Contemporary Scottish Diplomacy: Some Recent and Distant Parallels

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Abstract

The Scottish government under the SNP has frequently employed diplomacy to help secure its strategic goals. In response to this prevalence, this article explores how contemporary Scottish diplomacy compares to three other related forms of diplomacy, drawn from both the recent and the distant past, in the hope that these might pave the way for increased understanding of the Scottish government's actions.

Keywords: Diplomacy, Paradiplomacy, International Relations, Scotland, Medieval, Modern, Brexit, Scottish Independence.

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Scots went to polls this May for the Scottish parliament election, re-electing the pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP), which first came to power in 2007. Within the SNP manifesto was a section on 'Scotland in the World', outlining their foreign policy plans: increased funding for international development, the adoption of a feminist foreign policy, and closer ties to European countries. Diplomacy is nothing new for the Scottish government. On its website you will find a section on international relations, outlining ongoing policies. These include engagement strategies with numerous countries, ministerial visits, a strategic review of Scoto-Irish relations, the promotion of arctic cooperation, running offices abroad, and a commitment to a UN agreement. Yet this enthusiasm for diplomacy seemingly runs contrary to the Scottish parliament's actual powers. When this devolved parliament was established in 1998, international relations were reserved, remaining under Westminster's remit. The existence of contemporary Scottish diplomacy has drawn both academic and non-academic comment. Writing for the website *UnHerd*, for example, Henry Hill has highlighted the tension between Scottish diplomacy and Westminster's powers. Regardless of whether it is right or wrong, Scottish diplomacy is happening, and therefore we should look to debate its objectives, methods and outcomes, not just its existence. Hardly unusual, the SNP's diplomatic actions share common features with other case studies, from both the recent and distant past. Here I highlight three such parallels, exploring diplomacy conducted by other sub-state governments, governments in exile, and medieval figures. These comparisons present innovative ways of interpreting Scottish foreign policy, which future scholars can utilise and build on, paving the way for increased understanding of present-day Scottish politics.

Diplomacy conducted by other sub-state governments and entities is one obvious, relevant comparison. The Scottish government is certainly not unique in having foreign policies. Scholars have taken an interest in the diplomacy of towns, regions and other sub-state nations, such as Wales, Macao, US states and

Japanese islands, to name but a few examples.[1] Whilst there are many potential routes to explore, the theme of *differentiation* might prove particularly fruitful. This is where a sub-state administration pursues diplomatic actions that contrast or counter the foreign policy of the state that the sub-state sits within. For example, during the 1960s the Quebecois government was concerned that the Canadian foreign ministry was unrepresentative of French speaking people and overlooking the Francophone world. Consequently, the government of Quebec addressed this deficit, forging its own ties with French speaking countries, notably signing an agreement on education with France which they hoped would help overhaul their own education system.[2] Alternatively, in the 1980s the US government intervened in Nicaragua, supporting forces that were attempting to oust the ruling Sandinista government. To demonstrate opposition to their own government's foreign policy and to show solidarity with Nicaragua, US cities and towns began twinning with Nicaraguan ones.[3] Today, 32 Nicaraguan municipalities are stilled twinned with a US counterpart.

The Scottish government under the SNP has pursued a similar policy in relation to the European Union (EU), following the Brexit referendum in 2016, which saw the UK collectively vote to leave the EU, but the majority of Scots vote to remain. Whilst the UK government spent the past few years negotiating the state's exit from the supranational institution, the Scottish government has sought to strength its ties with the EU. For instance, the Scottish 2020-21 budget declares that the government's goals include 'ensuring Scotland remains a valued and well-connected nation, despite the UK's decision to leave the EU' and to 'demonstrate our ambition for independent membership of the European Union.' Several types of diplomatic practices complement these goals, such as meetings between members of the Scottish government and European figures. In 2018 and 2019, Scottish ministers made 80 diplomatic trips to European capitals, with Nicola Sturgeon, the current Scottish first minister, meeting with the EU's Brexit negotiator,

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[1] D. Criekemans, 'Regional Sub-State Diplomacy from a Comparative Perspective: Quebec, Scotland, Bavaria, Catalonia, Wallonia and Flanders', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 5 (2010), pp. 37-54.
[2] S. Paquin, 'Identity Paradiplomacy in Québec', *Québec Studies*, 66 (2018), pp. 19-21.
[3] R. Tavares, *Paradiplomacy: Cities and States as Global Players* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 234-35.

Michel Barnier. They have also used the Scottish government's international office in Brussels to network with European officials. One of the last events hosted there prior to the COVID-19 pandemic was a Burns Night VIP supper, attended by representatives from Croatia and Germany, 'as well as MEPs and other high level EU contacts.' Given the focus on the EU, it is perhaps no coincidence that, with a budget of £2,079,000 a year, the Brussel's office receives more funding than any of Scotland's other international offices. Reaching out to the EU, both through rhetoric and diplomatic actions, is intended to smooth an independent Scotland's accession into the bloc. Whilst the EU was cool towards Scottish membership during the referendum on independence in 2014, the SNP hopes that its overtures will encourage the EU to take a more positive stance on the issue. Regardless, their diplomacy can be seen as another example of sub-state *differentiation*, which seeks to counter the UK government's Brexit policy, and work to ensure that Scotland can resume its membership of the EU in the near future.

Another comparison can be made with governments in exile, and the common desire for legitimacy. As noted above, establishing international offices and meeting foreign dignitaries are two tranches of Scottish diplomacy. Including the aforementioned Brussels office, there are eight of these based around the world, often in strategically important locations such as Beijing and Washington. They operate as pseudo-embassies, advocating Scottish interests and strengthening ties with host countries. As for the summits and conferences that Scottish officials have taken part in, these have not only been with representatives of the EU and its member states. A joint heritage initiative involving the Scottish government and five global heritage sites provided Alex Salmond, at the time first minister of Scotland, with the opportunity to meet key Chinese officials and the then Indian prime minister, Manmohan Singh.[4] Likewise, during a trip to North America in February 2019, Nicola Sturgeon met with UN officials as well as the governor of New Jersey.

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[4] A. Clarke, 'Digital Heritage Diplomacy and the Scottish Ten Initiative', *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory and Criticism*, 13 (2016), p. 56.

These tactics echo those employed by governments in exile. One such example of this is the Tibetan Government in Exile, set up in northern India by the Dalai Lama in 1960, with the goal of restoring independence to Tibet following its annexation by China. Like the SNP, it has made diplomacy a central part of its policy plan, establishing pseudo-embassies in eleven cities and organising pseudo-summits between the Dalai Lama and foreign leaders.[5]

Whilst outwardly different, the SNP controlled Scottish government and the Tibetan Government in Exile have similar goals. Both groups seek to assert themselves as the legitimate government of a nation that is currently controlled by another government (although even the most hard-line SNP member would struggle to make the case that Scotland's position within the UK is exactly comparable to the Chinese occupation of Tibet). Thus, these groups appropriate the symbols of statehood. Since diplomacy is traditionally seen as under the remit of state governments, these groups increase their legitimacy by practicing it.[6] The significance of their diplomatic acts are perhaps best demonstrated by their opponents' responses. After Prime Minister David Cameron met the Dalai Lama in 2012, the Chinese government condemned the meeting, stating: 'We ask the British side to take the Chinese side's solemn stance seriously, stop indulging and supporting "Tibet independence" anti-China forces [sic].' Similarly, the UK government has attempted to curtail or limit Scottish diplomacy. For example, then foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt stopped the foreign office from providing consular support for Sturgeon's trips abroad on the grounds she was using them to drum up support for independence. The overlap then between these groups, their goals, and the responses to their diplomatic actions suggest that comparisons between Scottish diplomacy and governments in exile could provide important insight.

Finally, modern Scottish diplomacy warrants comparison with examples of medieval diplomacy. Contrary to more traditional views, scholars argue that

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[5] F. McConnell, T. Moreau and J. Dittmer, 'Mimicking State Diplomacy: The Legitimizing Strategy of Unofficial Diplomacies', *Geoforum*, 43 (2012), pp. 806-08.
[6] P. Jakubec, 'Together and Alone in Allied London: Czechoslovak, Norwegian and Polish Governments-in-Exile, 1940-1945', *The International History Review*, 42 (2020), pp. 468.

diplomacy in the modern world is no longer the sole preserve of the state. Rather, globalisation has caused diplomacy to fragment, with numerous non-state entities forging their own foreign policies. This includes the sub-state governments and governments in exile mentioned above, as well as supranational institutions, such as the EU, and both legitimate and illicit NGOs, such as multinational corporations and terrorist networks. In line with this, scholars such as John Watkins and Jakub Grygiel have called for comparisons between the increasingly "post-state" diplomacy of the modern world and interactions in the pre-state period.[7] Medieval diplomacy was similarly multifaceted, not solely restricted to kings, but involving popes, bishops, magnates, heirs, claimants and exiles, amongst many others.

Whilst there are many possible comparisons, medieval earls are perhaps the most relevant to the modern Scottish government, and particularly the strategy of counterbalancing. Earls were the medieval equivalent of sub-state governments, ruling over territory but subordinate to another sovereign power, in their case a king rather than a state. One such example, who is discussed in my thesis, is Earl Ælfgar of Mercia, a prominent magnate during King Edward the Confessor of England's reign (1042-66). This was a period of instability within England, involving both intra-noble division, and disputes between the magnates and the king. In 1055, Ælfgar, who at the time was earl of East Anglia, was outlawed by the English court. In response, he went to King Gruffydd ap Llywelyn of Wales, and together they led a joint attack on Hereford. The English court caved into this military pressure, and reinstated Ælfgar as an earl.[8] K. L. Maund suggests Ælfgar had already reached out to Gruffydd prior to 1055.[9] Whether the alliance had been prearranged or not, Ælfgar certainly built on it, marrying his daughter to Gruffydd, an event usually dated to c.

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[7] J. Grygiel, 'The Primacy of Premodern History', *Security Studies*, 22 (2013), p. 2; J. Watkins, 'Toward a New Diplomatic History of Medieval and Early Modern Europe', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 38 (2008), p. 5.

[8] 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle' (Henceforth 'ASC'), in *English Historical Documents: c. 1042-1189*, ed. by D. C. Douglas and G. W. Greenaway (London, 1953) (Henceforth *EHD II*), pp. 132-34.

[9] K. L. Maund, 'The Welsh Alliances of Earl Ælfgar of Mercia and his Family in the Mid-Eleventh Century', in R. Allen Brown (ed.) *Anglo-Norman Studies XI* (Woodbridge, 1988), p. 185.

1057.[10] This seemingly put him in a good position. When Ælfgar, now earl of Mercia, was outlawed once more in 1058, we are told he was later reinstated, thanks again to Gruffydd's military backing.[11]

During a period of intra-England disunity, Earl Ælfgar tied himself to a neighbouring king, securing a military ally and safe haven, to counterbalance the domestic division he faced. The Scottish approach to the EU follows a similar rationale. Independence would politically and economically divide Scotland from the rest of the UK, with the potential for a decline in trade being a major cause for concern. The SNP's solution is EU membership. Fiona Hyslop, the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture, responds to concerns about independent Scotland's trade by pointing to the Republic of Ireland: 'Through membership of the EU, independent Ireland has dramatically reduced its trade dependence on the UK, diversifying into Europe and in the process its national income per head has overtaken the UK.' The aforementioned Scottish diplomacy with EU leaders aims to secure Scotland's future membership of the EU, and thus another market that will counterbalance losing access to the UK one. The main difference between this and Ælfgar's diplomacy is that he was forced to seek foreign help due to intra-English disputes, whilst the SNP wants a self-imposed division with the UK, which they will need to counterbalance.

Evidently, whether we like it or not, Scottish diplomacy is a prominent feature of the contemporary international landscape. Consequently, I have highlighted here three relevant comparisons which could improve our understanding of it: the diplomacy of other sub-state governments, governments in exile, and medieval individuals, such as earls. Other modern sub-state governments, such as the Quebecois government, are perhaps the most applicable to the Scottish government given their similar constitutional positions. Although, all three approaches could prove useful for scholars of politics and international relations

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[10] Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History*, ed. and trans. by M. Chibnall, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1969-80), 2, pp. 138-39: A. Williams, 'Ælfgar, earl of Mercia', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004: https://doi-org.ezproxy.nottingham.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/178. Accessed 13 April 2021.

[11] 'ASC', *EHD II*, p. 136.

over the next few years. Having been re-elected, Nicola Sturgeon plans to call another independence referendum once the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, meaning that Scottish diplomacy will likely remain an important subject of analysis, both during a future referendum campaign and in the early days of an independent Scotland.

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