

NORDIC ASPIRATIONS: THE SCOTTISH DISCOURSE ON THE NORDIC REGION

Laila Berg

Sammendrag

Siden tidlig 2000-tallet har Norden spilt en sentral rolle i skotsk politikk og nasjonalisme. Med økt politisk makt til Skottland i disse årene, har spørsmålet om uavhengighet fått stadig mer rotfeste i det skotske samfunnet og støtte i den skotske befolkningen. I sammenheng med denne politiske utviklingen har Norden, av sentrale politiske aktører som den skotske regjeringen og SNP, blitt presentert som en rollemodell for Skottland. Denne artikkelen undersøker diskursen om Norden i dagens Skottland. Dette gjøres ved å lese den historiske utviklingen av denne diskursen, samt hvordan den bygger på allerede eksisterende verdier og ideer innen skotsk nasjonalisme, der egalitarisme er ansett som en kjerneverdi. På bakgrunn av denne unike sammenfiltringen er Norden både virkelighet og idé i dagens Skottland, og i det ligger konseptets styrke og motstandsdyktighet.

Nøkkelord

Norden, Skottland, skotsk uavhengighet, diskurs, identitet.

Abstract

Since the early 2000s, the Nordic region has received wide political attention and been presented as a viable and desirable role model for Scottish development by key political and social actors, including the Scottish Government and the Scottish National Party (SNP). The Nordic region is often presented as a role model that offers a vision of an alternative Scotland, which is in line with longstanding Scottish values of egalitarianism, communitarianism, and democracy, and therefore capable of helping steer Scotland towards a brighter future that includes independence. By combining empirical insights with analysis of official publications and public statements, this article will show how the Nordic region is a multifaceted concept consisting of both myth and reality used to reinforce a specific version of Scotland and add strength to the cause of independence.

Keywords

The Nordic region, Scotland, Scottish independence, discourse, identity.

Introduction

In 2017, the Scottish Government issued a policy entitled «*All Points North: The Scottish Government's Nordic Baltic Policy Statement*». The title, which plays with the meaning of north as one of the cardinal directions, simultaneously reflects the central position the Nordic region holds in modern Scotland, namely that of a multifaceted role model offering inspiration and practical example for Scottish political and constitutional development. The Nordic region is therefore both a powerful idea and a tangible political example

that has figured prominently in Scottish political discourse since the (re)establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 and the following decades, which saw a resurgence of Scottish nationalism and the rise of popular support for Scottish independence (Jackson 2020; Newby 2009). Within this context, the Scottish National Party (SNP), the SNP-led Scottish Government, and a number of pro-independence groups and organisations have often expressed the idea that the Nordic region offers Scotland a political and social model worthy of emulation and, importantly, compatible with existing Scottish values and interests.

Official publications issued by the Scottish Government such as the one above, or Scotland's Future 2013, contribute to and offer a specific conceptualisation and narrative of the Nordic region and its relationship to Scotland. In these publications, the Scottish Government seeks to assert its position as a country akin to the Nordic countries, emphasising for instance a shared history, commonality in resources and climate, and, more significantly, similarities in political attitudes and values. Equally, the Scottish Government explicitly expresses a desire for closer collaboration with the Nordic region and portrays the Nordic countries as arenas for Scotland to learn from. In short, the attitude to the Nordic region found in this policy statement, which can also be found in numerous debates, official documents, and informal conversations around Scotland, is both a product and producer of the Scottish discourse on the Nordic region.

This discourse is, as will be shown, deeply rooted in the current expression and negotiation of Scottish national identity and nationhood, which gained significant traction from the early 2000s. While a Scottish political interest and attention to the Nordic region and the Nordic model can be found already in late 1960s, it was, at that time, mostly confined to the circles of the SNP and characterised by fragmented and periodical references to the Nordic countries, focusing primarily on Norway and single issues such as oil-management and fisheries (McCrone 1989; Maxwell 2009; Jackson 2020). From the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, the Nordic region entered the mainstream political discourse, gaining attention from a wider range of Scottish politicians and social commentators, and becoming a meaningful concept for the Scottish public at large. As mentioned, the growth of interest in the Nordic region emerged in the wake of profound political and social changes Scotland had undergone in its recent past. This includes the (re)establishment of a Scottish Parliament in 1999, the growth of public support for Scottish independence and the political party most closely connected to it, the SNP, the culmination of this support in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum as well as the continuing public and political support for Scottish independence and the SNP post 2014 and Brexit.

These wide-reaching developments have led to a state of political and constitutional uncertainty in Scotland, where the previous status quo in which Scotland's membership in the UK was a commonplace has been overturned and challenged, establishing in its stead an active negotiation and the opening up of previously taken-for-granted notions and assumptions concerning Scotland's constitutional status, its political profile and the content and direction of its nationalism and national identity. It is often in times of political and social uncertainty that a need to discursively reimagine, restrengthen and reposition the nation and national identity arise (Therborn 1995; Triandafyllidou 2002). In the

Scottish case, this has manifested in a diverse and active debate concerning Scotland's independence, its nationhood and national identity. An element and strategy within the renegotiation and repositioning of Scottish nationhood has been to search for examples outside of Scotland, and indeed outside of the UK, to provide inspiration and viability to the nationalist cause, a search that has led to establishing the Nordic region as a near unrivalled role model for contemporary Scotland.

The significant position of the Nordic region in contemporary Scotland is the focus of this article, which, more specifically, will examine the discursive construction of the Nordic region in contemporary Scottish political discourse. This political discourse involves several different actors, mainly the political elite consisting of politicians, governmental institutions, social and political commentators, on the one hand, and ordinary Scottish people and grassroots organisations, on the other. Therefore, this article combines an exploration of how the Nordic region is represented and conceptualised in official statements and policies, paying special attention to two publications by the Scottish Government: *Scotland's Future* (2013) and *All Points North* (2017) with empirical examples of everyday conceptualisations of the Nordic region from my 2018 fieldwork from Glasgow and Aberdeen.

Discursive construction of the nation

Scotland has sometimes been described as a peculiar nation by sociologists and historians because it is a nation but not its own state (Nairn 1977; McCrone, Kendrick and Straw 1989). Relating to this, Scottish *nationalism* has at times been described as weak, because as argued by Tom Nairn, it was mainly cultural and not political in its expression and content: «It was cultural because of course it could not be political; on the other hand, this culture could not be straightforwardly nationalist either [...]» (1977, 156). Recent developments within Scottish nationalism and the Scottish independence movement challenge these previous conceptions, clearly demonstrating the political dimension of Scottish nationalism today. Present-day Scottish nationalism has been successful in translating cultural and national beliefs into political action and mobilisation, and in so doing strengthening and renewing Scottish nationalism itself. Scottish nationalism is here understood as the belief in the uniqueness and unity of the Scottish nation, which enables vastly diverse individuals to associate with and join together under a common collective identity, namely the Scottish national identity. The concept of the nation and the logics of nationalism are crucial in order to understand the process by which people engage and associate with the nation.

The nation, according to Benedict Anderson (1983) can be understood as an «imagined political community», that is, a social and mental construct with deep emotional bonds imagined as both limited and sovereign; as exclusive to outsiders yet offering sources of communion, continuity and identity to its members (Anderson 1983, 6). Therefore, the nation is more than a political unit of social organisation; it is also a community of meaning, identity and belonging which today is the main source of identity and identification of others (Anderson 1983, 14–16; Hall 1996; Bechhofer and McCrone 2015). Moreover, Anderson's theory of nationalism (1983) holds that the nation does not simply

exist in the world, ready to be discovered, but must be imagined and invented into existence by those who believe in it (the members of the nation). In order for nations to be meaningful constructs for their members, individuals have to personally identify and associate with their imagined community, and this association and identification can be described as national identity.

National identity is a flexible, relational, dynamic, and malleable category, made up of two interlinked processes of inclusion and exclusion, sameness and difference, which situates the individual in complex and interconnected ways (physically, legally, emotionally, socially) to a particular imagined community (Billig 1995, 8; Jenkins 2014). National identity can further be understood as *narration*: «[...] a story which people tell about themselves in order to lend meaning to their social world» (Ram 1994, 153). These stories and the social worlds they concern are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing, meaning that the stories people tell about themselves adapt to their changing social world, and that their social worlds produce particular types of stories, making some stories less significant, and creating the need for new stories that are relevant to the social context. This implies that what are regarded as meaningful components of a particular national identity, such as Scottish national identity, have not remained solid and fixed throughout time, but have always been and continues to be subject to change and negotiation. Furthermore, the way in which people imagine their nations is precisely what distinguishes different nations from each other: «Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined» (Anderson 1983, 6).

It is therefore necessary to examine the «stories» of contemporary Scotland and Scottishness, as well as the «style» these stories use, in other words, the style in which modern Scotland is currently being (re)imagined. And that, at least since the 2000s, has been by reference to the Nordic region which produces a specific conceptualisation of the Nordic countries as ideal societies, but which also supports and maintains an already dominant view of Scotland as egalitarian and social democratic. The dominant narrative contends Scottish distinction from the rest of the UK not only due to Scotland being a historic nation but also because of its democratic, communitarian and egalitarian cultural traditions and roots, according to which Scottish (historical) institutions and local government have been founded. This legacy is then often used to explain the presumed present-day progressive and egalitarian political views of the Scots, which are set in sharp contrast to the alleged neoliberal values associated with England in particular. Meanwhile, the Nordic region is conceptualised as both similar to Scotland and as better than Scotland because the Nordic region has some elements that Scotland desires but lacks, either in absolutes or degrees, such as independence or extensive social welfare system. Therefore, the Nordic region as role model has aspirational value for Scotland as it both exemplifies and articulates possibilities of a future Scotland. As one of my informants put it: «I believe the Nordic countries offer Scotland a better way of looking at itself» (Berg 2021, 155). The Nordic region is often presented as an ideal which Scotland should emulate and thus articulates and manifests aspects of current Scottish nationalism that are being emphasised, and constructed, or, imagined into existence. In so doing, the Nordic role model helps validate and consolidate a particular and particularly resilient view of

Scotland. As the modern historian Ben Jackson put it, «Scottish independence is as yet only a theoretical project. It rests on a counterfactual – a new Scottish state – the nature of which must be imagined by its proponents in the course of the political debate» (Jackson 2020, 6). The main argument of this article is that the discursive construction and utilisation of the Nordic region as an ideal for Scotland plays a central role in the process of imagining a new Scotland into existence.

Discourse is a central medium through which the nation is constructed and imagined, presented, and interpreted and reproduced to and by the members of the imagined community (Hall 1996; Wodak et. al. 2009). Discursive practices are taken to mean all expressions, whether textual, visual, conversational, symbolic etc. that represent the nation, and through which the nation is constructed and imagined, transformed and negotiated by different social actors (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Wodak et. al. 2009). Such discursive practices communicate, maintain and transform national cultures by invoking and utilising national narratives and origin myths concerning the nation's past, present and future, and in the process construct, affirm and transform the defining elements of the nation, its culture and people (Wodak et. al 2009, 22). In Scotland, as we already have seen and will explore further, the myth of Scottish egalitarianism is presented as a long-standing and defining feature of Scottishness which still dominates the popular understanding of Scotland, although it is often conceptualised as being suppressed by the lack of an independent Scottish state (Hearn 2000; Jackson 2020).

The «story of Scotland» and the Nordic example

Today, the main stories told about Scottishness are those which seek to strengthen a narrative of Scottish nationhood and national identity as egalitarian, social democratic and progressive, and which necessitate independence to actualise and realise fully. Gerry Hassan and Simon Burrows describe this as «the official story of Scotland», which attempts to cast Scotland as

[...] a confident, competent social democracy, increasingly asserting the politics of difference from the rest of the UK, as the British state sinks below a mass of prejudice, xenophobia and plutocratic capture. [...] The view put by many SNP and independence supporters is that 'our nationalism is different': benign, tolerant and inclusive, and welcoming of others including incomers to Scotland. (2017, 19, 24)

In this dominant narrative, Scotland is often presented in oppositional terms to England, where Scottish values of egalitarianism and social democracy are set at odds with the elitism and neoliberalism associated with England. Scotland's active distinction from England, has, according to several scholars, been a historical as well as present-day strategy and feature of Scottish nationalism: «Scotland developed a sense of itself as 'not-England', at the point where regal authority south of the border was flexing its muscles. Not to be incorporated into England required active dissociation» (McCrone 2017, 5). Emphasising Scotland's distinction seems to involve an active dissociation to England

and a reorientation to the Nordic countries. This means that while similarities to England are consistently downplayed, the similarities to the Nordic region are emphasised and amplified in an effort to establish a sense of commonality and connection to the Nordic region as an alternative ally for Scotland. This effort to seek connections with nation-states considered to be similar to Scotland and which are compatible with «the official story of Scotland» (Hassan and Burrows 2017) can be described as the discursive strategy of Scottish nationalism to transform its national profile.

For this reason, few other societies have been as publicly debated, lauded, and presented as possible allies and templates for contemporary Scotland as often as the Nordic countries (Newby 2009; Keating and Harvey 2014). The Nordic region has become the main political role model for modern Scotland, as pointed out, among others, by the Scottish sociologist David McCrone: «[...] the modern model for an independent Scotland has been, at least since the 1960s, the Scandinavian countries rather than Ireland, for example» (1989, 161). In Scotland, references to the Nordic countries are broad reaching and cover an array of issues, including: «education, land ownership, urban transport, green cities, elderly care, NATO, the management of the North Sea oil and gas, local government, the welfare state and Nordic cooperation» (Bryden et. al. 2016, 1). Supporters of the Nordic example in Scotland are equally diverse, and include the Scottish Government, politicians, social commentators, organisations, and ordinary people. The overall narrative presented by these actors is that the Nordic countries are similar to Scotland in all significant aspects except independence, and because of these commonalities, Scotland would thrive if it followed the Nordic example. In the Scottish Government's publication *Scotland's Future* (2013) published ahead of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the Nordic countries combined are referenced 117 times.¹ It is explicitly stated here, that not only are the Nordic countries perceived to be similar to Scotland, but their independence is the aspect which currently limits Scotland from gaining its potential of comparable success of the Nordics:

Looking at neighbouring independent nations, such as Norway and Denmark, it is clear that they enjoy an independence bonus that allows them to deliver fairer societies. They are able to provide more targeted support for families with children and better levels of care for older citizens, and deliver measures to boost their economies, support higher standards of living and create more jobs. These independence gains did not come overnight. They required effort and a focus on what was best for their societies, but *they are a signal of what can be achieved when Scotland too becomes an independent nation.* (Scottish Government, 2013, 59, my emphasis)

The above extract expresses the idea that Scotland could achieve similar political, economic and social success if it followed the Nordic example, which, moreover, necessitates attaining full independence. In addition to the idealisation of Nordic societies, the discourse on the Nordic region also offers a specific conceptualisation of the relationship between Scotland and the Nordic countries. Interestingly, the Nordic region is

¹ Of which Norway is referenced 42 times, Sweden 32, Denmark 31 and Iceland 12 times.

conceptualised and presented as both familiar and distinct; it is similar to Scotland, yet it is different. The similarities Scotland is claimed to share with the Nordic countries are historical connections, geographical position, resources, and political attitudes, while the main difference concerns the Nordic countries' independent statuses. Apart from that, the difference between Scotland and the Nordic region is conceptualised as a matter of degrees, often meaning that the Nordic countries are *more* of what Scotland desires for itself, and thus able, for example, to provide «*more* targeted support», «*better* levels of» and «*higher* standards» (Scottish Government 2013, 59, my emphases). In other words, the Nordic societies are more egalitarian, more progressive and more social democratic, and the reason for this is often credited to the Nordic countries' independence:

Nations that are *similar* to Scotland – such as Norway, Finland, Denmark and Sweden – sit at the top of world wealth and well-being league tables. *Unlike* Scotland they are independent and are able to take decisions in the best interests of their own economies. (Scottish Government 2013, 43, my emphasis)

The strong belief in the idea that Scotland is similar to the Nordic countries underlines the viability of the Nordic example in Scotland. Accordingly, Scotland is presented as sharing a number of significant commonalities with the Nordic countries, as expressed in the 2017 *All Points North* policy:

Scotland enjoys a long history of economic, social, cultural and political engagement with the Nordic and Baltic regions. Our countries enjoy parallels in many respects, based on the northern periphery of Europe with similar topographies, a mixture of urban and rural communities and many similar socio-economic traits. (Scottish Government 2017, 2)

The official standpoint of the Scottish Government is to actively work towards creating strong links to the Nordic and the Baltic countries and to adopt and incorporate successful social policies of these countries, such as for instance the introduction of the «Baby Box» initiative in Scotland, inspired by the Finnish maternity package model first introduced in 1937. For each of the Nordic and Baltic countries, the 2017-policy provides an individual selection of aims to promote closer relationships to each of these countries. In case of Denmark, for example, the Scottish Government states that it seeks to «explore current practice in Denmark around broader social issues, for example Scottish Government officials working on gender recognition in law are keen to look at the approach taken by the Danes» (Scottish Government, 2017, 7).

My own empirical research suggests that such political representations of the Nordic region have had an impact in creating and spreading more awareness and interest in the Nordic countries among ordinary Scots. Most of my informants offered similar perspectives as the above examples, and some also connected their views of the Nordic countries to the active political discourse promoting them in Scotland, as seen here:

And it is impressive when you listen to what they [the SNP] tell us, which is about how smart they [Norway] are with their oil money, and they're saying that

Scotland can do that. So, I guess they kind of make us look east, it's like a utopia or something. (Berg 2021, 172)

The conceptualisation of the Nordic region as a positive role model for Scotland has become dominant, not only with political actors but also, it seems, among ordinary Scottish people. So much so that scholars and social commentators in Scotland have argued that the dominant conceptualisation of the Nordic region offers a romanticised, cherry-picked, and antiquated version of the Nordic region and model based more on the Nordic societies of the 1970s than the current realities of the Nordic countries (Cairney, Harvey and St. Denny 2017, 120; Keating and Harvey 2014; Wooldridge 2014). However, despite the critique, the contemporary view of the Nordic region as an ideal for Scotland remains resilient not due to its accuracy but because it fulfils a need within Scottish nationalism and in particular for contributors to the independence cause to believe that an alternative Scotland is possible. In order to believe that Scotland can achieve independence and become a nation-state in line with its desires of social democracy and egalitarianism, as one of my informants put it, people need tangible examples which show that their dreams are possible and viable:

I think it's [the Nordic example] a useful crutch that the Scottish nationalists use to stand upon because it's important to have a *living example*. I think it's a major part. Yeah, no, cause having an example, tangible physical example to say 'look', that's extremely important. [...] So, *the idea that there's an alternative* or there's perceived to be an alternative, *regardless of what's actually going on over there*, the way it's perceived is that it's great. (Berg 2021, 255, my emphases)

The idea that Scottish political attitudes, values and views are radically different from England but similar to the Nordic countries was a frequent notion within my informant group, and it was offered as a key factor in explaining the appeal of the Nordic region as role model for Scotland. One informant put it as such: «[...] I would say we have in common [with the Nordic countries] is this attitude towards society and the importance of health and education and that the state has a role to play in that. Whereas in England, they tend to be more leaning towards the American ideas» (Berg 2021, 156).

The Nordic region seems to provide a guide and example of the type of society that many Scots aspire to, a notion that my informants clearly expressed: «I think there's a strong recognition that Scotland is a left-leaning country, and that we are looking to create a fairer society, and therefore we are looking towards those Nordic neighbours that have achieved that kind of equitable and fair and happier society» (Berg 2021, 156).

This function of the Nordic region for the Scottish nation-building project is also evident in the numerous presentations of the connection between Scotland and the Nordic countries provided by prominent political figures in Scotland. As the former SNP leader Alex Salmond famously said of Scotland's future: «Scotland can change to a better future and be part of northern Europe's arc of prosperity» (Salmond quoted in Keating 2017, 156). Salmond's successor as First Minister of Scotland and leader of the SNP, Nicola Sturgeon, said the following of Norway as an example for Scotland in 2020:

Norway is a shining example of how small, northern European nations which are independent have been able to use their powers, not simply to improve the lives of their citizens at home but to play a constructive part on the world stage. (Sturgeon 2020)

Social commentators in Scotland have also contributed to establish the now dominant discourse on the Nordic region as an ideal example but also as an aspiration for Scotland. The co-founder of *Nordic Horizons*² – an organisation which aims to promote knowledge and discussion of the Nordic countries in Scotland – Lesley Riddoch, draws connections to all of the Nordic countries in this statement:

Scotland, like Norway, has important oil, gas, hydro and fish reserves. Scotland, like Sweden, has emerged from half a century of solid Labour voting. Parts of Scotland, like Finland, are struggling with a legacy of bad diet; and Scotland, like Denmark, has fully embraced wind and marine energy. (Riddoch 2011)

Evidently, the Nordic region has become a firmly established and significant aspect of the nation-building process in Scotland. Not only that, but the Nordic region represents a specific identity that many actors in Scotland believe to be desirable and advisable for Scotland, a view which, as the empirical examples have shown, is also found among ordinary Scots. However, this significant role of the Nordic region is a relatively recent phenomenon. The next section will explore the trajectory of the Nordic admiration and comparison and examine closer how this tie to Scottish aspirations for an alternative, more Nordic-like Scotland. The current conceptualisation and appeal of the Nordic region can therefore be understood as an expression of the development of Scottish nationalism from the fringes to the mainstream.

Scottish political and historical context: The emergence of a discourse

The emergence of the discourse on the Nordic region in contemporary Scotland is connected to Scottish nationalism and specifically to the process of devolution in Scotland. Central to the devolution cause was the idea that Scotland is a distinct nation which is best suited in governing its national affairs and addressing its own societal issues, an idea which found increasing political support and recognition from the late 1990s and early 2000s. By this is meant the increase in devolved powers to Scotland, as well as the growth of recognition, awareness and support for Scottish political powers and self-autonomy based on the idea that Scotland is a distinct nation which is best suited in governing its national affairs and addressing its own societal issues. The concern with Scottish self-governance, either through devolution or independence, has been present in Scottish politics since the early 1930s (Jackson 2020). However, during the early years of Scottish nationalism, only a minority (such as the SNP) within Scottish society were engaged in questions concerning Scottish self-governance. This would change following developments in, and changes to, British society between the 1960s and 1980s. During this time,

² <https://www.nordichorizons.org/>

Scottish nationalism popularised and reinforced the conviction among the wider Scottish public that the UK government was unfit to manage and protect Scottish interests and rights, and that Scotland politically and culturally was incompatible with the political convictions of Westminster (Hassan and Burrow 2017; McCrone 2017; Jackson 2020).

Scotland was increasingly seen as politically and culturally distinct from England, and the Nordic countries were now being presented as societies similar to Scotland. From the 1970s onwards, the SNP started advocating that Scotland had more in common with the Nordic region than it had with England, thus arguing that the Nordic example was far better suited to Scotland than the political and economic ideals of the UK (Maxwell 2009). The SNP's association with social democracy in the 1970s was thus far more compatible with pre-existing Scottish values, a development that resonated with the Scottish public who were increasingly dissatisfied with, and alienated from, the UK Government (Dickson 1989; Nielsen and Ward 2015). These political attitudes in Scotland were driving the cause for devolution in Scottish society. After the first devolution referendum in Scotland in 1979 was unsuccessful, the creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 was a momentous political and national event and a victory for Scottish nationalism (Jackson 2020).

In many ways, the (re)establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 marked a new era of Scottish politics and nationalism, signalling political growth to Scotland, a collective rise in confidence, and bringing the issue of Scottish self-governance to the mainstream, and along with it, an increased focus on the Nordic countries. With growing domestic powers, the notion of deeply rooted Scottish distinction was now supported by the official institution of the Scottish Parliament, legitimising Scotland's distinction and uniqueness also in legal, pragmatic terms. Another significant development, which occurred in the years that followed, was the rise of the SNP. The SNP, the main advocate of Scottish independence but also of Nordic solutions in Scotland, has been successful in not only becoming a mainstream political party of Scotland, but also in establishing their version of and vision for Scotland as the dominant interpretation. In this version of Scotland, the Nordic region is perceived as its principal role model.

Myths of Scotland and Nordic connections

There is a long tradition in Scotland of conceptualising the Scottish nation and culture as at root egalitarian and democratic, a tendency described as Scotland's proneness to «mythical ideas about itself» (McCrone, Kendrick and Straw 1989, 2–3). Its strongest manifestation is in the notion of Scottish egalitarianism, which due to its near unassailable status, many scholars refer to as «the myth of egalitarianism» (McCrone, Kendrick and Straw 1989; Jones 1992; Hassan 2014). The association of Scotland with egalitarianism has become both omnipresent and unavoidable: «The egalitarian myth permeates political debate and underpins much of Scotland's institutional structures» (Jones 1992, 4). The roots of the notion (or myth) of Scottish egalitarianism are often attributed to Scotland's three longstanding institutions with distinctive features— law, education and religion — institutions which were retained also after Scotland seized to be an independent nation in 1707. The authoritative interpretation of Scotland's historical civil society and its structure has resulted in defining Scottish nationalism as consisting of the liberal values of

democracy, communitarianism and egalitarianism, and these seem to be at the heart of the myth of egalitarianism in Scotland.

The self-image of Scottish nationalism corresponds well with the generally accepted view of the Nordic countries as both social-democratic and egalitarian, but also, more importantly, as independent nation-states. This image of the Nordic region dates back to the 1930s and can be found, for example, in the American journalist Marquis Childs' account of Sweden's political system entitled «*Sweden: The Middle Way*», published in 1936. In this account, Sweden was presented as a unique political system that combined the best of two worlds: economic growth and social welfare; capitalism and socialism. This characteristic would soon be applied to the rest of the Nordic countries, producing the idea of Nordic exceptionalism and consolidating the idea of a unique Nordic model from the post-war period onwards. Since then, the Nordic model and the Nordic region have been widely recognised as comprising a unique and successful political model with distinctive features such as its welfare model, social democratic model of citizenship and its model of government based on social consensus and compromise politics (Bengtsson et al. 2014, 5).

That many in Scotland have turned towards the Nordic countries for both inspiration and legitimation, is therefore not entirely surprising; as Newby put it «In building a nation, few better examples can be found» (2009). By pointing to the Nordic countries as examples of successful social democratic northern nation-states, the proposition that Scotland could flourish in the event of independence is presumably validated. Some of the reasons why such comparisons seem to work or have a convincing power is because the version of Scotland that denotes it as egalitarian and social democratic but unable to fully fulfil these values due to Scotland's membership to the UK, has, as shown, become generally accepted in Scottish society. The Nordic countries thus seem a perfect fit for the task of rebranding and reinforcing the conceptualisation of the Scottish nation as progressive, egalitarian and social democratic in the context of Scotland's modern nation-building.

Scotland's historical links, such as the Viking settlements in Scotland, Scottish trade with the Nordic countries prior to the Union of Parliaments in 1707, and Scottish involvement in the Swedish army, further strengthen the idea of a strong commonality between the two regions (Newby 2009). Many scholars have recognised that the Scottish interest in the Nordic region relates to the conviction of similarities in political alignments and attitudes in Scotland and the Nordic countries (Bryden et. al 2016, 2). This perceived commonality in political persuasions is, meanwhile, related to the self-image of Scottish egalitarianism and the link between egalitarianism to the Nordic societies. The egalitarian myth of Scotland is at the heart of the Nordic comparisons in Scotland and is an explanatory factor in why the Nordic region as role model has found such a strong foothold in Scottish society.

A «Nordic Scotland»

What is particularly interesting about the discourse on the Nordic model in contemporary Scotland is that it likens Scotland to the Nordic countries in a way that presumes the

successes of the Nordic countries to be translatable to Scotland, in the context of having similar conditions. The Nordic region as a role model is thus regarded as a viable path for Scotland because of dominant perceptions in Scottish society that claim significant similarities between Scotland and the Nordic region. These similarities spring out of pre-existing Scottish cultural and political values of egalitarianism, communitarianism, and democracy, which, accordingly, Scotland is said to share with the Nordic countries. An example of this conviction can be found in the statement of the SNP politician George Reid, during the opening of the anniversary of the Nordic Council, held at the Scottish Parliament:

The truth is, that of all the nations and regions that make up the United Kingdom, the Scots – by reason of history, culture, their environment – are probably the most Nordic in character. As a people we are naturally egalitarian and communitarian in spirit. (Reid quoted in Newby 2009)

Scotland's inherent social democratic and egalitarian values and traditions, however, cannot be fully expressed as long as Scotland remains a member of the UK. Therefore, as argued by Alex Salmond (2012): «Independence matters because we do not have the powers to reach our potential». This potential is one of an independent social democratic and egalitarian Scotland which resembles the Nordic countries. Independence is thus presented as the main factor distinguishing Scotland from the Nordic countries, and the factor which has enabled the Nordic countries to create societies built on their egalitarian principles. This understanding of the Nordic region and Scotland's potential presented by the SNP politicians Reid and Salmond are uncannily similar to the accounts of my informants, many of whom also expressed the opinion that Scotland needs independence to achieve its potential and that this potential resembles the Nordic societies: «[...] essentially, we're held back by the mass Conservative vote [of England]. So yeah, I don't think we can fulfil the things that Scottish people want to fulfil because of that union» (Berg 2021, 215). Similarly, another informant said: «Should it [Scotland] eventually become independent, then there would be the opportunity to do that, and I know there is interest in political circles in Scotland in modelling themselves on the Scandinavian example» (Berg 2021, 171).

The Nordic region is a persuasive political role model first and foremost because it intersects with existing dominant notions in Scottish culture, among them the idea of Scottish egalitarianism, which claims Scottish distinction from the rest of the UK, in particular England, and a closer cultural and political connection to the Nordic countries. The global recognition and appraisal of the Nordic model adds weight to the choice of the Nordic countries as role models. The relatively recent attention to the Nordic countries in Scottish society also means that the Nordic region remains a slightly vague and therefore, malleable concept with a layer of mystique. As one of my informants reflected: «There's a certain vagueness to it. [...] I think there's a folk memory of that. I think there is this image of them being like us» (Berg 2021, 252). The same informant also expressed that perhaps this vagueness had value because it enabled the Nordic region to be a malleable

and therefore powerful role model for Scotland, and that people therefore were not necessarily interested in correcting the faulty and ideal perception of the Nordic region:

But of course, part of our ignorance arises from a conscious blindness. That if we're looking for other places in the world that we think we have affinity with, a little like us, where the world was a little more like how we want it to be, then we find that in the myths of the Nordic world. And we're not necessarily that keen to be ferreting out the stuff that tell us that it's not quite as perfect. (Berg 2021, 252)

All of these layers that the Nordic region intersects with in Scottish culture and nationalism have produced a complex conceptualisation of the Nordic region as vague yet clear, similar yet different, attainable yet mythical, in essence as both myth and reality. These characteristics and attributes reinforce the attractiveness and power of the Nordic region as a role model and source of inspiration for Scotland in the specific project of its nation-building, and its malleability ensures that the Nordic role model can suit the specific needs of legitimising and exemplifying the possibility of Scottish independence, by saying that if the Nordic region can be independent and flourish, then surely so can Scotland.

As myth and reality, the Nordic region is used by politicians, social commentators and by ordinary Scottish people who accept the view of Scotland as egalitarian and social democratic to support and give legitimacy to the independence cause. The SNP and the SNP-led Scottish Government have been in the forefront in creating the idealised image of the Nordic region by continually claiming strong commonalities between Scotland and the Nordic countries in political, cultural, and historic terms. However, as the empirical examples have shown, the idealised image of the Nordic region has arguably been accepted and reproduced by the Scottish public as well.

In the discourse on the Nordic region in Scotland, the Nordic countries are presented not only as viable and pragmatic role models, but as exemplifying the true essence of Scotland: egalitarian, social democratic and progressive. As such, the Nordic region in Scotland resembles what Peter Davidson described as «true north»: «'True north' goes beyond the idea of the prodigious (or malign) north and suggests that, for each individual, there exists somewhere the place that is the absolute north, the north in essence, northness in concentration and purity» (2005, 11). The Nordic region is perhaps uniquely able to exemplify «true north» on a collective level for contemporary Scotland. The Nordic role model can therefore be seen as a way to reimagine Scottish nationhood and national identity. A process which, as one of my informants reflected, has contributed to renewing the Scottish nation and nationalism: «Scotland feels very much like a new nation now... that it's been reborn» (Berg 2021, 260). As this article has shown, in the pursuit of transforming and restrengthening Scottish nationhood, the Nordic region as both idea and reality, has played a significant role in facilitating a collective reimagination and reflection concerning Scotland's future, concretising the ideal of an alternative Scotland, one which is heavily inspired by the Nordic example.

References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Andersson, Jenny. 2009. Nordic Nostalgia and Nordic Light: The Swedish Model as Utopia 1930–2007. *Scandinavian Journal of History* 34 (3): 229–245.
- Bechhofer, Frank, and David McCrone, eds. 2009. *National Identity, Nationalism and Constitutional Change*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bechhofer, Frank, and David McCrone. 2015. *Understanding National Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bengtsson, Åsa, Kasper M. Hansen, Ólafur P. Harðarson, Marthe Narud, and Henrik Oscarsson. 2014. *The Nordic Voter: Myths of Exceptionalism*. Colchester: ECPR Press.
- Berg, Laila. 2021. 'If they can do it, why can't we?' *Popular Perceptions of the Nordic Region in Scotland*. Doctoral thesis, University of Oslo. <https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/93316>
- Billig, Michael. 1995. *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage.
- Bryden, John, Erik Opsahl, Ottar Brox, and Lesley Riddoch. 2016. «Introduction.» In *Northern Neighbours: Scotland and Norway since 1800*, edited by John Bryden, Ottar Brox and Lesley Riddoch, 1–26. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Byrkjeflot, Haldor. 2020. «En døende amerikansk drøm utfordrer bildet av Norden.» *Aftenposten*. October 24, 2020. <https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/kronikk/i/EpWGMj/en-doeende-amerikansk-droem-utfordrer-bildet-av-norden>
- Cairney, Paul, Malcolm Harvey, and Emily St. Denny. 2017. «Constitutional Change, Social Investment and Prevention Policy in Scotland.» In *A Wealthier, Fairer Scotland*, edited by Michael Keating, 110–128. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Chartier, Daniel. 2007. «Towards a Grammar of the Idea of North: Nordicity, Winterity.» *Nordlit* 22 (April): 35–47.
- Childs, Marquis W. 1947 [1936]. *Sweden: The Middle Way*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Davidson, Peter. 2005. *The Idea of North*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Dickson, Tony. 1989. «Scotland is Different, OK?» In *The Making of Scotland: Nation, Culture and Social Change*, edited by David McCrone, Stephen Kendrick, and Pat Straw, 53–69. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- The Economist. 2013. «*Northern Lights. Special Report: The Nordic Countries.*» January 31, 2013. https://www.economist.com/special-report/2013/01/31/northern-lights?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=google&ppccampaignID=18156330227&ppcadID=&utm_campaign=a.22brand_pmax&utm_content=conversion.direct-response.anonymous&gclid=Cj0KCQiA4uCcBhDdAR-IsAH5jyUI_6XyF4m3O8h7YyNNik0USOu-TIF4zViMspz0vyYkFBNG6J7PpaPN0aAnV9EALw_wcB&gclsrc=aw.ds
- Fjågesund, Peter. 2014. *The Dream of the North: A Cultural History to 1920*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

- Hall, Stuart. 1996. «The Question of Cultural Identity.» In *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, edited by Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson, 596–634. Malden, USA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Hamelin, Louis-Edmond. 1979 [1978]. *Canadian Nordicity: It's Your North, Too*. Translated by William Barr. Montreal: Harvest House Montreal.
- Hassan, Gerry. 2014. *Caledonian Dreaming: The Quest for a Different Scotland*. Edinburgh: Luath Press.
- Hassan, Gerry, and Simon Barrow, eds. 2017. *A Nation Changed? The SNP and Scotland Ten Years On*. Edinburgh: Luath Press.
- Hearn, Jonathan. 2000. *Claiming Scotland. National Identity and Liberal Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hearn, Jonathan. 2017. *Salvage Ethnography in the Financial Sector: The Path to Economic Crisis in Scotland*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ichijo, Atsuko, and Gordana Uzelac, eds. 2005. *When is the Nation? Towards an Understanding of Theories of Nationalism*. London: Routledge.
- Jackson, Ben. 2020. *The Case for Scottish Independence: A History of Nationalist Political Thought in Modern Scotland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jenkins, Richard. 2014. *Social Identity*. London: Routledge. 4th edition.
- Jones, Peter. 1992. «Introduction.» In *Anatomy of Scotland: How Scotland Works*, edited by Magnus Linklater and Robin Denniston, 1–5. Edinburgh: Chambers.
- Jørgensen, Marianne, and Louise Phillips. 2002. *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Jørgensen, Dolly, and Virginia Langum. 2018. «Envisioning North from a Premodern Perspective.» In *Visions of North in Premodern Europe*, edited by Dolly Jørgensen and Virginia Langum, 1–11. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Keating, Michael, ed. 2017. *Debating Scotland: Issues of Independence and Union in the 2014 Referendum*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keating, Michael, and Malcolm Harvey. 2014. *Small Nations in a Big World: What Scotland Can Learn*. Edinburgh: Luath Press.
- Maxwell, Stephen. 2009. «Social Justice and the SNP.» In *The Modern Scotland: From Protest to Power*, edited by Gerry Hassan, 120–134. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- McCrone, David. 1989. «Representing Scotland: Culture and Nationalism.» In *The Making of Scotland: Nation, Culture and Social Change*, edited by David McCrone, Stephen Kendrick and Pat Straw, 161–174. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- McCrone, David, Stephen Kendrick, and Pat Straw, eds. 1989. *The Making of Scotland: Nation, Culture and Social Change*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- McCrone, David. 2017. *The New Sociology of Scotland*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Nairn, Tom. 1977. *The Break-up of Britain*. London: Verso Books.
- Newby, Andrew. 2009. «‘In Building a Nation few better examples can be found’: Nordic and the Scottish Parliament.» *Scandinavian Journal of History* 34 (3): 307–329.
- Nielsen Østergaard, Jimmi, and Stuart Ward. 2015. «Three Referenda and a By-election: the Shadow of Empire in Devolutionary Politics.» In *Scotland, Empire and*

- Decolonisation in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Bryan S. Glass and John. M. MacKenzie, 200–222, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Petersoo, Pille. 2007. «Reconsidering Otherness: Constructing Estonian Identity.» *Nations and Nationalism* 13 (2): 117–133.
- Ram, Uri. 1994. «Narration, Erziehung und die Erfindung des jüdischen Nationalismus.» In *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 5 (2): 151–177.
- Riddoch, Lesley. 2011. «Look North, Scotland.» *The Guardian*, December 5, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/dec/05/north-scotland-nordic>
- Said, Edward W. 2019 [1978]. *Orientalism*. UK: Penguin Classics.
- Scottish Government. 2013. *Scotland's Future: Your Guide to an Independent Scotland*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Government. 26 November, 2013. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-future/>
- Scottish Government. 2017. *All Points North: The Scottish Government's Nordic Baltic Policy Statement*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Government. September, 2017. <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/speech-statement/2017/09/points-north-scottish-governments-nordic-baltic-policy-statement/documents/00525147-pdf/00525147-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/00525147.pdf>
- Sturgeon, Nicola. 2020. «Scotland and Norway 'natural partners'.» *Scottish Government*. January 8, 2020. <https://www.gov.scot/news/scotland-and-norway-natural-partners/>
- Therborn, Göran. 1995. *European Modernity and Beyond: The Trajectory of European Societies 1945–2000*. London: Sage.
- Triandafyllidou, Anna. 2002. «Chapter 2: National Identity Reconsidered.» In *Negotiating Nationhood in a Changing Europe: Views from the Press (Studies in Social and Political Theory)*, edited by Anna Triandafyllidou, 25–54. Lampeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Wodak, Ruth, Rudolf de Cillia, Martin Reisigl, and Karin Liebhart. 2009. *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Wooldridge, Adrian. 2014. «Scottish Independence Essay: Nordic Model a Fantasy.» *The Scotsman*. August 13, 2014. <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/scottish-independence-essay-nordic-model-fantasy-1529166>