Young Scottish Party Members' Discourse about National Identity

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Introduction

'Should Scotland be an independent country?' That was the question Scottish people had to answer in 2014. Choosing between national independence and remaining part of a multinational state undoubtedly made voters think of their sense of belonging to Scotland, on the one hand, and the United Kingdom, on the other. The question of independence is hardly separable from national identity. When voting for the referendum in 2014, Scottish people indirectly answered questions as 'What is Scotland?', 'Is it a nation, a nation-state, a region?', in other words, 'Who are we?'.

These are kinds of questions that young Scots probably answered on their way to polling stations. The referendum campaign and the vote itself mobilised a big proportion of young people. Beyond that, it led to the upsurge of the membership of some parties' youth wings. This was particularly the case of the Scottish National Party (SNP) that led the 'Yes' camp.

As young people are commonly known for their lack of political participation, I wondered why so many young Scots engaged in political parties during the referendum campaign and afterwards. Considering the stake of national independence, I wondered whether they became party members for national identity reasons.

Based on a study I conducted, this paper explores young SNP members, Scottish Young Conservatives and Scottish Young Labour members' views of their national identity.

The Study

Research Questions

The main question of my research was: how do these young Scottish party members perceive and define their national identity? I first studied the way they understood the notion of national identity generally speaking. Then, I focused on their perceptions of their own national identity. As they live in both the Scottish nation and the British state, how do they view and talk about Scottishness, on the one hand, and Britishness, on the other? Finally, I wondered whether there was a consensus amongst these young party members when it came to defining those identities.

Methods

So as to answer these questions, I conducted a study in both qualitative and quantitative ways. I had interviews with 25 young SNP members, 4 Scottish Young Labour members, 7

young Scottish Conservatives, and a member of the Brexit Party, from 18 to 32 years old. I conducted those interviews in 2018, 2019 and 2020, in Aberdeen, Glasgow, Edinburgh and via phone and video calls. Besides interviews, I carried out an online survey. 53 responses were submitted. I also did social media analysis.

Young Scottish Party Members' Understandings of National Identity

The notion of national identity

First, it is worth noting that several interviewees insisted that national identity is something personal and, then, its definition varies from one person to another. This suggests that there is not something like *a* national identity, but according to these interviewees, there are many national identities as there are many ways of understanding it. In that sense, Alex[1] declared: 'People have different interpretations of national identity'.

It is also worth noting that they often thought the question was a hard one. That was also the case with questions about Scottishness and Britishness. I then tried and put myself in these young people's shoes. I completely agree with them: defining the notion of national identity and one's own national identity is a hard task. Having Michael Billig's banal nationalism theory in mind, I could say that it is difficult because we, people, do not pay attention to signs of nationhood in our everyday life environment and, thus, we never or not very often, to say the least, think of our national identity and what our national identity *is*. It is there, always there, and we are not particularly aware of this. In this regard, Sean said that 'national identity is omnipresent', and Alex highlighted that it is 'subconscious in people's lives'. Obviously, it reminded me of Billig's banal nationalism thesis. Despite their young age, Alex and Sean had well developed ideas of a complex notion like national identity.

One of the most significant conclusions I drew regarding young SNP members is that 93% of the interviewees based their definitions on civic characteristics. 'You live here, work here, doesn't matter where you're from' Josh said. In the same way, Alex defined national identity as '(feeling) connected to the nation, whether that you speak the same language, or you share the same cultural values'. In that sense, national identity is linked with the place where you live, with the notion of residency, but not with the culture and traditions of that place.

Is national identity political, cultural, or both?

I also asked young Scottish party members whether national identity is cultural, political or both. 69% thought it is both.

Most interestingly, statistics varied from one youth wing to the other. I found out that no one in the Labour Party thought it is cultural, 22% of the young SNP members thought so,

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[1] I changed interviewees' names.

but amongst the young Conservatives this rises to 50%. It correlates with the fact that right-wing parties are usually known to be attached to culture and traditions. The difference between young Conservatives' understandings of national identity and those of young SNP members was highlighted by Kate's words: 'Identity comes from the culture of the country where you live'. I showed earlier that YSI and SNP Students members defined national identity as the feeling of being part of the country where you live and choose to live. Here Kate, who is a young Scottish Conservative, adds culture to this idea. She even declares that national identity *originates* from the culture of that country. The emphasis on culture, rather than on the place itself, makes the distinction between young SNP members and young Conservatives' understandings of national identity quite clear.

Statistics about national identity as both political and cultural are significant as well. Again, 50% of the young Conservatives chose that option. But 75% of young Labour members and 72% of the young SNP members did so. In the same way as the relationship between Conservatives and culture and traditions, Labour and the SNP, left-wing and centre-left respectively, are parties which focus on socio-political issues like social justice, equality, fairness, social democracy. Then, it is not surprising to see that a political idea of national identity is more common in SNP and Labour members' minds than in those of Conservatives. So, a major finding here is that the view, the version of national identity depends on political parties but also on party family more generally speaking. An interviewee from the Brexit Party answered the question as follows: 'Both. A very important thing culturally.' Despite saying both, Jamie insisted more on the cultural aspect of national identity. He is a member of the Brexit Party and a former member of UKIP and the Conservative Party, namely right-wing parties. So, it confirms my conclusion regarding the relationship between young party members' perceptions of national identity and their party family. This is to be confirmed by the next section about young Scottish party members' versions of Scottishness and Britishness.

Young Scottish Party Members' Versions of Scottishness and Britishness

Scottishness

Questionnaires
In order to grasp young Scottish party members' understanding of Scottishness, I tried and see if they viewed it in an ethnic way – at least, in terms of blood ties and ancestry – or in a civic way. Here are the results of the online survey:

Scottish if
  - born in Scotland from Scottish parents: SNP 34%, Conservatives 67%, Labour 67%
  - born in Scotland from immigrant parents: SNP 11%, Conservatives 0%, Labour 33%
  - came to Scotland and became Scottish citizens: SNP 39%, Conservatives 0%, Labour 33%[2]

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[2] This was a multiple-choice question, hence the total is not 100% for each option.

I also asked them what characteristics represent Scotland best. I ranked their answers in each political party. Young Conservatives' top 3 is completely cultural. For Labour, Scottish characteristics are cultural as well, but to a lesser extent. As for young SNP members, socio-political values like equality, social justice, fairness and progress in their top 3 enhance their socio-democratic stance. It also suggests that their version of Scottishness is socio-politically oriented.

Interviews

As I said earlier, 69% of the interviewees thought national identity is something both cultural and political.

> 'I think having common values such as internationalism, supporting human rights and freedoms, and being willing to contribute to the welfare of your community are symbols of what it is to be Scottish. Our history, cultural heritage and languages (e.g. Scottish Wars of Independence, Highland Dress, Burns Suppers or speaking Scots or Scottish Gaelic) are also indicators of what symbolises Scotland.' Questionnaire respondent (SNP)

That said, what about the cultural version of Scottishness? 75% of the young Conservatives I interviewed based their definitions on cultural characteristics, 12% of the young SNP members did so, and 0 in the Labour youth wing.

> 'I think even now there's still perhaps a slightly more romantic view of Scotland being something that is very much intrinsic to the union, that kind of Highland scene of a stag and a Scotsman in a kilt with a bagpipe. (…) Even now to me it kind of sums up Scottishness.' Jack (Conservative Party)

Finally, let's focus on the socio-political version of Scottishness. Among the young people who talked about Scottish identity that way, 56% were SNP and 50% were Labour. None of them were young Conservatives. This, again, emphasises the relationship between national identity and party family.

> 'Traditional values of socialism, progress, equality, respect, social security system' Jonathan (SNP)
> 'Not the clichés like kilts, ginger heads, but fairness, openness, being honest' Mark (SNP)
> 'Outward looking, liberal country… too often our national identity is probably perceived to be bagpipes, tartan and people drinking alcohol, but Scotland is a very, very, liberal country now.' Peter (SNP)
> 'Broadly I would say that we are a social-democratic country. Multiculturalism is a part of what we are as a country, diversity shapes our identity, what the country is. There's nothing to do with kilts and bagpipes for sure.' Josh (SNP)

'Open and welcoming place. Not really bagpipes, haggis. More personal. When you come to Scotland, you're Scottish. We're a nation of immigrants.' Liam (SNP)

Britishness

Questionnaires
So as to grasp young Scottish party members' understanding of Britishness, I first tried and see if they viewed it from an ethnic perspective – at least, in terms of blood ties and ancestry – or from a civic perspective. Here are the results of the online survey:

British if
- born in the UK from British parents: SNP 21%, Conservatives 100%, Labour 67%
- born in the UK from immigrant parents: SNP 8%, Conservatives 33%, Labour 33%
- came to the UK and became British citizens: SNP 47%, Conservatives 33%, Labour 33%[3]

I also asked them what symbolises the UK. I'll focus here on some of the most relevant and striking answers:

- SNP
'The Queen, British Empire, Union Jack, Tea, British Rock, the Pub'
'Multicultural, diversity, fish and chips, the monarchy, Westminster'
'Divisiveness'
'Inequality, the remnants of a dying empire'
'Union Jack, Imperialism, Empire, English Defence League, Nigel Farage, Incompetent Parliament'
'Right-wing politics'
'Oppression, colonialist attitudes'
'I think the empire and similar crimes. It is mostly about harking back to the past.'
'The UK is England'
'Outdated system, racism, prejudice, death, no democracy.'
'Not a thing'

- Conservatives
'Freedom, strong institutions, the welfare state, the determination to carry on no matter what'
'The Union Jack. It shows the cultures coming together.'

- Labour
'Democracy, multiculturalism.'
'As a young person, who is a strong supporter of left-wing politics, when considering this question, largely negative symbols come to mind. Having been let down time & time again

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[3] This was a multiple-choice question, hence the total is not 100% for each option.

(Brexit, general elections, austerity) by politics in our country, I honestly view the United Kingdom as a society which is riddled by hierarchy and class, has a huge problem with bigotry and racism & cannot fairly deem itself as a leading democracy.'

These answers highlight a very much political-oriented view of Britishness among the members of the SNP and Labour youth wings. Let's see now if this is confirmed by interviews.

Interviews

Some interviewees talked about Britishness in both cultural and political ways: 38% among SNP members, 17% of the Conservatives, and 67% in Labour.

Significantly, 54% of the young SNP members based their definition of Britishness on socio-political criteria, while 17% and 33% of the young Conservatives and Labour members did so.

My interviews also shed light on the relationship between young party members' understanding of Britishness and the issue of Scottish independence. 100% of the young Conservatives and young Labour members conveyed very positive ideas about Britishness. On the contrary, nobody in the SNP had exclusively positive views of Britishness. Bearing in mind that the SNP are pro-independence and that the Conservative party and Labour are pro-Union, this is not surprising.

Similarly, nobody in the Conservative party and Labour described Britishness from an exclusively negative perspective, while 85% of the young SNP members did so.

'Britishness is nothing to be proud of. It's a union born out of corruption.
Not a very good reputation at all. Very harmful thing. Connotations of harm
and damage.' Matt (SNP)
'Something ageing, something lost and negative' Mark (SNP)
'It's nonexistent. I am ashamed of it.' Magnus (SNP)

These are striking, even harsh and extremely pejorative words. Yet, some SNP members qualified such views.

Besides, 40% of the members of the SNP youth and student wings referred to colonialism and the old British Empire when talking about Britishness. No one did so in Labour and the Conservative party.

Finally, several interviewees related Britishness with Englishness.

The results and quotations above show a clear relationship between the respective stances of the three political parties regarding the question of Scottish independence and their young members' talks about Britishness.

Conclusion

Through empirical research that was recently conducted, this paper enhanced the differences and similarities between young SNP members, Scottish Young Conservatives and Scottish Young Labour members when it comes to thinking of and talking about national identity. The interviews and online survey I carried out showed that young SNP members understand national identity from a civic and territorial perspective. I also found out that young SNP members, and to a lesser extent Labour members, see Scottishness and Britishness through a socio-political lens, whereas young Scottish Conservatives tend to base the definition of their national identity on more cultural views and arguments.

By showing that young Scottish party members' versions of Scottishness and Britishness are closely aligned with their party family, this paper thus suggests a relationship between young people's political colour and ideology, and their national identity.

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