

Runnymede Perspectives

Race and Elections

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Runnymede: Intelligence for a Multi-ethnic Britain

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9. The 2015 Election: BME Groups in Scotland

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As we approach the 2015 General Election, BME electoral participation in Scotland will encounter similar challenges and opportunities as that of the rest of the UK. These include disproportionately lower levels of voter registration amongst some BME groups (EMILIE Research Project, 2009), a concern about satisfaction in electoral systems (Meer and Modood, 2009) and the issue of sufficient levels of ethnic minority representation (Uberoi, Meer and Modood, 2010). Yet Scotland offers an interesting case through which to explore BME political participation in the 2015 election because it is also characterised by three distinguishing features which make direct comparisons with rUK difficult.

Firstly, and in many respects crucially, there is an astonishing lack of quantitative data collection on BME electoral participation in Scotland. This largely stems from the reliance on sample sizes that do not sufficiently take into account the smaller ethnic minority presence in Scotland (discussed below). A typical illustration is the routine ICM Electoral Commission surveys. For its winter 2013 poll, ICM interviewed a nationally representative quota of 1,203 BME adults aged 18+ living in the UK of which just 87 were living in Scotland (Electoral Commission, 2013). This is also true of the 2010 British Election Study (BES) data which despite a bigger sample size of 2,631 (Wave 2), included only 6 people of Indian background in Scotland and 2 people of Pakistani background. Even using the data from the 2010 Ethnic Minority British Election Survey (EMBES) would not yield enough data for Scotland as the Ethnic Minority sample comes to 39 (Heath et al, 2013). Seeking to extrapolate from these kinds of base figures would offer false precision and so we are not able to make meaningful predictions based upon existing quantitative data-sets. In understudying BME voters in Scotland, therefore, the possibility of BME electoral variation remains overlooked.

The second important difference is demographic. According to the 2011 Census, only 4% of people in

Scotland are from minority ethnic groups (compared with around 12% in England). South Asians make up the largest minority ethnic group (3% of the total population or 141,000 people) compared with over 6% in England. This modest number of the largest and most longstanding 'visible' ethnic minority is made apparent when set against the finding that 1.2% (61,000) people record their ethnic group as 'White: Polish' (a more recently arrived group). It is worth noting also how few African Caribbean groups there are in Scotland compared to the number of Chinese groups – an inversion of the trend in England. While the differing ethnic composition in Scotland is centrally relevant,¹ part of the reason that direct comparisons of electoral participation are not easy is that unlike in England where there is some significant BME residential dispersal (across a variety of electoral wards outside the major centres) this is much less evident in Scotland. The electoral concentration of BME groups is significantly clustered in a handful of cities, namely Glasgow City where 12 per cent of the population were from a minority ethnic group, in the City of Edinburgh and Aberdeen City it was 8 per cent and in Dundee City it was 6 per cent. This means that of the 59 Scottish Westminster constituencies, the ethnic minority electorate are only visible in just 16 (5 in Edinburgh, 7 in Glasgow, 2 in Aberdeen and 2 in Dundee). From these constituencies, only Glasgow Central has an ethnic minority population that is significant (around ¼ of the population is non-white).² Indeed, this is the only UK parliamentary constituency in Scotland that has been represented by a BME MP. Mohammed Sarwar who won this seat (then known as Glasgow Govan) in 1997 was the first Asian Muslim elected to the House of Commons (his son Anas Sarwar won the same seat in 2010). One in 59 is lower than the Westminster average of 1 in 43 BME Parliamentarians for the 2010 intake.

Perhaps a starker illustration comes in the form of Local Government. Bashir Maan blazed a trail for all British ethnic minorities by getting elected to

represent Glasgow's Kingston ward for Labour in 1970 (Peace, 2015: 4). However, heading into the 2012 Local Government elections, the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (CRER) report there were just 10 non-white Local Councillors from a total of 1,222 across the country, representing 0.8% of the total. Over half of the elected BME Councillors in Scotland were in Glasgow, meaning that only 5 of Scotland's 32 Local Authorities had minority ethnic representation. Of Scotland's cities, Dundee was the only one other than Glasgow to have any minority ethnic Councillors, with the capital, Edinburgh, having no representatives (Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights, 2012: 6).

This leads more broadly to a third point concerning the question of political representation. The devolution settlement has added a layer of democratic representation and distinct opportunities for ethnic minority political participation. We see this in terms of both the seeking of office, taking part in elections and also the kinds of issues that become subject to political debate. So in addition to 59 Westminster constituencies and 32 council wards, the Scottish Parliament created 79 new constituencies plus 56 through additional member lists. Currently there are only 2 BME MSPs (Humza Yousaf for the SNP and Hanzala Malik for Labour - both representing Glasgow constituencies).

Returning to Westminster, latest polling suggests that the SNP are set to gain the largest number of Scottish seats at the 2015 General Election.³ Ethnic minorities have traditionally been very loyal to Labour but this relationship already became strained with the decision to invade Iraq (Dobbernack, Meer and Modood, 2014). The SNP will be working very hard to persuade even more BME voters that their interests are best represented by the nationalists, irrespective of the way they voted in the 2014 Independence Referendum. A marked feature of that campaign was the visible BME presence and participation, on both sides of the arguments.

While the referendum analysis is still being undertaken, throughout the campaign anecdotal evidence suggested that BME voting intentions were consistent with the wider electorate, though what stood out most was that the Yes campaign had no less traction with ethnic minorities than the No campaign, and BME voices were at the forefront of both sides of the issue.⁴ This was true across all age ranges and markedly amongst young people who are typically viewed as less electorally engaged. In a study with a qualitative sample of 259 ethnic minorities in Scotland, Arshad et al (2014:

12) conclude that there was 'no indication that there is any apathy among [BME] young voters'. One Electoral Commission study has however reported some disparity relating to the ease of access to information on the Scottish referendum. It specifically notes that 'BMEs found it less easy to find information on how to cast their vote in the referendum (78% vs 91%), or on what would happen if there was a Yes vote (49% vs 60%) or a No vote (51% vs 64%) compared to the white Scottish electorate' (Electoral Commission, 2014: 26). Despite the referendum result, the 'Scottish question' is not going away, yet the BME and constitutional issues appear to continue 'to fire past each other' (McCrone, 2002: 304).

The obvious point is that political participation is not simply about electoral participation but about the social and political field in which – in our case – BME groups in Scotland are confident and audible. In addition to the technical questions of participation therefore this has to do with a sense of ownership over what Scotland might be and become. In the words of the late Bashir Ahmed (Scotland's first ethnic minority MSP – of the SNP) 'it isn't important where you come from, what matters is where we are going together as a nation' (Salmond, 2009). Here there is a longstanding trend of self-identification and claims-making on Scottish identities by ethnic minorities (Hussain and Miller, 2006). The important aspect is the subjective confidence and willingness amongst minorities to stake such a claim. Yet it is not clear how stronger claims-making that come with this will be met.

In a recent study of Scottish BME and national identity questions (Meer, 2015), it was noted that Scottish political actors frequently point to a number of boundaries for ensuring integration and pursuing unity. Two examples include the question of multilingualism and multi-faithism. Taking the issue of language first, when the question is raised of bringing other minority languages into the fold, which are more frequently spoken than Gaelic and appear to be taking on distinctive Scottish forms in terms of content and dialect, there is a consensus amongst respondents that Scottish Urdu and Scottish Punjabi could not warrant a status as one of Scotland's national languages. In this assessment, historical multilingualism is seen as a feature of the national identity whereas migrant languages are potentially fragmentary. A more charged illustration, however, concerns the prospects for religious pluralism, especially corporate recognition where the state-church relationship is pluralised. There are some very good reasons to be cautious about seeking to

mirror one religious settlement in the present with something from the past, and it must be stressed that Scottish political actors were positive (often very positive) about the fact of religious pluralism in Scotland. What is interesting in their responses was that each framed the question of formally recognising religious pluralism – as opposed to the fact of religious pluralism – within a register of sectarianism, and therefore resisted it. This is one way in which ‘countries with an inherited ethos of accommodation in relation to old minorities are not predestined to be inclusive of new minorities’ (Kymlicka, 2011: 289).

When authors such as Hanif Kureshi and Salman Rushdie, and politicians including Diane Abbott and Bernie Grant, tackled Britishness in the 1980s they held a mirror up to white British society and asked: ‘Who do you think you are?’ Today it would be impossible to think of the identity of Britain without placing minorities at its core. Something similar is yet to happen to Scottish identity, and political actors will play a vital role in these debates as they unfold.

Notes

- For example, disproportionately high numbers of black African and black Caribbean minorities reside in social or rented housing which can lead to frequent movement and thus a requirement to continually re-register (a problem compounded by the recent move to individual registration). Conversely, there are disproportionately high levels of home ownership amongst some Asian and Chinese communities.
- The total population of Glasgow Central at the time of the 2011 census was 91,257 of whom 69,218 identified as white. The largest non-white group are Asian Scottish/Asian British. <http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk>
- The Election Forecast UK website currently predicts that the SNP will win somewhere between 23 and 51 seats. <http://electionforecast.co.uk/> while the What Scotland Thinks/ScotCen Poll of Polls of voting intentions in Scotland for the 2015 UK general election has the SNP winning 49 seats <http://blog.whatscotlandthinks.org/2015/01/poll-polls-westminster-vote-intentions-19-jan/>
- ‘I may be Muslim but I identify myself as Scottish’: the indyref battle for the Scottish Asian vote’, Herald Scotland, <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/home-news/i-may-be-muslim-but-i-identify-myself-as-scottish-the-indyref-battle-for-the-scottish.23444359>

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