and where it is going, which is certainly somewhere different—independence or a renewed union.

All in all, this is a brilliant account of Scottish politics today. Its five parts complement each other and offer answers to most questions that a scholar might have regarding its specific actors and institutions, the behaviour of its peoples, and the complex yet not unfamiliar relations with the Union.