
A Very British Election?: The 2024 General Election and the Territorial Question(s)

*Une élection très britannique ? Les élections générales de 2024 et la/les
question(s) territoriale(s)*

Coree Brown Swan



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/14367>

DOI: 10.4000/14qkg

ISSN: 2429-4373

Publisher

CRECIB - Centre de recherche et d'études en civilisation britannique

Electronic reference

Coree Brown Swan, "A Very British Election?: The 2024 General Election and the Territorial Question(s)", *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* [Online], XXX-3 | 2025, Online since 15 September 2025, connection on 24 September 2025. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/14367> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/14qkg>

This text was automatically generated on September 24, 2025.



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) may be subject to specific use terms.

A Very British Election?: The 2024 General Election and the Territorial Question(s)

Une élection très britannique ? Les élections générales de 2024 et la/les question(s) territoriale(s)

Coree Brown Swan

Introduction

- 1 As newly elected Prime Minister Keir Starmer made his address to the nation outside of 10 Downing Street, he did so whilst flanked by supporters waving the flags of the United Kingdom, Scotland, and Wales. The election result delivered a decisive Labour victory in each of the constituent units of Great Britain (with Northern Ireland's distinct party system outside this framework), suggesting at first glance a country moving in unison. Yet beneath the headline numbers lurk potential tensions between the nations and regions of the UK, as well as within the Labour Party itself. These underlying dynamics raise important questions about the state and direction of the Union in the aftermath of the 2024 election.
- 2 To make sense of this moment – and the territorial dynamics it reveals – this article is guided by three overarching questions. First, does the relative quietude of 2024 – 2025 mark a genuine shift away from the earlier era of territorial conflict, or do unresolved tensions persist beneath the surface? Second, is this post-2024 period best understood as a return to *normal* British politics, in which territorial questions are again relegated to the margins? And finally, what does the Labour Party's constitutional stance and limited offer on devolution suggest about the future of the Union? Together, these questions offer a framework for interpreting the campaign, the early months of the Starmer government, and allows me to reflect on the devolved election campaign to come.

- 3 British politics in recent years have been marked by instability — externally, in the aftermath of Brexit, and internally, amid persistent questions over the future of the UK as a union state. These tensions took different forms across the UK's nations and regions. In Scotland, repeated demands for another referendum have been swiftly rebuffed by the UK Government. Meanwhile, Northern Ireland's prolonged deadlock, and Sinn Féin's electoral success revived debate about Irish unity. New demands for reform emerged from Wales, but received little attention from the centre, while a new system of metro mayors was introduced in England.
- 4 Despite this territorial unease, the 2024 General Election focused primarily on valence issues: economic performance, cost of living, the state of the National Health Service in the four territories, and most prominently, migration, although its salience varied across the UK.
- 5 The election campaign was broadly considered lacklustre, despite surprise surrounding its timing, the uncertainty a result of the repeal of the Fixed Term Parliaments Act in 2022. The Conservative Government and its leader Prime Minister Rishi Sunak were highly unpopular, and Labour was considered likely to win in a landslide.
- 6 In both Scotland and Wales, however, the longstanding incumbent parties faced internal difficulties of their own. The Scottish National Party was beleaguered, having narrowly avoided a vote of no confidence in the government following the collapse of its coalition with the Scottish Greens. John Swinney had been in post as First Minister for only a few weeks before the election was announced. Welsh Labour was also under new leadership after the resignation of Mark Drakeford, although Vaughan Gething would not survive the summer as First Minister.
- 7 The results were consistent with polling and public expectations: Labour secured a substantial majority — its largest since 1997 — while the Conservatives suffered a significant drop in seat share. However, the results revealed sharp territorial differences and hinted at a potential realignment in British party politics.
- 8 In Scotland, Labour — previously pushed to the political margins — made a remarkable comeback, gaining 37 seats from a base of just one, with a 16.7% swing. The SNP, by contrast, fell from 48 seats in 2019 to just 9 in 2024. Despite challenges surrounding the recent leadership election, and a concerted attack on Welsh Labour policies by both the Conservatives and Reform UK, Welsh Labour retained its dominance — winning 84% of Welsh seats. The Conservatives were left without representation in Wales, while Plaid Cymru secured its best ever result. In Northern Ireland, where UK-wide parties do not contest elections, Sinn Féin maintained its position as the largest party — though, as an abstentionist party, it does not take its seats at Westminster. The DUP, SDLP, and Alliance all saw declines in vote share.

	Wales Seats	Vote Share	Scotland Seats	Vote Share
Labour Party	27 (+9)	37%	37 (+36)	35.3%
Conservative Party	0 (-12)	18.2%	5 (-1)	12.7%
Plaid Cymru	4 (+2)	14.8%	---	---
Scottish National Party	---	---	9 (-39)	30%

Liberal Democrats	1 (+1)	6.5%	6 (+4)	9.7%
Reform Party	0 (-)	16.9%	0 (-)	7%
Green Party	0 (-)	4.7%	0 (-)	3.8%

- 9 The Liberal Democrats reclaimed third party status from the SNP, winning 72 seats and Reform saw its first significant political breakthrough, winning 5 seats, but more importantly, garnering 4 million votes throughout Great Britain, a disparity reflective of the distortions of the UK's majoritarian system. Its results were territorially uneven, but the party is widely expected to play a more significant role in the devolved elections of 2026.
- 10 Despite Labour's decisive victory, signs of political discontent were evident across the UK. The result was driven not by an outpouring of support for Labour's political project, but by a broad and determined desire to remove the Conservative government. The anti-incumbent sentiment found different expressions in each nation: a resurgent Labour in Scotland, sustained Welsh Labour strength (despite underlying fragilities), and continued nationalist support in Northern Ireland. The result was a British election in form but reflected deep territorial variation. Labour's majority, built on a rejection of the status quo, has shaped the government's period in office, and constrained its ability to pursue a more ambitious political programme.
- 11 Understanding the territorial dimension of the 2024 election is key to assessing whether this moment represents a genuine shift in the Union's stability – or merely a pause in a longer constitutional struggle. To unpack this further, the following section analyses how the territorial question was addressed – or avoided – in party strategy and campaigns.

The Territorial Dimension of the 2024 Election

- 12 Despite simmering territorial tensions, the 2024 campaign was, in many ways, a quintessentially British election, one dominated by UK-wide valence issues with constitutional questions largely submerged or filtered through a shared British frame. Both Labour and the Conservative leaders focused on issues with devolved dimensions – most notably the NHS, the economy, and migration, but framed them as valence concerns rather than policies with constitutional implications. Yet, constitutional politics shaped the campaign in more subtle ways. This section explores the prominence – or absence – of constitutional change in party discourse; the positioning of parties vis-à-vis the devolution settlement; and the extent to which further devolution was advanced – or avoided – by key actors.
- 13 Northern Ireland has been at the heart of major constitutional disputes in recent years, most notably the effort to reconcile the UK's exit from the EU with Northern Ireland's unique position on the island of Ireland, triggering broader conversations about unionism, nationalism, and the prospect of Irish unity. The Executive was reconstituted in early 2024, just months before the election, with the DUP returning to power sharing. Public dissatisfaction with public services is particularly high. The long-term decline of Unionism, intensified by the internal challenges of the Democratic &

Unionist Party, suggests that while Northern Ireland is not high on the Westminster agenda, tensions persist and the potential for conflict is ever present.

The Union and Constitutional Change

- 14 Although constitutional questions dominated campaigns during the Brexit era, they were sidelined in 2024.¹ Both Labour and the Conservatives downplayed debates over the future of the Union, focusing instead on economic competence, the NHS, and migration. While the SNP and Plaid Cymru raised constitutional issues, these interventions received limited media attention and were quite easily dismissed by statewide competitors.
- 15 The Labour Party was notably quiet in the constitutional space, reflecting its growing but fragile support in Scotland, and its increasing political vulnerability in Wales. In contrast to his predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn, Keir Starmer was able to make a more credible case in the devolved nations.² In Scotland, where Labour had found itself squeezed between the assertive unionism of the Conservatives, and the continued push for independence of the SNP, the party attempted to sidestep the constitutional question. This shift was aided by both the declining salience of independence in the minds of Scottish voters, and a more amicable relationship between Scottish and UK leadership.
- 16 The UK Labour Party's manifesto stated that "*Labour does not support independence or another referendum*" and instead pledged to reset relationships between London and the devolved governments.³ This statement was reiterated in the Scottish and Welsh Labour manifestos. When asked about whether his government would engage in negotiations with the Scottish Government, should it gain a majority in Scotland, Starmer was blunt in his assertion that he would not do so. He urged Scottish voters to vote for a Labour MP to take part in the new government, not an SNP MP "*to sit literally on the opposition benches and shout across the aisle.*"⁴
- 17 Scottish voters seemed willing to accept this stance, at least at this moment. The threat once posed by the SNP's demand for a second independence appeared diminished as the party turned inward at a moment of crisis. While new SNP leader John Swinney pledged to place independence on "*page one, line one*" of his party's manifesto, the issue had declined in salience with the voting public.⁵ It also made it more difficult for the Scottish Conservatives, who had, in recent elections, mobilised almost exclusively on its opposition to a second independence referendum.⁶
- 18 The constitutional status of Wales remained a peripheral issue, although support for independence had grown. Plaid Cymru opted for a moderate tact, part of its appeal to disaffected Labour voters and was successful in doing so, registering its best ever vote share in a UK contest. Whilst independence was on the first page of the SNP's manifesto, it was relegated to page 42 of Plaid's.⁷ The party instead pledged a Green Paper on the path to independence, and a National Commission to explore options for Wales's constitutional future, reminiscent of the SNP's tactic in its first period of government.
- 19 Welsh Labour, long supportive of further devolution, and often seen as competing with Plaid Cymru for its nationalist mantle, positioned itself as the party of both reform and responsible governance. Its 2024 manifesto focused on expanding the powers of the Senedd.⁸ However, like their Scottish counterparts, Welsh Labour leaders chose to

foreground issues of economic stability, health, and education, and avoided elevating constitutional matters during the campaign.

- 20 While in government, the Conservative Party had adopted an approach to the union described alternatively as hyper unionism⁹ or muscular unionism¹⁰, the party dedicated little attention or energy to the constitutional question. Rishi Sunak was seen as less engaged in the constitutional space than his predecessors, but made several notable interventions, registering both an opposition to independence and perhaps suggesting a growing devo-scepticism within the party as a whole. In a pre-campaign speech, the Prime Minister controversially listed Scottish nationalism “*trying to tear our United Kingdom apart*” alongside war, terror, and authoritarianism, as threats faced by the UK.
11
- 21 Conservatives made the case for the status quo rather than any constitutional change – stating
 Devolved governments should be focused on utilising the powers they have to deliver on people’s priorities and we will continue to oppose attempts to distract from these with constitutional wrangling.¹²
- 22 Discussions of independence, the party continually argued, were a distraction from policy failures in both Scotland and Wales. In Wales, Conservatives were dismissive of constitutional conversations ahead of the election, with a spokesperson describing proposals made by the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales as “*constitutional navel gazing*” that would not “*make ambulances arrive any faster, properly staff our schools or support Welsh businesses*”.¹³ With no sustained constitutional message, and without a broader vision for the future of the Union, the Conservatives appeared adrift on territorial questions — a striking reversal from their stance just five years earlier.
- 23 The continued success of Sinn Féin, and particularly the assumption (ultimately unrealised in the November 2024 Irish General Election) that it would be the largest party both in the North and in the Republic, also received little sustained attention from the UK’s statewide parties. Had it occurred, this dual leadership would have been symbolically and politically significant, perhaps intensifying debate around Irish unity, exacerbating tensions between nationalists and unionists. That the prospect was underexamined reflects a broad pattern of disengagement from constitutional questions.
- 24 Taken together, the 2024 general election revealed a striking disconnect between the constitutional significance of territorial questions and their rhetorical and strategic marginalisation. While nationalist parties continued to articulate demands for independence or reform, they achieved little cut through. The Union was no longer politically central to the campaign, suggesting a broader disengagement with implications for the coming years.

The Devolution Settlement

- 25 The threat posed by the SNP in recent years has often been met by a promise of further devolution – for Scotland, and by extension, for Wales, where Welsh Labour has long sought parity with the competences exercised by the Scottish Parliament. However, in 2024, faced with a weakened SNP, neither Labour nor the Conservatives proposed extending devolved powers. Instead, both parties focused on improving the operation

of existing settlements. This strategic shift reflected the predicted decline in SNP support but may also reveal a deeper centralising instinct within both the Labour and Conservative parties.

- 26 Labour's offer was deliberately modest, shelving the more ambitious proposals of the Brown Commission, and instead pledging to reset relationships between Westminster and the devolved governments. The party committed to a new memorandum of understanding to reinforce the Sewel Convention – the provision by which Westminster would *not normally* legislate in areas of devolved competences. This convention was repeatedly violated under Conservative governments.¹⁴ Rather than extending autonomy, Labour's campaign focused on deepening cooperation and improving relationships, with an eye to future party congruity in London, Cardiff, and Edinburgh, rather than further empowering other tiers of government.
- 27 Prior to the campaign, Welsh Labour had called for the devolution of broadcasting, the Crown Estate, rail services, and criminal justice powers, calls which were unanswered. Rather than contesting this, Welsh Labour emphasised unity, campaigning under the tagline: *“Two Labour governments, working together for Wales and Britain's future..”* In Scotland, Labour walked a tightrope – balancing the need for productive, collaborative relationships and the need to avoid being branded a branch office, a common indictment of the party in the past decade. Both Welsh and Scottish Labour refused to countenance any sign of division at a moment of political opportunity, but the seeds of future intra-party tensions were planted and emerged not long after the election.
- 28 The most significant offer of power was made not to Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland, but to the local authorities of England, in the form of local devolution. Labour said it would *“transfer power out of Westminster, and into our communities with landmark legislation to take back control”*, echoing the populist language which became common in the Brexit years.¹⁵ This was to be a continuation and expansion of a project which began under the Conservative government, a safe choice for a party with little appetite for big constitutional projects.
- 29 The Conservatives made no offer of further devolution, its manifesto stating bluntly
 Since the initial devolution settlements, significant further powers have been devolved to Holyrood, Cardiff Bay and Stormont. We believe governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland now have the right balance of powers to deliver for people there”¹⁶.
- 30 Instead, it emphasised accountability for devolved governments, and the integrity of the UK internal market.
- 31 Welsh Labour's long tenure in Cardiff Bay was highly politicised, used by the Tories as an object lesson on how UK Labour would govern from London. At a Welsh Conservative conference, Sunak accused the Welsh Labour government as treating the Welsh people as *“guinea pigs in a socialist experiment.”*¹⁷ Critiques made during the campaign focused on the NHS, with competing knowledge claims over waitlists, and the introduction of a 20-mph speed limit throughout Wales framed in the press as a *“war on motorists”*. While Welsh Labour's record of electoral success would be presumed to be an asset for UK Labour, it arguably became a liability.
- 32 In Scotland, where the Conservative Party was on the offensive, the party pledged to continue to stand up to the SNP and oppose calls for a second referendum. Its willingness to intervene in devolved policymaking – most notably using Section 35 to

block Gender Recognition Reform and refusing to fully exempt the Scottish deposit return scheme - suggested that the more assertive unionist positioning adopted by the party in recent year was more than just rhetoric.¹⁸ While Sunak was less engaged than his predecessors in matters of Union, the 2024 manifesto and willingness to challenge the exercise of devolved powers reflect the continuation – albeit a quieter form – of a more assertive Unionism.¹⁹

- 33 The SNP’s manifesto reiterated the demand for independence, but failing that called for the devolution of borrowing, migration, energy regulation, rail, broadcasting and the transfer of full powers over tax and social security.²⁰ These calls were unanswered by the UK Labour Party. Unlike in 1997, when the end of a long Conservative government prompted a bold devolutionary agenda, Labour in 2024 offered only modest reforms. In Wales, Plaid Cymru’s call for further devolution, including on policing, broadcasting, and energy likewise received no significant response from either party.
- 34 Though constitutional questions were largely set aside during the campaign, the territorial dimension of the 2024 election remained visible in party positioning, on-the-ground narratives, and voter sentiment – foreshadowing some of the dynamics and challenges to come.

A New Government, A New Approach?

- 35 The new Labour Government took office in July 2024, bolstered by majorities in England, Scotland, and Wales. Keir Starmer pledged to reset relationships with the devolved governments, promising an “*immediate*” change in his government’s approach and to seek more collaboration, that would be “*different and better*” from his predecessors.²¹ His first post-election visits were to Edinburgh, Cardiff, and Belfast, and his early rhetoric was met with cautious optimism from devolved leaders.
- 36 The Labour Government had no political honeymoon, its agenda immediately filled by events – both foreseen – the scale of the economic challenges facing the UK and the ongoing question of small boats crossings - and unforeseen – most notably the riots in Southport, England. As a result, a genuine reset may be complicated by the crowded agenda facing a new government, intractable policy problems which complicate intergovernmental relations, and the proximity of devolved elections in Scotland and Wales.
- 37 On the devolved dimension, the new government has thus far been focused on improving the tenor and regularity of intergovernmental relations, rather than revisiting the devolution settlement or its fiscal foundations. The King’s Speech, made shortly after the election made little mention of devolution to Scotland and Wales, saying only that the government sought:
- to strengthen its work with the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland so that the best outcomes possible are delivered for citizens across the United Kingdom.²²
- 38 The Labour Government inherited a reformed intergovernmental relations machinery, albeit one that not yet fully bedded in, or successfully fostered trust between governments.
- 39 Keir Starmer appears to have taken IGR seriously in his first few months. His first port of call following the elections were the devolved capitals, and in October 2024, a

Council of the Nations and Regions was convened in Edinburgh, bringing together devolved leaders, as well as England's mayors for a high-profile summit on investment. Absent a constitutional offer, and reflective of a voting public angered in recent years by public disputes between governments, this reflects a safe choice for the party, but one with minimal impact.

- 40 The new government may also face structural and political disincentives for engagement and cooperation. The UK's system of intergovernmental relations, which is comparatively ad hoc and informal, requires significant political will to maintain. We should note that it was under the early Labour governments that intergovernmental forums quickly fell into disuse. As a result, questions remain about the ways in which information can be shared, cooperation facilitated, and conflict resolved going forward, particularly against the backdrop of the 2026 campaign, incentivising parties to differentiate rather than collaborate.
- 41 Progress on key issues—such as reform of the Sewel Convention or meaningful funding negotiations—remains limited. As a result, the reset appears more symbolic than substantive. No public progress on Sewel has been made. The UK Government's engagement with the controversial UK Internal Market Act seems the exception, having announced an expedited review of the Act. While the repeal of the Act – the preference of the Scottish Government – is not on the table, the review suggests a potential for resolving at least some of the issues which have contributed to intergovernmental tensions
- 42 Conflict also emerged in response to decisions to address the UK's budgetary crisis – most notably the removal of the winter fuel payment to pensioners, and a hike to employer National Insurance contributions. These led to devolved governments demanding clarity about the impact of these policies on devolved funding settlements, and exacerbated internal Labour Party tensions, both within the UK parliamentary party, and between the UK and devolved parties.
- 43 In Scotland, the SNP has positioned itself as a bulwark against austerity from the centre, opposing both policies inherited from the Conservative government (the bedroom tax, and two-child benefit cap) and new UK Labour measures.²³ Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar sought to distance himself subtly from Starmer's government, describing his “*close personal and political relationship*” with the UK Labour leader, whilst asserting his willingness to have “*robust conversations*”.²⁴ Welsh First Minister Eluned Morgan noted she had “*only met [Starmer] once,*” downplaying her influence and pointing to persistent funding frustrations (e.g., lobbying for HS2 compensation). Differences have been accentuated in recent months by the constrained budgetary environment, as well as the statements made by Keir Starmer on immigration and British identity²⁵
- 44 With the 2026 devolved elections approaching, the sustainability of the intergovernmental reset and the relationships between the devolved and UK Labour parties are likely to face their first serious test.

Looking Ahead: 2026 and the Union

- 45 The 2026 devolved elections in Scotland and Wales are likely to test the stability of the Labour Government's territorial reset. In both, incumbents face significant electoral

pressures. The UK Labour government's declining popularity may threaten both Welsh Labour's incumbency and Scottish Labour's ambition to displace the SNP as the largest party in Holyrood. ²⁶As one Scottish Parliamentary candidate told *Politico* "*people are going to judge us on how Starmer is doing... We need the Labour government in Westminster to deliver.*"²⁷ Former Welsh Government Minister Lee Waters similarly questioned whether the UK Government would "*favour Wales' case... in a way that will make a clear impression on a disengaged and deeply disenchanted electorate.*"²⁸

- 46 In Scotland, the contest appears to be set between the SNP and Scottish Labour, reminiscent of the early years of devolution. Labour leader Anas Sarwar has expressed optimism following the party's 2024 gains. However, much of that vote is understood to have been lent in order to remove the Conservatives, rather than reflecting a deep enthusiasm for Labour *tout court* and recent polling has seen a sharp decline in support over the last year.
- 47 Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar will once again attempt to maintain both alignment with and distance from the UK leadership. The SNP, meanwhile, faces scrutiny over nearly two decades in government. Internal division, financial scandal, and leadership churn offer Labour an opportunity – but the SNP has rebounded in recent polls. Although independence falls well below pressing public policy problems – chiefly the economy, health, and education, the SNP may frame the election as a defence against Westminster-imposed austerity and suggest that independence offers a more permanent solution.
- 48 Conservative losses in 2024 were much more modest in Scotland than elsewhere, but the current polling holds out, its collapse will have been delayed rather than prevented. Although the most unambiguously pro-Union party, the party's success in 2016 and 2021 reflected the salience of the independence question, rather than a sea change in Scottish politics. The role Reform UK will play is, as of yet, uncertain. They seem likely to win seats, but lack a homegrown operation and profile. The party's position on devolution and the constitutional questions are unclear.
- 49 In Wales, Labour's dominance is being challenged on two fronts – from Plaid Cymru, which offers a constitutional alternative, and from Reform UK, which has emerged as a populist threat. The 2026 election will take place under new rules, following Senedd reform that will expand the number of members from 60 to 96 and introduce a more proportional electoral system (closed party lists across new regions). This structural change is expected to make the election the most competitive in Welsh political history.
- 50 For Welsh Labour, the 2026 election poses a difficult challenge – with the UK Labour government perhaps acting as a liability, rather than a potential partner. Unlike in previous elections, Westminster can no longer be credibly blamed for public service cuts, without being accused of intra-party disloyalty. Plaid Cymru, buoyed by its 2024 performance, enters 2026 with renewed relevance. Its constitutional offer is more moderate than that of the SNP, but it is expected to be an important factor in the Welsh elections, where Welsh Labour may be deprived of a majority. Like in Scotland, the impact of Reform UK is less predictable. In 2024, it came second in a number of Westminster constituencies. Though the party's manifesto ignored Wales and devolution, individual representatives have voiced hostility to devolved policymaking, particularly when it speaks to an environmental agenda.²⁹

- 51 Northern Ireland will not hold Assembly elections in 2026, but the politics of Union remains salient. The executive's fragile restoration and ongoing public service pressures suggests this stability might easily be disrupted.
- 52 If 2024 - 2025 represented a rhetorical and symbolic reset, then 2026 may prove to be a reckoning. The coming elections could reshape party politics within the devolved nations, placing new pressures on devolution itself. Even if incumbents were returned to office, they may face reduced majorities, and more fragmented, and fractious, parliaments. While the issue of constitutional change – including independence – is not on the top of the political agenda, it has, over the preceding decade, become the lens through which *normal* politics is refracted, and it is difficult to see that changing substantially, particularly given the political incentives for mobilisation on the constitutional question.

Conclusion: Quiet not Closure

- 53 The 2024 general election and its aftermath were marked by a striking quietude in territorial politics. The campaign focused largely on UK-wide valence issues - and Labour pledged in its early months to reset relationships with the devolved governments, a commitment welcome by devolved leaders. At first glance, and when coupled with the internal woes of the SNP, this might appear to signal a return to *normal* British politics, in which territorial questions are peripheral. However, this would be a mistake. The relative calm of the 2024 - 2025 period is less a sign of resolution – and more likely to be a temporary lull – a fragile equilibrium, under which significant unresolved tensions lurk.
- 54 This analysis has been guided by an effort to understand whether the low salience of territorial questions marks a departure from a recent history defined by constitutional contestation and crisis; whether territorial issues have been marginalised, and the implications of Labour's limited constitutional vision. On these counts, the evidence suggests caution. Far from indicating that the fault lines within the UK's constitutional settlement had been mended, it instead indicates that they have been suppressed, a result of electoral timing and political strategy, and broader crises, whether geopolitical or economic, which have subsumed our attention.
- 55 While Labour governs across Great Britain, its centralist instincts and minimalist offer on devolution suggest that dramatic changes to the Union and the constitutional structure of the UK are unlikely. This stance may ensure stability for now. However, this stasis leaves constitutional issues unaddressed. Without significant reforms to the devolution settlement, or the collapse of sub-state nationalist political forces, the longstanding issues over governance and funding are likely to persist. Recent decades have suggested that mobilisation on the territorial dimension is politically profitable, and this is unlikely to change. In other words, Labour's current position may ensure a degree of quiet, but the territorial constitution of the UK remains a live issue. The relative peace in territorial politics since 2024 is best understood as a quiet interlude rather than wholesale resolution.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BBC News, 'Labour Risks Senedd Election Kicking - Ex-Minister', *BBC News*, 6 January 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5yw19nzl9yo> [consulted 17 March 2025].
- Brown Swan, Corée and Kenny, Michael, "'We Can't Afford to Be a Branch Office": The Territorial Dynamics of the British Labour Party, 2015–2019', *Parliamentary Affairs* 77, no. 1 (2024), pp. 109-128.
- Conservative Party, *The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2024* (London, Conservative Party, 2024).
- Convery, Alan. 'The Scottish Conservative Party and the Three Unionisms.' in David Torrance (ed.), *Ruth Davidson's Conservatives: The Scottish Tory Party, 2011–2019* (2020): 139-153.
- Deans, David. 2023. 'No more powers for Wales, says prime minister Rishi Sunak', 28 April 2023. *BBC News*.
- Deans, David, 'Labour Risks Senedd Election Kicking - Ex-Minister', *BBC News*, 6 January 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5yw19nzl9yo> [17 March 2025].
- Deerin, Chris, 'Scottish Labour Is Embracing the Politics of Difference', *The New Statesman*, 17 May 2024, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/scotland/2024/05/scottish-labour-starmer-pledges-embracing-politics-difference> [consulted 17 March 2025].
- Elgot, Jessica, 'Eluned Morgan to set out 'red Welsh way' in speech criticising Starmer', *The Guardian*, 6 May 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/may/06/eluned-morgan-to-set-out-red-welsh-way-in-speech-criticising-starmer> [consulted 23 May 2025].
- Gray, Emily, Ormston, Rachel, Abernethy, Sally, Walker, Alex, and Rogers, Laoise, *Labour Strengthens Position in Scotland as Ipsos Poll Shows a Close Race*, 11 June 2024, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/labour-strengthens-position-scotland-ipsos-poll-shows-close-race> [consulted 17 March 2025].
- Hassan, Gerry, 'The UK General Election in Scotland: The End of an Era, Age of Ultra-Competition or Interregnum?', *The Political Quarterly* (2025).
- Helm, Toby, 'Keir Starmer Hits New Low in Personal Popularity Ratings', *The Guardian*, 28 September 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/sep/28/keir-starmer-hits-new-low-in-personal-popularity-ratings> [consulted 17 March 2025].
- Hutcheon, Paul, 'Anas Sarwar Speaks of "Robust" Conversations with Keir Starmer After Difficult Start for Labour Government', *Daily Record*, 18 February 2025, <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/anas-sarwar-speaks-robust-conversations-34702033> [consulted 17 March 2025].
- Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales, *Final Report: January 2024* (Cardiff, Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales, 2024).
- Jones, Catrin Haf, 'FM Compares Her Influence on Starmer to That on Trump', *BBC Wales News*, 20 September 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cpv2ng90y9po> [consulted 17 March 2025].
- Jones, Teleri Glyn, 'Starmer Sick of Me Asking for HS2 Cash, Says FM', *BBC News*, 14 December 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cm2l67g2nyro> [consulted 17 March 2025].

Kenny, Michael and Sheldon, Jack, 'When Planets Collide: The British Conservative Party and the Discordant Goals of Delivering Brexit and Preserving the Domestic Union, 2016–2019', *Political Studies* 69, no. 4 (2021), pp. 965-984.

Labour Party, *2024 Labour Party Manifesto* (London, Labour Party, 2024).

Larner, Jac, *Welsh Labour and the Travails of Single-Party Dominance*, 25 July 2024, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/welsh-labour-and-the-travails-of-single-party-dominance/> [consulted 17 March 2025].

Lewis, Gareth and Browne, Adrian, 'Welsh Independence: Leaving UK is Viable, Says New Report', *BBC News*, 18 January 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-67949443> [consulted 17 March 2025].

McDonald, Andrew, 'The Next King of Scotland', *Politico*, 28 June 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/scotland-anas-sarwar-scottish-labour-party/> [consulted 17 March 2025].

McKinnon, Morven, 'Starmer to Meet Swinney to Discuss "Better" Working Together', *BBC Scotland News*, 6 July 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c6p2kvvwn2o> [consulted 17 March 2025].

McMillan, Fraser, 'Why Starmer's Labour Government Could Prove Decisive for Scotland's Constitutional Future', *Centre on Constitutional Change*, 6 March 2025, <https://www.centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk/Starmer-Scotland-Constitution> [consulted 17 March 2025].

Meighan, Craig, 'Starmer: No Referendum for Scotland or Going Back on Gender Reform Bill', *STV News*, 21 June 2024, <https://news.stv.tv/scotland/keir-starmer-no-scottish-independence-referendum-or-going-back-on-gender-reforms-bill-if-labour-wins-election> [consulted 17 March 2025].

Murphy, Mary C. and Evershed, Jonathan, 'Between the Devil and the DUP: The Democratic Unionist Party and the Politics of Brexit', *British Politics* 15, no. 4 (2020), pp. 456-477.

Nutt, Kathleen, 'Swinney: Independence Will Be Page One, Line One in SNP Manifesto', *The Herald*, 16 June 2024.

Plaid Cymru, *For Fairness, For Ambition, For Wales: Plaid Cymru Manifesto* (Cardiff, Plaid Cymru, 2024).

Reform Party UK, *Our Contract With You: 2024 Election Manifesto* (London, Reform Party UK, 2024).

Sandford, Mark, '"Muscular Unionism": The British Political Tradition Strikes Back?', *Political Studies* 72, no. 3 (2024), pp. 1160-1177.

Scottish National Party, *SNP 2024 Manifesto: A Future Made in Scotland* (Edinburgh, Scottish National Party, 2024).

Scottish National Party, 'It's Labour's Two-Child Cap Now', 25 July 2024, <https://www.snp.org/its-labours-two-child-cap-now/> [consulted 17 March 2025].

Sunak, Rishi, 'Speech on Security', 13 May 2024 (London, Policy Exchange), <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-on-security-13-may-2024> [consulted 17 March 2025].

The King's Speech, 22 July 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-kings-speech-2024> [consulted 17 March 2025].

Welsh Government, *Welsh Government Response to the Final Report of the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales*, 12 March 2024, <https://www.gov.wales/welsh-government->

response-to-the-final-report-of-the-independent-commission-on-the-constitutional-future-of-wales-html [consulted 17 March 2025].

NOTES

1. Gerry Hassan, "The UK General Election in Scotland: The End of an Era, Age of Ultra-Competition or Interregnum?", *The Political Quarterly* (2025).
2. Coree Brown Swan and Michael Kenny, "We Can't Afford to Be a Branch Office: The Territorial Dynamics of the British Labour Party, 2015–2019", *Parliamentary Affairs* 77, no. 1 (2024), pp. 109–128.
3. Labour Party, *Change: 2024 Labour Party Manifesto* (London, Labour Party, 2024).
4. Craig Meighan, 'Starmer: No Referendum for Scotland or Going Back on Gender Reform Bill', *STV News*, 21 June 2024, <https://news.stv.tv/scotland/keir-starmer-no-scottish-independence-referendum-or-going-back-on-gender-reforms-bill-if-labour-wins-election>
5. Kathleen Nutt, "Swinney: Independence Will Be Page One, Line One in SNP Manifesto", *The Herald*, (16 June 2024).
6. Alan Convery, "The Scottish Conservative Party and the Three Unionisms." *Ruth Davidson's Conservatives: The Scottish Tory Party, 2011–2019* (2020): 139–153; Coree Brown Swan and Paul Anderson. "Representing Scotland: Conservative narratives of nation, union, and Scottish independence." *Frontiers in Political Science* 6 (2024).
7. Plaid Cymru, *For Fairness, For Ambition, For Wales: Plaid Cymru Manifesto* (Cardiff: Plaid Cymru, 2024).
8. Welsh Labour, *Change: Welsh Labour Manifesto* (Cardiff: Welsh Labour, 2024).
9. Michael Kenny and Jack Sheldon, 'When Planets Collide: The British Conservative Party and the Discordant Goals of Delivering Brexit and Preserving the Domestic Union, 2016–2019', *Political Studies* 69, no. 4 (2021), pp. 965–984.
10. Mark Sandford "Muscular Unionism": The British Political Tradition Strikes Back?', *Political Studies* 72, no. 3 (2024), pp. 1160–1177.
11. Rishi Sunak, 'Speech on Security', 13 May 2024 (London: Policy Exchange), <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-on-security-13-may-2024>.
12. Conservative Party, *The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2024* (London: Conservative Party, 2024).
13. Gareth Lewis and Adrian Browne, 'Welsh Independence: Leaving UK is Viable, Says New Report', *BBC News*, 18 January 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-67949443>.
14. Labour Party, *Change: 2024 Labour Party Manifesto* (London, Labour Party, 2024).
15. Labour Party, *Change: 2024 Labour Party Manifesto* (London, Labour Party, 2024).
16. Conservative Party. *The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2024* (London, Conservative Party, 2024).
17. David Deans, "No More Powers for Wales, Says Prime Minister Rishi Sunak", *BBC News*, 28 April 2023.
18. Section 35 of the Scotland Act 1998 is understood as a "veto" power exercised by the Secretary of State for Scotland. When triggered through a negative statutory instrument, legal instruction is provided to the Scottish Parliament's Presiding Officer prohibiting the presentation of the bill, passed by the Scottish Parliament, to the king for Royal Assent.
19. Coree Brown Swan and Paul Anderson, "Representing Scotland: Conservative narratives of nation, union, and Scottish independence", *Frontiers in Political Science* 6 (2024).
20. Scottish National Party, *SNP 2024 Manifesto: A Future Made in Scotland* (Edinburgh, Scottish National Party, 2024).

21. Morven McKinnon, “Starmer to Meet Swinney to Discuss ‘Better’ Working Together”, *BBC Scotland News*, 6 July 2024. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c6p2kvvwn2o>.
 22. UK Government, *The King's Speech*, 22 July 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-kings-speech-2024> [accessed 17 March 2025].
 23. Scottish National Party, ‘It’s Labour’s Two-Child Cap Now’, 25 July 2024, <https://www.snp.org/its-labours-two-child-cap-now/> [accessed 17 March 2025].
 24. Paul Hutcheon, ‘Anas Sarwar Speaks of "Robust" Conversations with Keir Starmer After Difficult Start for Labour Government’, *Daily Record*, 18 February 2025, <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/anas-sarwar-speaks-robust-conversations-34702033> [accessed 17 March 2025].
 25. Jessica Elgot, “Eluned Morgan to set out ‘red Welsh way’ in speech criticising Starmer”, *The Guardian*, 6 May 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/may/06/eluned-morgan-to-set-out-red-welsh-way-in-speech-criticising-starmer>
 26. Toby Helm, ‘Keir Starmer Hits New Low in Personal Popularity Ratings’, *The Guardian*, 28 September 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/sep/28/keir-starmer-hits-new-low-in-personal-popularity-ratings>
 27. Andrew McDonald, ‘The Next King of Scotland’, *Politico*, 28 June 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/scotland-anas-sarwar-scottish-labour-party/>
 28. David Deans, ‘Labour Risks Senedd Election Kicking - Ex-Minister’, *BBC News*, 6 January 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5yw19nzl9yo>
 29. Reform Party UK, *Our Contract With You: 2024 Election Manifesto* (London, Reform Party UK, 2024).
-

ABSTRACTS

The 2024 UK general election was notable for the absence of constitutional debate, once a theme that dominated campaigns. This article examines that quietude and asks: does the election mark a shift away from an era of territorial conflict, or are longstanding tensions merely suppressed or delayed? Is this a return to “normal” British politics, with the territorial question sidelined? And what does Labour’s limited constitutional offer suggest about the future of the Union? Focusing on campaign dynamics, the early decisions of the Starmer government, and party positioning across the UK’s nations, the article argues that the appearance of stability is misleading. While intergovernmental tone has improved, substantive reform remains limited. Structural tensions — over autonomy, funding, and representation — persist beneath the surface. With the 2026 devolved elections approaching, the post-election calm may prove temporary: a fragile equilibrium rather than a settled will.

Les élections générales britanniques de 2024 ont été marquées par l'absence de débat constitutionnel, un thème qui dominait autrefois les campagnes. Cet article examine ce silence et pose les questions suivantes : les élections marquent-elles le passage d'une ère de conflit territorial à une autre, ou les tensions de longue date sont-elles simplement supprimées ou retardées ? S'agit-il d'un retour à la politique britannique « normale », avec une mise à l'écart de la question territoriale ? Et que suggère l'offre constitutionnelle limitée du parti travailliste quant à l'avenir de l'Union ? En se concentrant sur la dynamique de la campagne, les premières décisions du gouvernement Starmer et le positionnement des partis dans les différentes nations

du Royaume-Uni, l'article affirme que l'apparence de stabilité est trompeuse. Si le ton intergouvernemental s'est amélioré, les réformes de fond restent limitées. Les tensions structurelles - sur l'autonomie, le financement et la représentation - persistent sous la surface. À l'approche des élections dévolues de 2026, le calme post-électoral pourrait s'avérer temporaire : un équilibre fragile plutôt qu'un consensus.

INDEX

Keywords: Labour Party, British politics, sub-state nationalism, unionism, territorial politics

Mots-clés: Parti travailliste, politique britannique, nationalisme, unionisme, politique territoriale

AUTHOR

COREE BROWN SWAN

University of Stirling

Dr Coree Brown Swan is a lecturer in British Politics at the University of Stirling. She was previously at Queen's University Belfast, and received her PhD from the University of Edinburgh. She has written extensively on the politics of independence and union in the United Kingdom.