Parliamentary Affairs (2024) ***77****, 109–128*
Advance Access Publication 28 October 2022
https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsac022

'We Can't Afford to be a Branch Office': The Territorial Dynamics of the British Labour Party, 2015–2019

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Despite having delivered devolution, the British Labour Party has faced significant challenges in adapting to, and competing effectively in, a multi-level political space. This article explores this dynamic in the context of a pivotal period of change (2015–2019), in which the party was led by Jeremy Corbyn, a political outsider, and when British politics was riven by Brexit. In this article we highlight the operation of a key strategic duality underlying the territorial politics pursued by both Scottish and Welsh Labour parties: an endemic and unresolved desire to seek greater autonomy from the UK party, on the one hand: and the preference to retain or gain influence at the centre of British politics, on the other. How these goals were pursued, and tensions between them managed by the territorial parties and their leaders, are central to an understanding of how the party handled the challenges created by devolution more broadly.

Keywords: Brexit, Constitutional politics, Devolution, Labour Party, Territorial politics

1. Introduction

The British Labour Party's response to the introduction of devolution to Scotland and Wales has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis (Hassan, 2002; Bradbury, 2006; Hopkin and Bradbury, 2006; Laffin and Shaw, 2007; Hassan and Shaw, 2012; Bennie and Clark, 2020; Hassan and Shaw, 2019; Bennett *et al.*, 2020; Henderson *et al.*, 2020). However, the Corbyn era has been viewed as a distinct period in the party's history, not least amongst Scottish and Welsh Labour members and representatives, who, when interviewed in the summer of 2019, offered

opposing views on Corbyn's leadership and its impact on the political fortunes of the Scottish and Welsh parties. Some suggested that Corbyn's more explicitly left-wing agenda would help the party regain ground lost to the Scottish National Party (SNP) in Scotland, while others worried that Corbyn and his compatriots were disengaged with the constitutional questions facing the party. Partisans were also divided in how they might respond—cleaving closely to the party's London leadership or seeking a more independent identity and policy agenda.

This article make two distinctive contributions to the debates animating the existing literature on this topic. It asks, first, whether established characterisations of the party's response in the early years of devolution remain apposite in the more recent period, particularly in relation to the Corbyn era (2015–2019)—one of the most turbulent in the history of the party, both because of its radical leadership and the divisive and fraught policy debates that emerged in the wake of Brexit. And second, it picks out and highlights the operation of a key strategic duality underlying the territorial politics pursued by both the Scottish and Welsh Labour parties. This we characterise as: an endemic and unresolved desire to seek greater autonomy from the UK party, on the one hand: and the preference to retain or gain influence at the centre of British politics, on the other. How these goals were pursued, and tensions between them managed by the territorial parties and their leaders, are key to an understanding of how the party overall handled the challenges created by devolution.

2. Comparative perspectives

Important aspects of Labour's experience can be understood in reference to the wider process of party adaptation to the creation of multi-level systems of governance, and particularly those contexts where sub-state nationalist and regionalist parties challenge state-wide competitors (Hopkin and Bradbury, 2006; Fabre and Mendez-Lago, 2009; Maddens and Libbrecht, 2009). As various studies have illustrated, the decentralisation of political power necessitates the 'territorial rescaling of parties', and often results in the 'programmatic differentiation of regional parties from the centre' (Detterbeck and Hepburn 2018). State-wide parties now required to compete in elections in 'the peripheries' often face incentives to develop and display their distinctiveness from their state-level leadership, and these are manifest in their policy programme, the manner in which they communicate with their electorate and changes to branding and visual identity. Their capacity to achieve these degrees and forms of greater autonomy depends both on how constrained they are in organisational terms, and what resources, both financial and political, are available to them. In Belgium, the state-wide parties split in response to sub-state nationalist competition and the federation of the formerly unitary state. And, as this comparative literature attests, attempts to achieve more autonomy from the centre often result in new, territorially rooted intra-party tensions (Carty, 2004).

The UK Labour party is an interesting example of these processes for two reasons. First, it was the primary architect of devolution in the UK context, and is strongly associated with a more positive assessment of devolution than its rival, the British Conservative party. And second, it is, in historical terms, far more centralised than many other European political parties, in both cultural and organisational terms. Prior to devolution, power was concentrated in its main governing institutions, and there was no tradition of providing regional or territorial representation in its decision-making bodies. The Scottish and Welsh parties had their own organisational structures, but minimal autonomy in terms of policy development, and neither had their own leader (Hopkin and Bradbury, 2006).

1.1 UK Labour under Corbyn

The introduction of devolution—by a popular and politically powerful Labour government, following the party's landslide victory at the general election of 1997—triggered a wider debate within the party about whether change was needed to its own structures and organisational culture in parallel with the changes made to the UK's system of governance. But, as various authors have illustrated, these resulted in very few practical reforms in the early years of devolution (Thorlakson and Keating, 2018). New Labour remained primarily committed to securing victory at elections at Westminster and demonstrating its British-wide reach and identity (Laffin and Shaw, 2007). The party adopted what Bradbury (2006, p. 577) calls a 'central autonomy' model as it 'sought to ensure that the devolved institutions did not become locations for peripheral politicians continuing to behave as local politicians, championing peripheral dissidence'. This strategy was tested by conflicts over candidate selection in Wales and friction over policy with the Labour-led Scottish Government in the early years of devolution, but for the most part withstood these pressures. But this became much harder following its major defeat in the 2007 elections at Holyrood which exacerbated tensions between the party at the centre and in Scotland, and then during the course of the 2014 referendum campaign, when relations worsened further still, culminating in the dramatic resignation of the Scottish Labour leader, Johann Lamont, in its aftermath.

By 2015, when a radical outsider figure, Jeremy Corbyn, was elected to the leadership of the UK party, this initial strategy was in disarray, and a pattern of more open political conflict between the 'national'[1] parties and the UK centre had

[1]We have used the language of 'national' parties to refer to Scottish and Welsh Labour. This terminology is imperfect, the central policy body of UK Labour is the *National Policy Council* but after considerable debate, we felt this was the most appropriate language, as both 'local' and 'regional' did not accurately capture the importance of the parties, and describing the parties as a 'branch' of UK Labour has pejorative implications, particularly in Scotland.

begun to emerge, accentuated by differences over strategy and policy in relation to Brexit. Two of the key questions about this more recent period in the party's history—which have as yet received little analytical attention—are (i) whether the advent of Corbyn instigated a different approach to territorial management at the centre of the party; and (ii) if it shaped a different strategic imperative for the party in both Scotland and Wales.

Corbyn's accession to the helm of the British party triggered new forms of internal conflict on a number of dimensions. He was carried to power on the back of a large and active grassroots movement, which resulted in considerable conflict within the parliamentary party, and between his activist supporters and some moderate MPs. His position on Brexit, which was out of kilter with the majority of party members and political representatives, created a different axis of internal political conflict (cf Pike and Diamond, 2021; Heppell, 2021; Ward, 2022).

But the territorial dimensions of Labour's internal politics under Corbyn has been given little attention in this literature, an omission we seek to rectify. We pay primary attention to the calculations and behaviour of elite figures in the party, both centrally and in the devolved nations, and these themes were the main focus of the set of interviews we conducted. We carried out 36 semi-structured interviews between February and September 2019 with senior Labour politicians and advisors operating in Scotland, Wales and Westminster[2]. In selecting interview subjects, we sought to balance those who had been supportive of Corbyn's leadership and those more critical, teasing out some of the main differences and dynamics within the party's territorial politics in this period. We have combined the key insights from these interviews with an evaluation of manifestos, party documents and public statements by Labour politicians. Overall, we have sought to identify the most salient, strategic concerns of both the 'national' and UK Labour parties during this period, capturing the internal dynamics within each.

Based upon our analysis of these materials, we identify the salience and force of two particular territorial–political imperatives for the 'national' parties in these years: the desire for devolved leaders to signal and exercise autonomy from the party at the centre, on the one hand; and the ambition to exercise influence over the central party's policy development and strategic direction—an impulse which might at times lead to an attempt at closer accommodation with the party's leadership, on the other. We find that these countervailing dynamics—one centrifugal and the other centripetal—are integral to an understanding of the political dilemmas facing Labour's leaderships in both Scotland and Wales during this period.

[2]These interviews were not recorded, and we agreed to respect the anonymity of participants in order to ensure their candour. The title of each interviewee is included, insofar as doing so would not reveal their identity.

Corbyn's leadership, and the factionally rooted conflicts it generated—worked along a horizontal dimension within the party, and at times cut across differences between the 'national' parties and the centre. His seemingly lacklustre approach to the EU referendum campaign in 2016 (reflective of his own Eurosceptic sympathies), and reluctance to pivot towards support for a second referendum on Brexit—the preferred position of most party members and MPs—generated tensions right across the party. And after 2015, there were far fewer Labour representatives from Scotland in Westminster, and while Welsh Labour had a more established presence, it had no senior figures who carried influence within the Corbyn leadership group.

But this was not the only major political cleavage within the party in this period. Brexit created a number of other dilemmas of policy and strategy. And in both Wales and Scotland—though especially in the latter case—domestic constitutional issues returned to the fore as a consequence of the Brexit vote and the deep disagreements between the devolved governments and the central government which it unearthed.

Within the 'national' parties, there were significant changes in leadership during this period, and the degree to which leaders were aligned with Corbyn became an important political factor. Both Kezia Dugdale (2015–2017) and Carwyn Jones (2009–2018) were succeeded by leaders who were widely viewed as more natural allies of the new UK leadership. For the devolved party, closer association with Corbyn offered some potential political benefits but these were always offset by potential liabilities. He was regarded by many as a figure with roots in metropolitan London politics, and no discernible record of interest or engagement in issues relevant to the territorial constitution or devolved government. A search of Hansard reveals that the future Labour leader made no mention of devolution during his tenure as a backbench MP, and only passing mention of Scotland and Wales[3]. Northern Ireland was an exception, but his former close association with Irish Republicanism opened him to considerable criticism from opponents (Dixon, 2018, p. 103).

After the departure of Dugdale, the Scottish party chose a leadership more amenable to the Corbynite agenda, in the form of Richard Leonard as leader, and Neil Findlay as his deputy. Findlay was a key figure, having managed Corbyn's leadership campaign north of the border, and became—in the words of one of our interviewees—the 'umbilical link' between the two leadership camps (Interview, 2019a). The new leadership in Scotland hoped that the Corbynite emphasis on the primacy of class solidarity might provide an effective counter to the appeal

[3]Corbyn did use the word devolved three times between 1983 and 2015 but only in reference to the Greater London Authority (two times) and Northern Ireland. No references to the UK constitutional arrangements were made.

of nationalist sentiments, allowing the party to sidestep pressing constitutional debates (Bennett *et al*., 2020; Brown Swan, 2022). But in resolving one problem—securing a more stable alignment with the UK party—Scottish Labour now encountered another, as internal opposition to the party's subordinate status to London again became a divisive issue. One former senior politician we interviewed expressed the widely held, though rarely publicly expressed, view that Leonard was a 'follower' of Corbyn and would be punished for this stance by the Scottish electorate (Interview, 2019a). Various other Scottish politicians characterised Leonard as 'subservient', warning that 'Scottish Labour is now an offshoot of the Jeremy Corbyn Party' (Interview, 2019f). Members of the party were often openly critical of the Scottish leader and there were attempts by MSPs and MEPs to unseat him as leader in 2020 (Carrell, 2020).

And in Wales, following the departure of Jones—who like Dugdale, was fairly distant from Corbyn's politics—the election of Mark Drakeford appeared to pave the way for closer alignment between the Welsh and UK parties. But he too had to navigate some challenging dynamics affecting the relationship between Welsh and UK Labour. And while he was widely viewed as more Corbyn-friendly in his political disposition, he soon followed Jones in seeking to strike a more independent position for the Welsh party (Interview, 2019b). This was particularly evident in the party's move to back a second referendum in 2019, and decision to campaign for Remain in any future vote.

To shed further light on these dynamics, and the dilemmas for the 'national' parties which they generated, we focus on the parties' responses to them in two distinct realms: (i) the challenges associated with electoral politics for devolved parties and their leaders; and (ii) party organisation and demands for reform. We conclude by exploring the analytical importance of this autonomy/influence duality and ask whether this sheds light on some of the much discussed dilemmas facing state-wide parties in multi-level political systems.

3. Dilemmas of electoral strategy and political leadership

One of the most important triggers for the political turbulence that extended across all levels of the party was the rapid succession of elections that occurred in this period. These contests generated disruptive new conflicts, in territorial terms, over how strategies, and policies for general elections were set. A demand for more input from the devolved parties was apparent in both contexts in this period and was linked to the more difficult and conflictual relationship between the territorial leaderships and Corbyn after the party's fleeting success in the 2017 election.

Overall, the UK party's strategic focus was, as ever, shaped by the imperative to construct an electoral majority at Westminster, a goal which had historically been aided by its dominance in Scotland and Wales. From 2015 assumptions about the

Table 1 Seat share in UK and devolved elections, 2015–2019

	2015 UK	2016	2017 UK	2019 UK General Election
	General Election	Devolved Elections	General Election	
England	206 (+15)		227 (+21)	203 (–59)
Scotland	1 (–40)	24 (–13)	7 (+6)	1 (–6)
Wales	25 (–1)	29 (–1)	28 (+3)	22 (–6)

capacity of the party to win a majority of Scottish seats, in particular began to shift markedly, as is clear from Table 1.

The overriding strategic dilemma for the leaders of the Scottish and Welsh parties was whether it was in their best interests, in electoral terms, to align with, or distance from, Corbyn and his political project. In the Scottish case, these were years of extended political crisis, electoral decline and leadership turnover—irrespective of this shift of approach in London, although its troubles were undoubtedly amplified by this political change. The party reaped some of the benefits of Corbyn's appeal to younger people who had, in 2014, gravitated towards independence, but lost ground among others. Once Brexit emerged as the most salient divide in UK politics, after 2016, and the question of Scotland's constitutional future became more prominent again as a consequence, Corbyn was increasingly viewed by many within the Scottish party as an impediment to Labour's fortunes.

For the leaderships of the Scottish and Welsh parties, elections offered a key opportunity to enhance their standing and position in relation to the centre—outside the arduous process of pursuing organisational reform (which is discussed in more detail below). Even in general elections, when the UK party was clearly in control, there was always an option to focus on devolved issues and steer away from policy questions associated with the wider party. Successive Scottish Labour manifestos highlighted the suite of domestic policies that would be delivered at Holyrood in partnership with a Labour government at Westminster, including free school meals and free bus travel (Scottish Labour, 2019). And, if the 'national' party was in government at the devolved level, as was the case with Welsh Labour, celebrating its own accomplishments was both politically important in its own right and offered the chance to demonstrate its relative distance from the UK party.

But the Scottish and Welsh leaderships had a marginal role, in organisational terms, in determining electoral strategy at the centre. There was a formal requirement for them to be consulted during the manifesto drafting process, and separate versions of this document—with discrete territorial sections included—were published. But the Scottish and Welsh leaderships were largely excluded from any

input into the development of the overall strategy and core contents of the electoral programme. Their primary role, as a senior figure in the Welsh party put it, was to 'devo-proof' proposals coming from the LOTO's office, ensuring they were consistent with the devolution settlements and did not contain any commitments which would become a source of embarrassment or controversy (Interview, 2019b). One analysis of the 2017 manifestos (Bennie and Clark, 2020) reported a striking lack of policy detail on territorial issues, and the 2019 manifesto dedicated just a few paragraphs to Scotland and Wales (Labour, 2019).

In fact, the question of how closely to align with the UK party's electoral programme had emerged as an endemically difficult dilemma since the early days of devolution. But it was now made all the harder by the oscillating political fortunes of Corbyn himself. In the run-up to the 2017 general election, the Welsh party opted to pitch itself as closely allied to London leadership, while emphasising its own distinctive national identity. Leader Carwyn Jones was the public face of the campaign, and he and the Welsh party spoke in positive terms about the potential for working in partnership with London: 'By working together with the UK party, we've brought forward proposals that will make Wales a fairer, more prosperous country—with power closer to the people' (Welsh Labour, 2017). This was one of the few occasions on which it was able to align with some enthusiasm with its UK counterpart in such a campaign. As Huw Irranca-Davis noted:

> 'Other parties may criticise the possible constitutional and electoral confusion from mixing Welsh and British policies and leadership, but you can bet they would be doing the same if they only could use the same chemistry' (2017)

Labour performed unexpectedly well in the 2017 general election, right across Britain, gaining three seats in Wales and regaining six in Scotland, results that raised the prospect that alignment with the centre paved the way to electoral success. Jones stepped down in 2018, and the newly elected Welsh leader, Drakeford (2018), widely viewed as more sympathetic to Corbyn, signalled his recognition that the UK leader had been an asset for his own party:

> We've been very lucky in the Labour Party – we've attracted hundreds and thousands of new members in Wales during the campaign. They haven't joined the Labour Party because of the Welsh experience. They've joined it because of the UK experience.

But this more positive vision of the relationship with the central party was short-lived and had disappeared by the 2019 European Parliamentary election, held despite the UK's vote to exit the EU. As the Brexit crisis of 2018–2019 unfolded, leaders in both Cardiff and Edinburgh broke ranks with London, making the case

for another referendum to be held, and backing a pro-Remain stance in any future election—positions that enjoyed majority support within their own parties.

Following very poor results for both parties in the devolved elections of May 2019, their leaders were driven to place more distance between themselves and London. As Drakeford (2019) put it, 'I can tell you now that my Welsh Labour government will continue to stand up for Wales by campaigning wholeheartedly, vigorously and unapologetically, for Wales to remain in the EU'. And, speaking in September 2019, Leonard joined the campaign for a clearer pro-Remain position from the London party: 'I do think the time has come for clarity on this question, and the Scottish Labour party, the Welsh Labour party takes a similar view that we should be overtly remain' (Scotsman, 2019).

In Scotland, Labour found itself squeezed in this period between nationalist demands for another referendum and a new, more emphatic Conservative unionism. And as questions about nationhood and the constitution became more salient again in Scotland, it became less advantageous to be so closely associated with Corbyn. As one former MP put it to us, 'The present-day Scottish Labour Party is trying to secure a future on the back of Jeremy Corbyn but without a constitutional position, the party will inevitably decline' (Interview, 2019g). And, as a party activist we interviewed bluntly put it, 'Corbyn can't even spell devolution, much less understand or care about it' (Interview, 2019a).

Denied much political room for manoeuvre by debates over a second referendum, senior figures in Scottish Labour fell back on the radical-sounding, but largely undefined, idea of putting the UK on an entirely new, 'federal' footing. According to Bennett *et al.* (2020), those emphasising a federalist platform were overwhelmingly grassroots activists and trade union officials, whereas politicians and advisors were less keen. In Westminster, Baroness Bryan was charged with developing Labour's constitutional offering, but the completion and publication of a report on the subject was forestalled by the 2019 election, and Corbyn's resignation.

More generally during this period, the Corbyn leadership group sought to ensure that its political outlook and policy approach were adopted by all parts of the party, while also showing a readiness—within limits—to provide enough scope for the latter to develop a sense of national identity. And in this respect its strategic preference was broadly similar to the leaderships that had preceded it. Finding a stable equilibrium between these competing aims required significant political effort and judgement on both sides, but was made especially fraught in a period of open constitutional debate and intra-factional conflict. For both Welsh and Scottish Labour, tensions with the centre ratcheted up considerably as calls for a second referendum on Brexit grew louder before the 2019 general election.

Intra-party conflict over Brexit was intertwined with the renewed salience of the Scottish referendum question, as the Conservative government stuck by its

preference to exit the EU on terms that were anathema to the bulk of Scottish opinion. The two issues collided dramatically in the 2019 election campaign as the prospect of a minority UK Labour government reliant upon the support of the SNP—the price for which might be a second referendum—was widely aired. Corbyn was described by one senior politician as 'flippant about independence', and perhaps even in favour of it (Interview, 2019c). And during the course of the campaign, the UK party's deputy leader, John McDonnell, intimated that Labour would be prepared to contemplate offering another referendum on Scotland's independence to secure SNP support for a Labour minority government (The Guardian, 2019). The lack of any consultation with the Scottish party's leadership about this explosive idea confirmed to many in the party that their own views were of second-order concern in London. In an op-ed in *The Herald*, former Scottish Labour communications director Alan Roden insisted that: 'Every time the UK leader ventured north he fluffed his lines on Indyref2, opened the door to another referendum, and handed the Tories ready-made election leaflets' (Roden, 2019). Corbyn was eventually forced to rule out a referendum in the early years of a Labour government—a stance that was deemed insufficiently clear by many in Scotland and provided fodder for Conservative rivals (Scotsman, 2019).

4. Organisational reform

Elections and the dilemmas of political leadership proved to be sites of notable tensions, and some open conflicts, between the 'national' and UK-level party. And so too was the growing demand for organisational reform from below. Could a more separate and autonomous position for the Scottish and Welsh parties be given institutional expression, and could their concerns about diminishing influence at the centre be met in organisational terms? For the London leadership, any such proposals represented a potential threat, particularly in a context of heightened factional conflict. However, one of the most striking features in the party's internal territorial politics during this period was that, whatever the ideological or factional position of the Scottish and Welsh party leaders, they were all drawn to pursue the cause of reform. This was one of the few policy domains in which they could practically—and symbolically—demonstrate their ability to strike a more independent stance from the centre, while also advancing arguments for greater and better representation in Labour's central decision-making structures. This was, in other words, one of the few issue-areas where the goals of autonomy and influence could credibly be advanced, hand-in-hand.

Following the introduction of New Labour's initial devolution reforms, both the Scottish and Welsh parties had been granted the power to elect their own leader, although this position was not formally recognised in the party's Constitution until some while later. After the first set of devolved elections, the

centre loosened its grip a little, allowing the parties on the ground to develop their own policy-making procedures and generate their own election materials for devolved elections.

Following Labour's dismal performance in the 2011 Scottish elections, a 'root and branch' review of party structures was conducted by Jim Murphy MP and Sarah Boyack MSP, who recommended the creation of an elected leader of the Scottish Labour Party and the establishment of a political strategy board to coordinate between and across the party (Murphy and Boyack, 2011). These changes were approved by a special Conference later that year (Hassan and Shaw, 2012, p. 330). Welsh Labour, in power in Cardiff since devolution, had no such equivalent exercise but its leadership was consistently vocal about the need for reform.

Elections aside, organisational change was the central medium through which relationships with the central party were negotiated in this period. In their study of Scottish Labour, Bennett *et al.* (2020) found that this topic recurred regularly in interviews and was addressed at length by party grandees, politicians, advisors, and activists alike. Some of their respondents argued that a reluctance to meet these demands reflected Westminster's ignorance of Scottish politics, whereas others believed that a more deliberate hostility to enhanced powers for the devolved party from current and former Scottish Labour MPs was an important factor.

Under the leadership of Dugdale and Jones, both parties began to air demands for a more fundamental change in their institutional relationship with the centre. In Dugdale's leadership campaign she stressed the need for organisational reform, and reiterated the case, identified by her predecessors, for greater autonomy for the Scottish party. This was in part a response to her predecessor, Johan Lamont's, resignation statement as leader in which she made the resonant accusation that the London leadership, under Ed Miliband, had treated Scottish Labour as a 'branch office' (Foote, 2014). Writing shortly after her election, Dugdale outlined her proposal for change, and submitted it to the parliamentary party at Westminster. She argued for a federal model of party organisation but offered reassurances, saying 'this isn't a break up…a federal solution to our party structures doesn't split us apart, it ensures our unity endures' (Dugdale, 2015). Upon her election, Dugdale successfully secured an agreement with Corbyn to be formally consulted on some policy decisions at the centre, and to be publicly acknowledged by him as the leader in Scotland.

Dugdale's tenure was marked by her concerted focus on party reform, and the direct manner in which she was at times prepared to pursue this objective. Despite some success, Dugdale resigned in 2017, having failed to improve the party's electoral position.

Dugdale was joined in her demands by Welsh Labour leader Carwyn Jones. Following Corbyn's election, both leaders immediately stressed their desire for

more autonomy from the party at the centre. In the 2016 Senedd election campaign Jones sought to make a parallel case for greater autonomy for Welsh Labour:

> It's a Welsh election. This is Welsh Labour, which in terms of policy is autonomous. We develop our own policies, our own laws – there's no influence from London at all'… It doesn't matter who the leader is in London, that's what we've always done. It's nothing to do with Jeremy. (The Guardian, 2016)

But he also found less conflictual ways of establishing a degree of distance from the priorities and approach of the new UK leadership. He was aided in doing so by his position as First Minister, which provided more levers that he could use to demonstrate his quasi-independence. In a 2016 press article he signalled his own more pro-business stance than that of Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell (Guardian, 2016). And in the run-up to the Welsh Assembly elections of 2016—at a time in which the UK party was embroiled in infighting—Jones made clear that the party would emphasise that those candidates standing were representing Welsh Labour, not the UK party (Guardian, 2016).

The Welsh party had already established its willingness to push back against central political direction in the early years of devolution, resisting attempts from London to select a party leader favourable to the Blair leadership, and instead choosing Rhodri Morgan. And it had developed the case for its separate identity and distinctive approach, stressing the 'clear red water' that lay between Cardiff and London (Moon, 2009). Welsh interviewees continually referenced this earlier pattern, with many attributing the party's success to these early, and often quite painful, efforts to establish the party's autonomy (Interview, Welsh Labour MS, 12 June 2019).

Subsequent reforms, including the granting of a place for Scottish and Welsh leaders on the National Executive Committee (NEC), and control over the selection of candidates for Westminster elections, were agreed in 2016[4]. Jones echoed Dugdale in maintaining that these reforms reflected the need for the party to adapt itself to the shifting architecture of British governance: 'As devolution matures across the UK it is right that our structures and politics should seek to match it' (BBC, 2019). But these demands now encountered some scepticism and a degree of resistance from sources close to Corbyn. Interviews we conducted with figures at the centre, including former and current MPs and party officials, elicited the near-universal consensus that organisational reform was a red herring and a

[4]These reforms were promised under Ed Miliband but not delivered before his resignation. The agreed reforms were voted through by quite narrow margins, amidst fears by those allied to Corbyn that this was an attempt to wrest control from the Labour leader (Massey, 2021).

potential distraction for the party. (Interview, 2019h). This approach was reinforced by the new leadership group's focus on winning the battle for control of its upper echelons from rival factional groups. Demands for greater autonomy from below were often viewed as a threat to these efforts.

A parallel development in this period was the focus of both Scottish and Welsh leaders on securing better representation within the decision-making structures of the central party. Their primary opportunities to shape policy development came in the form of their participation in the Clause V meeting, where the party's manifesto content was decided, and the more regular meetings of the National Policy Forum. In several interviews, we heard frustrations at the adequacy and efficacy of these meetings (Interview, 2019*a*,*b*). One Assembly Member recalled a National Policy Forum meeting in 2015, where it became abundantly clear how little her/his colleagues understood devolution, with a senior figure asking, 'When was that devolved? Can we take it back?' (Interview, 2019d).

These issues, however, remained comparatively marginal to the factional politics at Westminster prompted by Corbyn's rise, and to the major policy issues—most notably Brexit—which consumed the attention of representatives there. The reforms to the NEC which Corbyn permitted were perceived by some party members in Scotland and Wales as merely token concessions (Interview, 2019e), and viewed by others through a factional lens: as deliberate attempts to stack the NEC against the leader. And this latter view was shared within the London leadership and among many MPs. These proposals were indeed met with some resistance when they were voted on at the 2016 party conference (LabourList, 2016). The trade union Unite abstained from the vote, calling instead for the Scottish and Welsh NEC seats to be selected by the membership, rather than reserved for the leader or their delegate.

More generally, our interviews unearthed a marked divide between the views of MPs at Westminster, who were largely unsympathetic to complaints about the perceived under-representation of Scottish and Welsh leadership in Labour's decision-making structures, and members of the devolved parliaments who saw this, and the need for greater autonomy, as politically salient. More generally, the question of party reform became an important site for the wider tussle between party HQ and the devolved capitals over the balance between the leeway and flexibility needed by politicians operating at the devolved level and the requirements for British-wide co-ordination of policies and messaging.

Leonard's relatively warmer relationship with the Corbyn leadership prompted a new set of arguments for change after 2018—both from his opponents and also from him—as he too sought to demonstrate his ability and willingness to be more independent from London. In his case, as a more 'approved' Scottish leader, there was more tolerance from the centre for his arguments for more autonomy. Indeed, these were helpfully echoed back by figures in the London leadership, including

UK Deputy Leader John McDonnell who argued, in December 2018, that far from being a 'sub-office of London' the Scottish party 'had a new leadership that's dynamic. They will make the decisions about the future' (Gordon, 2018).

But there were also clear limits to the scope for autonomy that the centre was prepared to accept. There was pushback, in particular, over the thorny issue of whether the re-selection of MPs should be the responsibility of the relevant party or remain under the control of headquarters. In the run-up to the 2019 General Election, the party's NEC overruled a proposal to devolve this responsibility from MS Mick Antoniw, who argued that '…there's a lack of understanding of the fact that Labour's in government of only one part of the UK and that's in Wales and they should pay more attention to that' (BBC, 2019). This proposal was viewed by Drakeford as a straightforward administrative matter, a 'sensible clearing up of the rules' (ITV, 2019) but became the subject of some contention within the UK party leadership. Corbyn rejected the proposal, arguing that the rules on selection had to be consistently applied across different territories, 'as it is a UK wide party operating as a UK group' (BBC, 2019). The nature of the argument he made on what was, for him and his supporters, a highly sensitive and salient organisational issue, was revealing. On issues that mattered politically, the Labour Party was depicted as a single, hierarchical organisation operating within a unified territorial space, not a multi-levelled entity with quasi-autonomous parts operating in very distinct political environments.

Towards the end of this period, in the wake of the UK party's disastrous polling at the 2019 election, the devolved parties' demands for greater control over their own affairs were amplified further, and were accompanied by more radical ideas about the merits of a rupture with the London party. This vision was, for instance, aired by Leighton Andrews, a senior figure in the Welsh party and former Welsh Government minister, who argued for Welsh Labour to separate if the UK leadership persisted in its support of Brexit (Williamson, 2017). His position gained little support at senior levels in the Welsh party but reflected a rising current of opinion which had some gravitational pull upon the party's leadership there.

And around the same time a similar impulse emerged in Scottish Labour circles. Former First Minister Henry McLeish argued for a Scottish Labour Party which is more 'independent of thought' (The Courier, 2019) while MSP Monica Lennon, who would later stand unsuccessfully for Scottish leadership, floated the idea of an entirely new creation: 'Scottish Labour needs to stand or fall by its own decisions. We either continue at the mercy of the UK party's distant structures or we become a party in our own right' (Hutcheon, 2020).

Proposals for separation, made in the context of contentious debates over Brexit and the Scottish party's precipitous decline, echoed debates that had emerged previously within the Conservative party. In 2011, leadership contender Murdo Fraser proposed the formation of an entirely new, centre-right entity, breaking

free from the British party. This stemmed in part from the distinctive history of the Conservatives in Scotland, where they had operated as a separate political organisation until 1966 and have a greater degree of autonomy over policy and selections than their Labour counterparts (Convery, 2014). Scottish Labour's relationship with the UK party was, as Hassan and Shaw (2019) have documented, much more integrated within, and subordinate to, the UK party. However, the successive constitutional and political shocks of these years meant that the same existential questions about the imperative for greater autonomy and questions about the party's identity in the devolved territory rose to the surface, and significant cracks in the historically embedded relationship between the party in Scotland and at centre began to emerge in both of these contexts.

One further point of contention concerned the reliance of the 'national' parties upon UK Labour for financial resources. While publicly available data on this is limited, our interviews confirm that both remain heavily dependent on the UK party for their funding (Interview, 2019h). It has been reported in some quarters that Scottish Labour, in particular, experienced a 65% drop in donations between 2017 and 2018, and the wider party pledged additional assistance in light of further financial hardship in 2020 (Scotsman, 2019; Herald Scotland, 2020).

Throughout this period, the manner in which the 'national' parties' relationship with the centre was organisationally structured, emerged as an issue of considerable political concern, and was the source of a number of private and public disputes between them. Overall, the worse the performance of the Scottish and Welsh parties, in electoral terms, the stronger the argument for measures designed to secure more autonomy, as blame for poor electoral performance was usually shunted onto the centre. These demands were typically channelled towards procedural and organisational questions, and were, at times, actively resisted—especially on sensitive issues such as who should be responsible for managing selection processes for candidates. Corbyn's ascent to the leadership, and the divisions generated by his stance on Brexit, resulted in a notable intensification of the salience of organisational reform in these years as the parties in Cardiff and Edinburgh sought to project their distance from him and his stance on Brexit. But there was a striking asymmetry—as there always had been—between the intensity and salience of these questions in Scotland and Wales, and their marginality at the centre.

5. Conclusions

Our analysis draws attention to two important domains where the fluid and sometimes tense relationship between Labour's 'national' parties and its headquarters played out in these years: the challenges associated with electoral politics; and the politicisation of questions of party organisation and reform. And it leads us to identify the salience and

singular importance of two recurrent political imperatives for the 'national' parties in these years: the ingrained desire to demonstrate, performatively and practically, that the national party was able and willing to gain more independence from the state-wide entity, and the simultaneous wish to have more meaningful input into policy development and strategic direction at the centre. These countervailing dynamics—one more centrifugal and the other more centripetal in kind—emerged independently of some of the factional divisions and policy differences associated with the advent of Corbyn and the continued salience of Brexit as a policy question.

And this focus has a direct bearing upon the two questions we posed at the start of this article: whether this turbulent period instigated a change in established patterns of territorial politics at the centre of the party, or indeed on the part of the 'national' parties. Our analysis lends credence to the view that while Corbyn's leadership had a major impact upon the party's internal factional politics and position within the wider political environment, it did not result in a fundamentally new pattern of territorial politics within the party. In key respects, Corbyn and his allies stuck to the script used by their predecessors in terms of their approach to the management of the parties in the periphery. For all its radicalism on other fronts Corbynism did not involve a serious engagement on the terrain of constitutional policymaking and devolution. Equally, in terms of the leaderships of the 'national' parties themselves, while this period presented some acute dilemmas of strategy and policy, the powerful duality which we observe in their behaviour was not a new creation; it was in essence the same as that which had existed previously. The ultimate challenge, in strategic terms, for both the Scottish and Welsh parties was how to manage the competing imperatives of greater autonomy and more influence. And both settled upon the idea of investing considerable effort in the task of securing organisational reform because this was one of the few domains when it was possible to achieve a degree of alignment between these objectives.

A similar pattern has been observed in the comparative literature on political parties and multi-level politics (Alonso, 2012; León, 2014). Some commentators have explored the tensions that arise for state-wide parties when they seek to manage the competing goals of 'party unity, cohesion and centralisation on the one hand, and diversity and internal decentralisation on the other' (Fabre, 2008, p. 309)—an insight that resonates strongly with the case examined here. The finding that a similar pattern exists in the case of UK Labour, but has gone largely unremarked in scholarship on it, points to the imperative to overcome the exceptionalist tenor of much of the study of British Labour, and to pursue an assessment of its territorial politics within a comparative frame. At the same time, the case study developed here suggests that these challenges are particularly profound for the Labour Party given its highly centralised organisational structure. These pressures, present since devolution, become particularly acute at moments of electoral stress, and seem set to continue as the constitutional questions remains salient.

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council Grant on Between two unions: The Constitutional Future of the Islands after Brexit [ES/P009441/1].

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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