REVIEW

David Torrance. *Ruth Davidson's Conservatives: The Scottish Tory Party, 2011-19*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. Pp. 244. ISBN: 9781474455657 (ePub). £19.99 (PBK/ePub); £90.00 (HC/PDF).

With *Ruth Davidson's Conservatives: The Scottish Tory Party, 2011-19*, David Torrance has perpetuated an immense publishing run on contemporary Scottish politics. With biographies of Nicola Sturgeon, Alex Salmond, David Steel, and George Younger, and a bevy of books on Scotland's constitutional dilemmas since 2014, it has become hard for Scottish politicians to do anything without him writing a book about it. This collection of essays, covering its subject from almost every possible angle, only strengthens the feeling that Scottish political debate has had since 2014: that, as P. G. Wodehouse would have put it, meditations upon the constitution are so plentiful that it is almost impossible to fling a brick in any public place without damaging some seminar on the independence question.

The most striking thing about this collection, both its strength and its weakness, is the disparity between the official subject matter of the book and its real focus—between Ruth Davidson's tenure of the Scottish Conservatives and the development of Scottish unionism during and after the referendum on independence. The consolidation of anti-independence opinion behind the formerly moribund party is plainly what makes this topic worth writing about, and this is confirmed by the dearth of any meaningful comment on the other parts of the title topic—namely, the first three years of Ruth Davidson's leadership preceding the independence referendum, and Davidson herself. On the latter point, what is there really to say? Aside, I mean, from what Torrance himself states in the first chapter, “Davidson had not contributed ‘any coherent or significant ideas to the intellectual or substantive case for the union’” (p. 30). That is one way of putting it.

The chapters in this book, then, which actually get to the heart of the matter, are those by Mark Diffley, Richard Hayton, Alan Convery, and Gerry Hassan. Diffley shows that the resurgence in

Scottish Conservative fortunes can be firmly dated to the early months of 2016 and the Scottish Parliament elections of May that year. In other words, there was no rallying of unionist opinion immediately after the referendum in September 2014, as there undoubtedly was of nationalist supporters. This is unsurprising—the aggravation of defeat is a far better political mobilizer than the relief of victory. The opening for unionist consolidation came instead after the Scottish National Party had become utterly dominant after the May 2015 British general election, when it was the turn of unionists to feel embattled.

Richard Hayton, meanwhile, reacquaints us with the eminent political scientist Jim Bulpitt’s concept of “central autonomy” as the Conservative party’s perennial objective—that is, the maximizing of the British government’s room for manoeuvre in affairs of state, with the fewest restrictions possible placed on it by other actors. Although Bulpitt did not live to see the introduction of devolution for Scotland and Wales in 1999, his theorizing of “territoriality” is plainly relevant here. As Hayton correctly says, devolution has brought mixed blessings from this point of view. Of course, the establishment of new representative institutions created new agents who could interfere with Downing Street’s prerogatives, but conversely those institutions had their remits restricted mostly to questions of “low politics” (administration of public services, for instance), rather than the more exhilarating highs of foreign policy, the constitution, and the big questions of fiscal and monetary policy. On this reading, the problem with Brexit is that it has wrecked this distinction between high and low. It is simultaneously a “high” constitutional and diplomatic issue, and immersed in the “low” politics of agricultural subsidies, commercial regulation, and fisheries.

Alan Convery surveys the strands in the Conservatives’ unionist ideology over the past twenty years. Both his and Gerry Hassan’s contribution chart the decline of a Scottish unionism that once “celebrated its Scottish credentials and traditions” (p. 183), down into the miasma of Thatcherite intransigence. The question then becomes how far the party’s recovery under Ruth Davidson’s leadership represents a genuine ideological recovery for unionism as a whole. Here, I think, we come to a problem. It comes naturally to the Scottish intelligentsia to chide Conservatives for “their reluctance to concede any ground to the SNP having prevented them

from thinking imaginatively about the future of the Union” (p. 143). But it is not clear what “thinking imaginatively” about devolution really means (besides devolving ever more powers to Holyrood), nor what good that will really do the union. The 2016 Scotland Act is a case in point—a significant expansion of the Scottish government’s autonomy was swallowed whole by the SNP and then forgotten about. The point, of course, is that the SNP has no interest in being mollified, only in being aggrieved. As long as the nationalists keep the mantle of “standing up for Scotland,” there will be little getting around that. That is why Davidson’s strongest moments in her leadership were not when she was engaged in “thinking creatively” about the union, but when she lambasted the SNP for being obsessed with the independence question to the detriment of the public services that they were supposed to be running.

In other words, if the union is to survive, it is likelier to do so by the independence question going away than by unionists thinking up a way to sell the concept of the UK to Scottish voters. One possibility, unexplored in this collection, is that it is simply not possible to reconstruct the old unionist consensus by rhetoric or reform alone. Perhaps the post-war dispensation did not just go away because Thatcherites decided it should, but because the social institutions it represented—the trade union movement for Scottish Labour, and the Church of Scotland for Scottish Tories—withered away. Both of these rooted their respective parties in Scottish society *and* within a wider ideological framework of British politics.

This book starts with a proviso that it was completed before the British general election of December 2019. And of course, the proviso itself was made before the enormity of the coronavirus pandemic hit us all. Both events seem to have strengthened the SNP’s command of Scottish politics. If that holds true to the Scottish parliament election due in May 2021, the questions this book grapples with will only become more urgent for unionists.

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