

# Introduction

If you think back, we were seen as doing very well under devolution, as opposed to the Welsh, who were seen to be backward and the Welsh party is now of course ... everyone [says]: 'Oh, look at the Welsh model, that's what you need to learn from.' (Interview with Scottish official 4, 30 November 2012)

All organisations have to adapt to changing circumstances. In the business world, this might be associated with the arrival of new technology or the changing habits of customers. In a similar way, political parties that want to be successful have to respond to changes in society and the policy environment. However, like some businesses, political parties often fail to adapt or decide to pursue what in hindsight turns out to be the wrong strategy. They may continue to flog spools in the era of the digital camera. There is therefore a complicated set of interactions between the perception of the need to adapt and the comfort that may be found in maintaining the familiar status quo. A central question in the study of political parties is how (and how far) they change in response to their environment.

This book is concerned with how this question has played out in two political parties that had to adapt to substantial changes after 1997: the Scottish and Welsh Conservative parties. Reflecting on her 1979 speech to the Scottish Conservative Party conference, Margaret Thatcher remarked that, 'Life is not easy for Scottish Tories; nor was it to become easier' (Thatcher, 1993: 35). The Conservative Governments (1979–1997) were a particularly difficult time for the territorial Conservative Party. In Scotland and Wales, the party suffered a crisis of both popularity and legitimacy that led to the return of not a single Conservative MP outside England at the 1997 general election. The party then suffered the additional trauma of dealing with the implementation of the devolved territorial governments that it had long campaigned against, and which seemed inimical to its conception of unionism. The sub-state Welsh and Scottish branches of the statewide UK Conservative Party both embarked on post-devolution life with a difficult inheritance.

However, the puzzle at the heart of this book concerns their seemingly contrasting fortunes since then. While the Welsh Conservatives appear to have staged a recovery since 1997, the Scottish Conservatives have been much less successful. It has also become accepted wisdom in the Scottish Conservative Party that it has

**Table 1.1** Conservative Party electoral performance in Scotland and Wales, 1999–2011

<i>Election</i>	<i>Members of the Scottish Parliament</i>	<i>Members of the Welsh Assembly</i>
1999	18	9
2003	18	11
2007	17	12
2011	15	14

*Source:* Rallings and Thrasher (2009); National Assembly for Wales (2011); Scottish Parliament (2013).

lessons to learn from its Welsh colleagues. This book seeks to analyse how both parties have adapted to devolution and the reasons why one party may have changed more substantially or in different ways than the other.

The central research question of this book is to ask how the Welsh and Scottish Conservative parties adapted to devolution. In answering this question, I draw on the tools of comparative political science and the existing work on political parties and adaptation. I try to show how the territorial Conservative Party fits into wider debates about the nature of party change and the challenges faced by statewide parties in regional contexts.

### **Multi-level party politics and statewide parties**

A statewide party is a party that competes in elections simultaneously at the central or national level also and across more than one sub-state level. Such a definition would include the UK Labour Party, which competes at Westminster and in Scotland and Wales. However, it would exclude, for instance, the Scottish National Party, which has a presence at both the Scottish Parliament and Westminster, but which does not compete in Wales or Northern Ireland. Statewide parties may thus be distinguished from stateless nationalist or regionalist parties (SNRPs), such as Plaid Cymru in Wales (Hepburn, 2009; Fabre and Swenden, 2013: 343). The Scottish and Welsh Conservative parties are sub-state branches of the statewide UK Conservative Party. It is an archetypal statewide party as it competes in Scotland and Wales, at UK elections, and at a supranational level in the European Parliament.

The sub-state branches of statewide parties face a series of difficult choices in deciding the extent to which they should adapt to multi-level politics. How much should their policies differ from the statewide party? Should they give up influence at the centre for more local autonomy (Van Biezen and Hopkin, 2006; Detterbeck and Hepburn, 2010; Alonso, 2012)? They must also find a coherent way to be both

defenders of the constitutional status quo and champions for regional distinctiveness. These tensions are reflected in decisions about the parties' constitutional structures as well as their policy platform and financial arrangements (Hopkin, 2009; Thorlakson, 2009). Statewide parties must find a balance between emphasising the regional and the national (Roller and Van Houten, 2003).

There are five central reasons why it is important for political scientists to study the behaviour of statewide parties and their sub-state branches (Fabre and Swenden, 2013: 343). First, the trend in most OECD countries over the past 30 years has been one of decentralisation towards sub-state levels of government (Hooghe *et al.*, 2010). While the twentieth century overall may have displayed a trend towards the nationalisation of politics (Caramani, 2004; Chhibber and Kollman, 2004), there is now increasing evidence of decentralisation in the nature of party competition in Western Europe (Hough and Jeffery, 2003, 2006; Johns *et al.*, 2013). In Scotland, for instance, party competition was always different from the UK level and is becoming more so (Miller, 1981; Bohrer and Krutz, 2005). Parties increasingly operate as multi-level organisations that compete in elections with different dynamics and perhaps different party systems in several parts of a state. The study of only a party's 'core' level (Deschouwer, 2003) gives an incomplete picture of its activities, especially when it may face the challenge of competing against regionalist parties at a sub-state level (Meguid, 2010; Toubeau, 2011).

Second, as Fabre and Swenden (2013: 343) argue, 'By shifting the unit of analysis to the region (or the local level), the comparative method can be meaningfully applied to regional party systems and party organizations within the same state.' This allows us to compare strategies for territorial management across parties and different sub-state regions, and across time.

Third, statewide parties perform an important function in linking not only citizens to government, but also policies and governments at the different levels of a state (Filippov *et al.*, 2004; Bolleyer, 2011; Fabre and Swenden, 2013: 343). Statewide parties contribute to the ties that keep a multi-level state together. They also provide the structures through which statewide party leaders attempt to influence sub-state politics and policy. When the same party is in power at a national and sub-state level, statewide parties can also smooth policy coordination or intergovernmental dispute resolution (McEwen *et al.*, 2012). The fact that they are closer to citizens may also help the sub-state branches of statewide parties do a better job of linking citizens to national political decisions (Fabre and Swenden, 2013: 350).

Fourth, statewide parties provide central party politicians and central government with a measure of legitimacy when they take decisions at a national level that have an impact on sub-state regions. Even if a statewide party performs poorly in sub-state elections, the fact of it standing candidates in every area of the country lends it a degree of legitimacy. The structures of the statewide Conservative Party in Scotland also provided, for instance, the forum through which senior national Conservative politicians, such as the prime minister, engaged in the debate on Scottish independence.

Finally, and of central importance to this study, parties operating simultaneously at different levels provide interesting cases through which to explore the nature of party change. Comparisons between parties at the national centre and at the sub-state level also allow us to explore the extent to which national party change affects sub-state parties and vice versa.

### **Devolution in the United Kingdom**

The plurinational nature of the UK's 'state of unions' (Mitchell, 2010) and the strengthening of administrative devolution, particularly in the post-war period, have resulted in UK political parties that to some extent always operated as multi-level organisations. However, the 1997–2001 Labour Government's programme of devolution made the multi-level nature of the political system much more explicit and more urgent. For Bogdanor (2001: 1), devolution is the most significant constitutional reform in the UK since the Great Reform Act in the nineteenth century.

It required all of the UK's statewide parties to reconsider their territorial organisation (Fabre, 2008; Bratberg, 2009). They were forced to negotiate a response to a much more explicit 'regional/national dilemma' (Roller and Van Houten, 2003). Moreover, in the UK, this strategic decision was compounded by the nature of devolution itself. The devolution reforms of 1998 posed as many, if not more, questions as answers (Jeffery, 2007). First, devolution in the UK is quite radically asymmetrical. Not only have different levels of autonomy been granted to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, there has also been no devolution to the regions of England. For Flinders and Curry (2008), this has resulted in a form of 'bi-constitutionality' in which the traditional Westminster rules of the game continue to apply to UK-level elections and government, alongside more consensual approaches in the devolved UK regions. The devolution reforms were explicitly designed not to interfere with the UK centre's ability to take decisions about the governance of England or the UK (Mitchell, 2010; Convery, 2014a).

Second, in this context, the devolution arrangements did not create a federal system of government. Tony Blair in particular was ambivalent about the nature of the reforms he was implementing (see, for example, Ashdown, 2001: 446) and the preservation of the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty lies at the heart of both the Scotland and Wales Acts (1998). However, for Vernon Bogdanor (2009) the effect of devolution has been to create a *de facto* quasi-federal UK. Thus, whilst it is theoretically possible that the Westminster Parliament could still abolish the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, it is almost impossible to imagine the circumstances under which it would do so. Such a decision would likely result in a constitutional crisis that could lead to Scotland leaving the Union. Moreover, the British Government has made it clear that it accepts the sovereignty of the Scottish people on the matter of secession. It recognises Scotland's unilateral right to secede. Compared to other federalised or decentralised states, this is a highly unusual feature

of the UK (Melding, 2013: 11–12). As King (2007: 179) argues: ‘With the coming of devolution to Scotland and Wales [the] single locus of sovereign authority no longer exists. Or, if it does exist, it exists only on paper.’

However, whilst the devolved legislatures (particularly the Scottish Parliament) have substantial *self-rule* powers, the extent of *shared rule* – sub-state government input into national decisions – is extremely limited in the UK (Swenden, 2010). They are allowed considerable freedom on the areas devolved to them, but there are few formal mechanisms for them to influence UK Government policy. Thus, the UK Government attaches no strings to the block grants it gives to the devolved governments. They may spend their money exactly as they choose. Crucially, they are also free to organise their public services in a manner that pleases them. This has led to substantial divergence from policies in England, particularly in the areas of health and education.

Statewide political parties in the UK must, therefore, negotiate the uneven structures of devolution. In particular, for Hazell (2006: 1), England is ‘the gaping hole in the devolution settlement’. For parties whose core level is at the UK and who draw most of their MPs from England, this creates a tricky backdrop for territorial politics. In Jim Bulpitt’s (1982: 144) words, ‘for the Conservative Party the United Kingdom is, and always has been, a particularly difficult piece of political real estate to manage.’

### **The Scottish and Welsh Conservative parties**

In this context, the Welsh and Scottish Conservative parties present an interesting case for comparison. Of all the UK statewide parties, the Conservatives had the furthest to travel in terms of accepting the new devolved institutions. Whilst the party had become adept at deepening and entrenching administrative devolution (Mitchell, 2003), it set its face since the early 1980s firmly against moving any further. All of the other statewide parties, alongside the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru, supported devolution. In 1998, therefore, both the Welsh and Scottish Conservative parties had to carry out an abrupt change in attitude if they were to participate in the new devolved institutions.

Both parties were also haunted by similar ghosts of the past. The legacy (economic, political and mythological) of the Thatcher Governments (1979–1990) and her perceived mishandling of territorial politics cast a shadow over Conservatives in Wales and Scotland. Well into the third term of the Scottish Parliament, Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) were still invoking the memory of the Thatcher Governments to warn about the dangers of Conservative policies (Torrance, 2009: 254). The rapid economic changes of the 1980s and 1990s also had a disproportionate impact on Scotland and Wales due in part to the large concentrations of heavy industry (Stewart, 2009).

Thus, whilst it is a gross exaggeration to suggest that the Welsh and Scottish Conservatives both faced the same challenges in 1997, it would be fair to say that

they started post-devolution life with a broadly similar inheritance: no MPs, a difficult past and new institutions that they had stridently campaigned against. Having both set out with a comparably poor hand to play, their contrasting fortunes since then present an interesting case study to examine how and why they might have responded to different pressures to change. Scotland and Wales might both be considered 'cold climates' for Conservatives (Kendrick and McCrone, 1989; Torrance, 2009).

### Comparing party change

In order to compare the Scottish and Welsh Conservative parties, this study uses an analytical framework derived from the literature on party change and the literature on multi-level party politics. I compare the Scottish and Welsh Conservative parties using a series of drivers and manifestations of change. This book is therefore a qualitative case study. It seeks to understand the processes of change and continuity in the Welsh and Scottish Conservative parties in the post-devolution period. The central question is: how did the Welsh and Scottish Conservative parties adapt to devolution and multi-level politics? Answering such a question requires an in-depth focus on the post-devolution political environment and, most especially, on the people, organisations and ideas that had the potential to drive party change. Only in this way will we be able to isolate and examine the complex social processes that affected these two parties.

We are therefore explicitly concerned with the history of the post-1997 Scottish and Welsh Conservative parties. History matters here for three central reasons (Steinmo, 2008: 127). First, acquiring expertise in certain cases is an essential task for political scientists (Kavanagh, 1991; Gerring, 2001: 122; Tilly, 2006; Burnham *et al.*, 2008: 174). As Tilly (2006: 420) describes, 'Not only do all political processes occur in history and therefore call for knowledge of their historical contexts, but also where and when processes occur influence *how* they occur. History thus becomes an essential element of sound explanations for political processes.'

Second, as Steinmo (2008: 127) explains, 'behaviour, attitudes and strategic choices take place inside particular social, political, economic and even cultural contexts'. Actors are shaped by their surroundings in ways that cannot be explained fully if they are taken out of their temporal setting and treated simply as variables. We cannot hope to fully understand a party's behaviour by simply studying the raw output of election results or counting how many times words appear in manifestos. Although political parties in general have much in common, often their actions can only be explained through detailed knowledge of history, idiosyncrasies and people. Their specificities should not be viewed as a barrier to parsimonious theory building or as a difficult variable to codify and aggregate: they are instead a reflection of complex social realities (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 86; Della Porta, 2008: 207). A case study reaches the heart of these questions.

Finally, actors' perceptions and expectations are themselves shaped by the past (Steinmo, 2008: 128). Political actors are students of political history whose ideas and attitudes are products of their own past experiences and their own interpretations of events. The attitudes in government of Margaret Thatcher and Geoffrey Howe, for instance, were indelibly marked by their experience in Edward Heath's cabinet; John Major's feelings about inflation were influenced by his own personal circumstances; public policy-making in post-devolution Scotland is informed by an interpretation of the Conservative Governments (1979–1997). This book is, therefore, also explicitly interested in the meaning that actors attach to their actions. What to a political scientist may seem like a 'rational' course to follow may be ignored in a political party not only because change is difficult, but also because party elites interpret events and problems differently.

These assumptions about the nature of the research question may be summarised as a historical institutionalist approach. Steinmo (2008: 126) describes this approach as standing between a rational choice institutionalism (which emphasises how rules shape an individual's choices and interpretations of how to maximise personal gain) and sociological institutionalism (which emphasises how human beings naturally follow social norms in pursuing their goals). Instead, it views humans as 'both norm-abiding rule followers and self-interested rational actors. How one behaves depends on the individual, on the context and on the rules' (Steinmo, 2008: 126).

### Outline

The analysis proceeds in three main stages: theory and context; detailed analysis of the Scottish and Welsh cases; and conclusions. Chapter 1 discusses what we know about party change and multi-level politics. It sets out an analytical framework based on a series of drivers and manifestations of change. Chapter 2 then discusses the main changes that occurred at the top of the Conservative Party after devolution. It sets out the statewide context for decisions made at the sub-state level and suggests key developments that may have affected the thinking or environment of the party beyond the centre.

The main analysis begins with consideration of the Scottish case in Chapter 3. This study finds that, until 2014, the main levers of party change were in the hands of elected politicians who chose not to use them. Beyond party organisation, devolution was not a driver of change. Instead, interpretations of electoral performance mattered more than changes in leadership or dominant faction. The 2014 independence referendum forced the party to come to terms with devolution through its own proposals for further powers, but this policy change has yet to extend to any other area. However, in the Welsh case (Chapter 4), significant party change was much more in evidence. In particular, an early change of leadership was a key driver of changes in strategy and policy (although the issue of further devolution always



remained thorny). There were no organisational changes after the initial creation of a more distinct Welsh Conservative Party after devolution, but the party leadership pushed at the limits of their small measure of autonomy.

Comparing the two cases (Chapter 5) reveals that people mattered more than party structures when explaining party change in these two parties. Fundamentally, both parties interpreted their problems differently. On paper, both parties had different levels of autonomy, but in practice party constitutions mattered little here. The enacted party organisation gave the Welsh Conservatives considerable room to innovate and their comparative lack of institutionalisation became an advantage. Finally, we draw the two cases together and consider how they fit into a wider understanding of party change and multi-level politics. What does it mean to be a statewide party in the UK post-devolution and, in particular, post-referendum?