

Education Policy and the SNP Government

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The Scottish National Party formed a minority government in Scotland in May 2007, signalling significant change in the electoral and political landscape of Scottish politics. Because of its minority status, the SNP has relied on its self-presentation as a governing party with capacity for government, but limited by the restricted autonomy of devolution. Through discursive strategies Scotland has been repositioned in a new alignment with selected small social democratic states. A key feature of this discursive shift is the way in which the ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ are defined and referenced in the development of policy including education policy, and this Briefing offers an analysis of the uses of nationalism in education policy.

- ▶ The SNP minority government uses discursive strategies to position itself as a competent governing party and to reposition Scotland by constant ‘referencing outward’ to small social democratic states and by ‘referencing inward’ to selected national practices and characteristics that distinguish it from England;
- ▶ By ‘discursive strategies’ we mean the use of persuasive policy texts to promote particular meanings and attitudes—for example a fluid, inclusive and ‘modernised’ nationalism that combines economic viability and social democratic principles;
- ▶ Education is a key arena of social and public policy of growing importance within the UK and Europe, with growing links to economic and social policy for the knowledge economy and knowledge society;
- ▶ Education policy therefore plays a significant role in the Scottish government’s ‘project’ of modernised nationalism. Through ‘referencing inward’ the government mobilises ideas of public provision, fairness, and the need to address inequalities: through ‘referencing outwards’ ideas of democracy and accountability are mobilised;
- ▶ Constant comparison with selected systems offers a further resource in the SNP’s discursive repositioning of Scotland as a small and potentially independent social democracy.

Introduction: The Political Context

This briefing is framed by political devolution and the establishment of a devolved parliament for Scotland in 1999. Within the UK as a whole, constitutional change has brought added complexity to the policy process (Jeffrey 2009). Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have different forms of devolution. Scotland has a parliament with primary legislative powers and tax varying powers. In Wales in 1999 executive devolution was introduced which offered secondary legislative powers. Following the Government of Wales Act 2006 significant changes have been made to the legislative powers of the Welsh Assembly allowing it a much expanded role in primary legislation (Chaney, 2007). The 2007 coalition deal drawn up between Labour and Plaid Cymru included the commitment to set up an 'All Wales Convention' to review the primary legislative powers of the Welsh Assembly, with the view to holding a referendum on extending its powers. Northern Ireland has a form of devolution rooted in the Good Friday Agreement which stresses power sharing. Plans for English devolution have not progressed. The asymmetric nature of devolution, alongside the vagueness of the legislation which introduced the Scottish Parliament, has led to a complex policy environment (Arnott, 2007). It is within this environment that the minority SNP government operates.

Despite some disappointment with the performance of the new Parliament, considerable trust in the devolved institutions in Scotland remains (Scottish Government, 2008). However, the public in Scotland seem less convinced about the Scottish Parliament's ability to achieve policy change ((Bromley et al, 2005, Curtice, 2008). Survey evidence over the past three years has consistently shown support for additional powers for the Parliament, but support for independence has fluctuated. The task facing the SNP government is to move the political debate on from support for additional powers within the UK to support for full powers (independence) for Scotland.

In forming a government in May 2007, the SNP first attempted a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, but the SNP's commitment to independence proved to be a sticking point. The SNP decided, therefore, to form a minority administration. This political context produces reliance on the strategic use of discursive resources to position the SNP as a governing party with capacity for government, but limited by the restricted autonomy of devolution. The SNP faces two major challenges; firstly to demonstrate competence in government from a minority position, and secondly to build support for independence in order to ensure their long-term agenda (Arnott & Ozga 2009).

The SNP government has employed discursive strategies to connect its programme in office with its need to present an image of what an independent Scotland might look like. Thus there have been two

strands to the independence agenda of the SNP government: the first focuses on the processes of achieving independence while the second discursively constructs the kind of independent country Scotland might be. The policies pursued under the devolved SNP administration are designed to enhance the confidence of those living in Scotland with respect to the ability of Scotland to govern itself while also creating an image or 'imaginary' (Andersen 2006) of independent Scotland.

As well as constraints, principally in terms of its ability to pursue policy change via legislation, minority government offered advantages to the nationalist administration. The policy communities in Scotland, especially perhaps in education, are well accustomed to operating in a policy process which is not dependent on legislation. Non legislative policy making allows the SNP government to build credibility, especially in terms of its day to day ability to govern. Building credibility and trust are central to the strategy of the SNP administration.

The SNP must articulate nationalism in the context of the (increasingly) asymmetrical UK state. Interdependencies between the layers of government are becoming increasingly apparent (Arnott & Ozga, 2009) and this has particular implications for the articulation of nationalism if the SNP is to avoid an impression of lack of realism or nostalgia for less interdependent, and risky policy environments than those that current obtain in market exposed, globalised economies. In the remainder of the briefing, we explore the ways in which the SNP's 'project' of modernised nationalism is being developed in the policy field of education. Education is an arena of social and public policy of growing importance within the UK and Europe, with growing links to policy on health, crime, well-being and also, increasingly, to economic policy. We draw on research conducted in 2008-09 which explores the ways in which transnational pressures created by an emergent global policy field in education were aligned discursively by the Scottish government (TSG) drawing on ideas of nationalism and national identity in education policy to reposition Scotland.

Education and nationalism in Scotland

Education in Scotland has played a particularly strong role historically in the shaping and support of national identity (McCrone, 1992). Research on education policy before the SNP government was formed highlighted pressures for both convergence with and divergence from UK policy. Convergent pressure followed from the fact that from 1999 until May 2007 the Labour Party was in power both in Scotland and at the UK level. From the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 until the second Scottish Parliament elections in May 2007 the Labour Party was the lead partner in a Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition. As a consequence there were common themes in education

policy in both Scotland and England—themes such as choice, privatisation and standards (Arnott, 2005; Croxford and Raffe, 2007). These were sometimes inflected rather differently and as a result policy texts sometimes conveyed an uneasy blending of rather divergent approaches.

However pressures for convergence come not only from UK politics but from the need for education to serve a globally-ordered knowledge economy and enable the development of a knowledge society, transcending national frontiers. Education policy in Scotland reflects shared global policy preoccupations through such requirements as the creation of ‘new’ Scots who are ‘better educated, more skilled and more successful, renowned for our research and innovation’ (Hyslop 2007). Since May 2007 the Scottish government has attempted to tap into the importance of education to national identity in order to produce a particular ‘local’ inflection of the global agenda that contributes to modernised nationalism (Arnott & Ozga, 2008).

Policy Discourse

A discourse of modernised nationalism enables the SNP government to redefine nationalism in ways that stress its fluid, contingent and processual elements, and thus link it to the SNP’s agenda of development towards independence. Nationalism as discourse shapes and supports nationalism as a programme for government. Discourse is not ‘just words’ but has concrete effects: it makes things happen. Policy texts carry definitions of problems, reference particular kinds of evidence and argument, and produce ‘knowledge’ of particular kinds to guide the implementation of policy solutions. We have therefore analysed the work that particular ideas and key concepts do in making and promoting meaning in education policy. Our analysis of key texts (including 28 interviews with policy makers, but also policy documents) identified key terms (for example: nation, economy, social democracy, equality, fairness, wealth, poverty—that formed a ‘cluster’ of concepts. We then looked at the frequency of and interaction between those terms, and the extent to which they were mutually reinforcing and mobilised ideas of ‘modernised’ nationalism.

Discursive Policy Shifts

We have identified three instances of education policy developments and their discursive framing, that connect to ‘modernised nationalism’: firstly, the shift of resources towards very young children and young adults from poor backgrounds, secondly the use of international comparisons of performance, and thirdly the framing of the new policy for higher education.

Referencing Poverty alongside wealth Creation: In the first months of the new government, the dominant discourse in education policy was very much

that of the global ‘knowledge economy’ and skills agenda without much reference to education as a resource for fairness or new forms of national identification. However by December 2007 there is a shift towards problems of poverty and early interventions to more directly address the links between underachievement and poverty. Economic imperatives remain important and are constantly referenced, but alongside the use of education to challenge inequalities and promote fairness. The discursive shift is accomplished by foregrounding the social justice issue (ie Scotland is well-schooled but the poorest pupils do very badly) and invoking a shared idea of Scottish education (as socially just and fair) to displace its meritocratic and academic character. Thus referencing ‘inward’ to particular social democratic elements of the shaping myths of Scottish education promotes a redistribution of resources.

Referencing Outward: repositioning Scottish education: International comparisons are used to reposition Scotland. One of the most powerful forms of international assessment is OECD’s PISA test, which creates league tables of more or less successful nations (see CES Briefing 45 for more details). PISA has been a complex issue politically for the UK, as the OECD originally recognized only one system (ie the UK), but has shifted over time to acknowledge the separate Scottish system, which was entered separately in PISA in 2003 and 2006. Before the SNP election victory, PISA was often used by politicians in Whitehall and latterly in Holyrood to score points in an inter-UK competition for status as best performers in the OECD league. Since 2007, however, the UK—and specifically England—has been displaced discursively in the reception of PISA in Scotland. Other comparators, especially the Scandinavian and Baltic countries, are referenced.

Higher Education: ‘New Horizons’: The final example comes from higher education, and draws on analysis of the Scottish government’s policy text, produced in collaboration with Universities Scotland: ‘New Horizons: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century’. This sets out a shared agenda for Scottish higher education that will ‘optimise and shape the contribution which the Scottish university sector can make during the next 20 years to the Scottish economy, to Scottish culture and society and to the political priorities of TSG’ What is distinctive is the combination of economic imperatives for higher education with social democratic aims and ends, that act to persuade a sceptical and possibly resistant audience, by invoking key (Scottish) principles such as ‘prosperity and opportunities for all’. The universities are characterized by TSG as ‘among the strongest and most vibrant institutions in civic Scotland’ and as key components of cultural identity and contributors to a more enlightened society. The discursive framing of the universities combines their academic excellence,

economic importance and civic and social contributions and responsibilities in ways that seek to use nationalism but in a modernized form, so that references ‘inward’ are combined with allusions to world class quality, and their world class excellence sits alongside their social and civic contributions to Scotland. This framing supports a policy move to persuade the universities to work in new ways: collaboratively and aligned with TSG’s policy priorities.

Conclusions

Policy actors use discourse to foreground certain key ideas and thus restrict or reduce the significance of other competing ways of seeing or thinking about a policy issue. Discourse, in effect, creates and recreates the world by eliminating some possibilities and focusing on others. The SNP government uses discursive resources in ‘referencing inwards’ to mobilise and modernise key elements of nationalism. In ‘referencing outwards’ it also seeks to discursively reposition Scotland, and both forms of referencing present a vision of what an independent Scotland could look like.

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