The Scottish Parliament Election 2016: another momentous event but dull campaign

Abstract. *The Scottish Parliament election in 2016 produced two surprising results: it represents a reversal of SNP/ Labour party fortunes so complete that we now take it for granted, but the SNP did not achieve a widely-expected majority; and, the huge surge of support for the Scottish Conservatives was enough to make it (easily) the second largest party. A mistaken sense of inevitability of the result - another SNP majority - helped produce a dull campaign and keep alive the prospect of a second referendum on Scottish independence. This article has four main sections: putting the 2016 election in recent historical context; considering the implications of consistently high SNP support on the constitution; highlighting key issues in the election campaign; and, examining the SNP's policy agenda from 2016.*

Key Words Scottish Parliament elections – Scottish National Party – Scottish Conservatives – Scottish Labour – minority government – Scottish independence

Biography

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Introduction

The Scottish Parliament election in 2016 was momentous, but not entirely for the reasons we expected. The main outcome is the SNP's third victory in a row since 2007, which is likely to keep it in office until at least 2021. The results eclipse the former record by Scottish Labour, which governed Scotland in coalition with the Scottish Liberal Democrats from 1999-2007. The SNP also improved its constituency votes and seats, but lost enough ground in the regional list to deprive it of a second outright majority in a row. Consequently, given such high expectations for the SNP - on the back of its 'landslide' victory in 2011 and thumping win in the UK General Election in 2015 - its third Holyrood election victory in a row can be interpreted as a further indicator of its success but also a sign that its dominance should not be taken for granted. Its *circa*-45% share of the vote was enough to produce a majority in 2011 but not 2016. Further, while the now-predictable decline of Scottish Labour seems almost complete, this time the main beneficiary was the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party which became the main opposition in Holyrood for the first time. The Liberal Democrats have also seen their fall from grace confirmed by a second poor showing which relegates them to the fifth and smallest party in Holyrood.

The historical significance of these trends is difficult to overstate. In the first Holyrood election in 1999 it seemed inevitable that Scottish Labour would be the largest party, with the SNP likely to represent an opposition party well off the pace. The early years were premised on the idea that, with devolution secure, the biggest party could focus on the political reforms associated with 'new politics', combining key measures associated with symbolic politics (including the greater representation of women and participation in politics beyond the 'usual suspects') and substantive policy change. This expectation continued in 2003 but ended in 2007 when the SNP became the largest party by one seat. In 2011, its 'landslide' victory to secure a majority of seats – and trigger a process which led to a referendum on Scottish independence in 2014 – seemed extraordinary (particularly since Holyrood uses a mixed-member-proportional, not plurality, system). Now, in 2016, the SNP has become so dominant of Scottish politics that its majority seemed *inevitable*. This sense of inevitability was bolstered by its showing in the UK General election 2015, when the party that always previously secured a small minority of seats – its highest ever number of seats was 11 (of 71, from 30% of the vote in October 1974) - won 56 of 59 (aided by a plurality system which exaggerated the effect of its 50% share of the vote). By 2016, on the back of several opinion polls, many expected its electoral dominance to be complete (although compare Philip, 2016 with Carrell and Brooks, 2016a).

Consequently, although the change over 17 years is phenomenal, this recent sense of inevitability helped produce a dull campaign. In all other Holyrood elections there was either the promise of novelty (from 1999) or high competition between the two main parties (from 2007), to produce a sense of the high stakes involved. So, we saw meaningful competition to accentuate important differences between parties on key policy issues or portray a party's better vision and image of governing competence. This time we knew that, for the most part, one manifesto counted far more than the rest.

It is also difficult to find evidence of success when the other parties have tried to interrogate the SNP's record in government on issues such as health, education, and policing (Cairney, 2016b). This limitation helped produce, in early post-election commentary, a feeling (albeit with limited evidence) that the SNP didn't need to rely as much on this image of governing competence, since so many of its new members and high number of voters seem to remain enthused more by the implications of SNP electoral success (more constitutional change) than its record in office. SNP spokespeople countered with the argument that the election represents a public vindication of its record. So, we need to wait for detailed analysis on the role of valence politics and, in particular the parties' images of governing competence, which was so central to SNP success in 2007 and 2011 ('most voters thought that the party would do a better job in office than its rivals' - Johns et al, 2013: 158).

Still, this legacy of the 2014 referendum can be found in the election debates in 2016. While the SNP has been looking for ways to keep alive, but postpone, a second referendum, the three main opposition parties continue to describe the SNP as a one issue party or extol the possibilities for policy change already afforded by further devolution in 2015. Of the few substantive issues to be discussed without a referendum frame, perhaps only educational attainment stands out because it is the issue on which First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has asked to be judged (while 'fracking' remains the issue that many in the SNP leadership would like to ignore).

Overall, this election comes with a strong sense of unfinished business elsewhere. In the short term, it has been overshadowed either by UK party politics (in the run up to local and mayoral elections) or the 'Brexit' referendum (June 2016) on the UK's future in or out of the European Union. In the longer term, the SNP's continued dominance keeps the issue of Scottish independence high on the agenda.

The 2016 Scottish Parliament election result

Table 1 highlights the importance of constituency voting and seats to the success of the SNP. Its 46.5% share of the vote translated into 81% of constituency seats, a position offset significantly by the d'Hondt formula which restricted it to 4 (of a possible 56) additional regional seats. Although not entirely proportional, the Mixed Member Proportional system reduced its overall total to just under a majority. It also helped ensure that:

- the Scottish Conservatives - who secured only 7 (9.6%) seats from 22% of the constituency vote – won a slightly greater proportion of seats (31, 24%) than of the vote
- Scottish Labour – 3 (4.1%) of seats from 22.6% of the constituency vote – could offset major (and disproportionate) constituency losses; and
- the Scottish Greens became the fourth largest party.

In contrast, the Liberal Democrats won four of their five seats from well-targeted constituency contests.

Table 1: Scottish Parliament election result 2016

	Constituency	Seats	List	Seats	Total Seats	% Seats
Scottish National Party	46.5%	59	41.7%	4	63	48.8%
Scottish Conservatives	22.0%	7	22.9%	24	31	24.0%
Scottish Labour	22.6%	3	19.1%	21	24	18.6%
Scottish Greens	0.6%	0	6.6%	6	6	4.7%
Scottish Liberal Democrats	7.8%	4	5.2%	1	5	3.9%

Source: BBC News (2016c). Turnout 55.6% (of 4,099,407).

The only clear majority was secured by men. Although the symbolic representation of women in the Scottish Parliament was a key plank of the 'new politics' of Scottish devolution, women continue to secure just over one-third of seats. In 2016, women secured 45 of 129 seats (35%), which compares with 37% in 1999, 40% in 2003, 33% in 2007, and 35% in 2011 (table 2).

Table 2: Women MSPs, by Party, 1999-2016

	1999	2003	2007	2011	2016
SNP	15 (42.9%)	9 (33.3%)	12 (25.5%)	19 (27.5%)	27 (42.9%)
Conservative	3 (16.7%)	4 (22.2%)	5 (31.2%)	6 (40.0%)	6 (19.4%)
Labour	28 (50.0%)	28 (56.0%)	23 (50.0%)	17 (45.9%)	11 (45.8%)
Greens	0 (0%)	2 (28.6%)	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	1 (16.7%)
Lib Dems	2 (11.8%)	2 (11.8%)	2 (12.5%)	1 (20.0%)	0 (0%)
Total	48 (37.2%)	51 (39.5%)	43 (33.3%)	45 (34.9%)	45 (34.9%)

Source: adapted and updated (using figures from Gender Politics, 2016 and Swann, 2016b) from Cairney et al (2015a: 9). Table does not include 'other' parties/ independents.

The number of women in the Scottish Parliament used to depend strongly on the fate of Scottish Labour: the high point of 40% in 2003 was on the back of 28 Labour MSPs representing 56% of its group and accounting for 55% of women MSPs (Cairney and McGarvey, 2013: 106; Cairney et al, 2015a). At the time, it was the only party to 'twin'

constituencies and alternate women/men candidates on the regional list (Mackay and Kenny, 2007: 86-7). Other parties pursued less systematic or effective measures: the Liberal Democrats' were 'half hearted' (Kenny and MacKay, 2013: 8; Cairney, 2011, 30); the SNP had 'an informal rule of thumb that [regional] lists should be more-or less gender balanced' (Mackay and Kenny, 2007: 87), the Conservatives sometimes ensured that women 'were generally placed in favourable positions on the party lists', and the Greens alternated men and women on party lists with uncertain effect (Kenny and MacKay, 2013: 9). Now, as Labour's fortunes have dropped, the decision by the SNP to use stronger measures - including All Women Shortlists for seats vacated by retiring MSPs - (ensuring that 13 of its 17 new MSPs were women) seems particularly important (Kenny and Mackay, 2013; Kenny et al, 2015; Swann, 2016a; on the substantive representation of women, see Engender 2016a; 2016b).

The symbolic representation of other important social groups is more difficult to measure so soon after the election (although the Scottish Parliament recently gained international attention for having three gay party leaders (or co-convenors) among five parties - Cairney, 2016b).

The 2016 result in context: trends since 1999

Scottish Labour had dominated Westminster and local elections in Scotland for decades before the first Scottish Parliament election in 1999 (it also won a plurality of European Parliament seats, but with far lower margins):

- *Westminster* (plurality electoral system). Labour won most Scottish seats in every election from 1959-2010. In 1997, it won 46% of the vote and 56 (78%) of 72 Scottish Westminster seats (Cairney and McGarvey, 2013: 45). The SNP won 22% of the vote and 6 (8%) seats. A similar pattern continued until 2010: Labour dominated Scottish Westminster seats even when the SNP began to win Holyrood elections.
- *Local elections* (plurality until 2003, single transferable vote from 2007). In 1995, its 44% of the vote translated into 613 (53%) of 1155 seats and it remained the largest party until 2007 (Cairney and McGarvey, 2013: 51).

This dominance produced an expectation that Scottish Labour would become the largest party in the Scottish Parliament for the foreseeable future. In that context, the fortunes of Labour and the SNP changed remarkably quickly (table 3). In 1999 and 2003, the main limit to Labour dominance was the electoral system: it won the majority of constituency seats comfortably but few regional seats (it also won most constituency seats in 2007). By 2011, this position had reversed and, by 2016, the regional list was the only thing standing between Scottish Labour and electoral oblivion.

In contrast, by 2011 the SNP achieved a majority of Scottish Parliament seats because the regional element of the mixed-member proportional system (56 of 129 seats) was not large enough to offset SNP dominance of constituency seats. This is a remarkable outcome if we accept the well-shared story that Holyrood's electoral system was 'chosen by Labour to stop the SNP ever the getting the majority it needed to push hard on the independence agenda' (Cairney, 2011: 28), although its effect in 2016 (to stop the SNP forming another majority

government) may help postpone a second referendum. The SNP's success generally continues at the expense of the smaller parties, most of which only secured a major presence in one (2003 election). The exception is the Scottish Green Party which became Holyrood's fourth largest party in 2016.

Table 3: Scottish Parliament Election Results 1999-2016

	Const.	Seats	List	Seats	Total Seats	% Seats
Scottish National Party						
1999	28.7%	7	27.3%	28	35	27.1%
2003	23.8%	9	21.6%	18	27	20.9%
2007	32.9%	21	31.0%	26	47	36.4%
2011	45.4%	53	44.0%	16	69	53.5%
2016	46.5%	59	41.7%	4	63	48.8%
Scottish Conservatives						
1999	15.6%	0	15.4%	18	18	14.0%
2003	16.6%	3	15.5%	15	18	14.0%
2007	16.6%	4	13.9%	13	17	13.2%
2011	13.9%	3	12.4%	12	15	11.6%
2016	22.0%	7	22.9%	24	31	24.0%
Scottish Labour						
1999	38.8%	53	33.6%	3	56	43.4%
2003	34.6%	46	29.6%	4	50	38.8%
2007	32.2%	37	29.2%	9	46	35.7%
2011	31.7%	15	26.3%	22	37	28.7%
2016	22.6%	3	19.1%	21	24	18.6%
Scottish Greens						
1999	0.0%	0	3.6%	1	1	0.8%
2003	0.0%	0	6.5%	7	7	5.4%
2007	0.2%	0	4.0%	2	2	1.6%
2011	0.0%	0	6.7%	2	2	1.6%
2016	0.6%	0	6.6%	6	6	4.7%
Scottish Liberal Democrats						
1999	14.2%	12	12.4%	5	17	13.2%
2003	15.4%	13	11.6%	4	17	13.2%
2007	16.2%	11	13.9%	5	16	12.4%
2011	7.9%	2	5.2%	3	5	3.9%
2016	7.8%	4	5.2%	1	5	3.9%
Other						
1999	2.7%	1	7.7%	1	2	3.9%
2003	9.6%	2	15.2%	8	10	5.5%
2007	3.1%	0	8.0%	1	1	0.8%
2011	1.1%	0	7.7%	1	1	0.8%
2016	0.5%	0	4.5%	0	0	0%

Note: Other includes the Scottish Socialist Party, which won 1 seat in 1999 and 6 in 2003.

Issues raised (or not) in the election campaign: independence

A key talking point was that the Scottish independence referendum in 2014 did not settle the constitutional debate (Cairney, 2015a). Instead, the main opposition parties wove into their 2015 and 2016 campaigns the idea that the SNP will use any election victory to push for a second referendum. Yet, the only plausible trigger, in the short term, relates to the 'Brexit' referendum on the UK's membership of the EU in June 2016: SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon argued that, if most voters in Scotland vote to stay in, and most voters in the UK overall vote to leave, it would 'almost certainly' prompt SNP demands for the second Scottish independence referendum (BBC News, 2016a).

In the absence of this constitutional crisis, is difficult to see how the SNP could justify – and, more importantly, *expect to win* – another referendum within five years of the first. This problem is reflected in the SNP's manifesto and Sturgeon's defence of its vague position. It appears to want to keep independence on the agenda for the long term without proposing a referendum within five years. So, its idea is that, in the absence of a Brexit crisis, the only other prompt is a major and sustained upswing in support for independence: 'the Scottish Parliament should have the right to hold another referendum if there is clear and sustained evidence that independence has become the preferred option of a majority of the Scottish people' (Scottish National Party, 2016: 23). Sturgeon confirmed that this measure would be from opinion polls – 'We would have to see, in a range of polls over a period of time, that independence had become the preferred option of the majority' – but without stating how many polls, what level of support, or how sustained (BBC News, 2016b). The unsatisfactory nature of this position seems reinforced by the SNP's position in 2016: the last referendum was fairly recent, it lacks a strong statement of intent in its manifesto, it now relies on the Scottish Greens (2016: 35) to produce a pro-independence majority, and the Greens' trigger for a second referendum – a petition by maybe 100,000 voters – seems equally vague and problematic.

Use the powers you have, and the further powers you gained

The prospect of a Yes vote in the Scottish referendum prompted the main UK parties to promise substantially greater devolution, before the May 2016 election, to secure a No vote (Cairney, 2015a). So, the *Scotland Act 2016* contains provisions to enhance the Scottish Government's powers, including a greater ability to modify income tax rates and bands and reform some aspects of social security.

This development prompted much debate but no resolution on how to use the so-called 'Scottish rate of income tax' or SRIT (the power to modify income tax rates and bands was devolved in the 2016 Act). What could have been a values-driven discussion about the benefits and costs of raising income tax to fund services, or about who should win and lose from taxation changes, has generally turned into a pedantic and (perhaps deliberately) confusing debate about: the meaning of 'progressive' taxation (Eiser, 2016a describes a rise in SRIT as 'slightly progressive'); the likely income from each 1p change in taxation; and,

the unintended consequences (such as high earners leaving Scotland) of greater higher-rate taxation in Scotland (Eiser, 2016b). Further, since the SNP's victory seemed inevitable, it became difficult to treat the tax plans of the other parties as serious prospects, including Scottish Labour's (2016) planned 1p rise (coupled with compensation for affected low earners), the Scottish Greens' (2016) more radical income and land tax plans, and the Scottish Conservatives' (2016; Carrell, 2016) unfulfilled hopes to reduce it (alongside its proposal to reintroduce tuition fees).

Further, it is difficult to conclude that there would have been more serious discussion if the stakes were higher. Instead, the debate confirmed the important of 'narratives' in politics (Jones et al, 2014). Political parties and their supporters tell simple stories to appeal to the cognitive biases of voters, such as their tendency to trust the messenger of the information rather than the information itself, or reject the arguments of the people that they demonise (Sabatier et al, 1987). So, the SRIT is a tax that very few politicians want to raise, and many would rather show voters the dire effects of other people changing the rate – often with reference to emotionally charged scenarios such as the effect of a tax rise on low paid and hard-working nurses. Further, some debates on forums such as Twitter suggested that key players could not even agree on the best way to present the basic arithmetic of any change. Consequently, the debate was largely about which party leaders could be portrayed most easily as the heroes and villains of the piece, when we knew that very little would change anyway (Cairney, 2016a).

Fracking

Although it is only one case, 'fracking' policy suggests that internal SNP tension may often be as important as the actions of the opposition parties (see Cairney, 2016c). Initially, it introduced a moratorium after some intense competition with Scottish Labour in the run up to the UK General election. Since them, Scottish Labour (2016: 6) has declared an unequivocal opposition to fracking which is only matched by the Scottish Greens (2016: 11; the Scottish Conservatives, 2016: 33 are in favour). Yet the extension of the moratorium – and continued sensitivity within the SNP Government - often seems more to do with the debate within the party that the SNP is struggling to manage (unless, as in 2016, it manages to rule out debate completely at its annual conference). In any case, its current position is now, to all intents and purposes, far closer to the Greens/Labour than the Conservatives because no extraction of fossil fuels could meet the absolute standard it now describes: 'We will not allow fracking or underground coal gasification in Scotland unless it can be proved beyond any doubt that it will not harm our environment, communities or public health' (SNP, 2016: 9).

One party state versus effective opposition: Conservative success, Labour failure

The opposition parties had begun to face an electoral dilemma: do they make an exaggerated complaint that SNP dominance has produced something akin to a one party state, or make a more positive case for the need for a strong opposition? In this election, the Conservative party chose the latter to great effect. Its manifesto presents three remarkably simple messages: we have a strong and charismatic leader, we represent the party that will oppose

most strongly a second referendum on independence (and you should too, because we now have a 'powerhouse Parliament'), and we will provide the strongest opposition to the SNP. Indeed, many of its campaign materials emphasised Ruth Davidson's leadership without mentioning the party's name at all, in part to address the low value of the Conservative brand in Scotland without becoming a separate Scottish party (see Convery, 2012).

In contrast, Scottish Labour suffered again from its association with its parent/UK party, combining: the sense that the Scottish branch does not have enough autonomy to make policy, and its vulnerability to the unpopularity of the UK party (accentuated in the run up to the election by the issue of anti-Semitism - Gardham, 2016).

The Conservative party may also be the first to stress so strongly the value of opposition as an end in itself (in part because it has little chance of becoming the first party). This might help reduce very slightly my sense (Cairney, 2011: 39) that the Scottish Parliament lacks the resources to ensure that opposition parties are effective, even during minority government (when the SNP had 47 of 129 seats) and even if they use committee and plenary proceedings to good effect.

The SNP's policy agenda from 2016: will minority government make a difference?

Nicola Sturgeon decided to lead a minority government almost immediately after the final result (Carrell and Brooks, 2016b). This means that the SNP's manifesto is not the only one that counts, but it is difficult to predict the specific extent to which other parties will play a role. The SNP does not need the support of other parties in the same way as in 2007 when it held 47 seats and relied on the support of at least two parties (or, sometimes, the Conservatives plus Margo MacDonald) to gain a majority. Back then, its minority status produced some actual and anticipated lost votes, prompting it to back the Edinburgh trams project, drop its plans to reform the council tax, lose a vote to introduce a minimum unit price on alcohol, and postpone its bill to produce a referendum on independence.

This time, it will be defeated rarely because a majority opposition would rely on the Conservatives, Labour, and Greens – and it is difficult to think of an issue that unites those three parties against the SNP. For example:

- Labour and the Greens oppose fracking but the Conservatives support it (and pro-development would be secured largely through existing planning powers, not primary legislation).
- Labour and the Greens would support an increase in the upper income tax band, but the Conservatives would oppose.
- The Scottish Conservatives (2016: 9) discuss 'Reversing the Named Persons law' (in the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*) but a successful opposition bill to reverse Scottish Government policy is inconceivable.
- The parties agree broadly on other issues, such as to boost funding for the NHS and reduce the 'attainment gap' in education (which will rely largely on funding and perhaps measures to increase parental involvement, or perhaps reduce the local authority role, which the Conservatives would likely support).

- The SNP needs support to pass its annual budget bill, but only from one party. Further, from 2007-11 this process generally ran smoothly. The exception was 2009, when its bill fell in the first round and passed in the second. The process allowed each party to appear to secure 'concessions', but the changes were largely consistent with SNP policy and produced a marginal change in the budget (Cairney, 2011: 54-6).

Further, key policy outcomes will not depend on outputs from the Scottish Parliament. Instead, they will result from behaviour of many actors in a complex policymaking system, in which the Scottish Parliament generally plays a peripheral role and the Scottish Government only plays one part. This point has major implications to the idea of strong opposition put forward by the Scottish Conservatives.

Effective opposition revisited

The idea of opposition in the Scottish Parliament relates strongly to the language of ambition, high stakes competition, central government control, and accountability through elections (Cairney, 2016d). Parties compete to tell you the transformations they can deliver with Scottish Government powers, the elections are high stakes because much power is held in Scottish central government and, if there is high central control, with major 'levers' of policy change, you know who is in charge and therefore who to praise or blame. So, the dominant message of Scottish Parliament elections is: let's blame or praise the central government because it is in control and has the levers to make things happen.

In contrast, policy studies suggest that ministers can achieve far less in central government. Key phrases highlight the limits to central control and the pragmatic ways in which the centre shares policymaking responsibility with other actors such as local public bodies and 'stakeholders':

- *Policy communities*. Ministers can only pay attention to a fraction of the things for which they are formally in charge. So, they pay disproportionate attention to a small number of issues and ignore the rest. They delegate responsibility for those tasks to civil servants, who consult with stakeholders to produce policy.

- *Governance (not government)*. There is a blurry boundary between formal responsibility and informal influence. A huge number of actors are involved in the policy process and it is difficult to separate their effects. Instead, we often think of policy outcomes as the product of collective action, only some of which is coordinated by central government.

- *Complexity, or complex government*. In complex policymaking systems, policy outcomes seem to 'emerge' from local practices and rules, often despite central government attempts to control them. Consequently, there is a large literature which tries to produce pragmatic responses to deal with the limits to central government control (Cairney, 2012a; 2012b; 2015b; Jordan and Cairney, 2013)

In that context, there are good reasons for central governments to share power and responsibility with other actors, including: civil servants have the capacity, knowledge, and

networks to research and make detailed policies; many public bodies like 'quangos' need to be at 'arm's length' from ministers to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of their public; local governments have their own mandates, often possess a keener sense of the needs of local communities, and can work in partnership with local stakeholders and public bodies to produce long term strategies for their areas; stakeholders provide knowledge and advice on how to deliver policies in specialised areas; and, service users often have profound insights on the public services they receive. So, alongside fighting elections, the Scottish Government tries to produce pragmatic ways to share policymaking responsibility and encourage new mechanisms of accountability: institutional, local, community, service user (Cairney, 2015c).

The main problem is this: it is difficult to reconcile these forms of accountability, partly because the new approaches suggest that the central government is trying to shirk responsibility for its actions. During elections and parliamentary scrutiny time it is difficult for ministers to argue that they should only be held to account in a limited way. Consequently, they play the game of democratic accountability *and* shared responsibility, producing highly contradictory strategies. On the one hand, they pursue things like 'prevention' strategies which encourage relatively hands-off policymaking for the long term in cooperation with local bodies (Cairney et al, 2015b). On the other, they make election promises – for example, on the numbers of police officers, teachers, and nurses they'll employ – and maintain performance management systems (including NHS waiting times targets) to show that they are in charge and making some progress. These actions to achieve short term electoral success can undermine the long term strategies. So, the kind of effective opposition promised by the Conservatives remains to be seen: it should consider a pragmatic approach to hold the Scottish Government to account in a meaningful way but it, like the SNP in government, will face intense pressure to play the game of democratic accountability. 'Strong opposition' will likely mean saying 'no' to SNP policies during legislative debates and playing the blame game in First Minister's Questions.

Conclusion: a momentous event which does not settle the matter

We hold elections and referendums in part to generate a sense of the settled will. Voters choose parties of government and their favoured constitutional settlements. Yet, in 2016, we still retain a sense of unfinished business. The SNP's win, but not majority, helps postpone but not rule out a second referendum on Scottish independence. The next referendum, on the UK's position in the European Union, could prompt a further constitutional crisis in Scotland within two months of the election. In the meantime, or in the absence of crisis, the Scottish Government can use the powers it has, but there is no clear sense of what they are and if the SNP Government has much incentive to use them. Perhaps most importantly, the problems that the Scottish Government would like to solve – such as socioeconomic and other inequalities, and their effect on health outcomes and education attainment – often seem impervious to central government control, regardless of the 'levers' it controls. We elect governments to solve these problems, and blame them if they fail, but without demonstrating the extent to which we can actually hold them responsible in a meaningful way for the policy outcomes of complex systems. The Scottish Parliament election in 2016 was momentous in

terms of party and constitutional politics, but its longer term impact on policy outcomes remains to be seen.

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