

Subarctic Backyards? Britain, Scotland, and the Paradoxical Politics of the European High North

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Abstract: This article discusses the ways in which the relationship between Britons and the Arctic has been positioned in recent political discussions. It is argued that both UK and Scottish politicians have used changes in the Arctic environment to argue for shifts in policy direction involving a reconfigured northern imagination. Within the Atlanticist wing of the British Conservative Party, the perceived need for the relationship between Britain and northern Europe to be reinforced, through the use of bilateral and multilateral partnerships, has been used as part of a wider strategy to revisit the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union. For many subscribed to this section of British political thinking, the ultimate aim is withdrawal from the European Union. It is current UK Government policy that a referendum on British withdrawal from the European Union will be held by 2017. At the same time, a perceived lack of engagement by the UK with Arctic issues has been mobilized by Scottish nationalists in the debates that are preceding their independence referendum scheduled for September 2014. Moreover, this is complicated by the apparent desire of the Northern Isles, formerly dependencies of the Danish-Norwegian crown, to remain within the UK, regardless of the political future of the rest of Scotland. As such, northern visions about the Subarctic are being folded in complex ways into the domestic politics of the UK. This has implications for the constitution of arguments about the politics of the High North.

Introduction

We cannot forget that geographically the United Kingdom is a northern European country. Let me be clear, this is not about carving out spheres of influence; this is about working together on mutual interests. For too long Britain has looked in every direction except its own backyard. (Fox, 2010: p. 1)

Liam Fox MP, then UK Secretary of State for Defence

The facts are sobering. Sea ice in the Arctic is melting faster than at any time in the past four decades. During this summer the Northwest Passage was free of ice and this trend is set to continue and become the norm. These changes in Scotland's backyard are significant and are accelerating. Our neighbours are at action-stations and Scottish government ministers are thinking about the challenges as we approach the independence referendum. (Robertson, 2011: p. 1)

Angus Robertson MP, leader of the Scottish National Party at Westminster

The argument for engagement in the Arctic as a matter of national imperative is a familiar trope. For citizens of Canada, Russia, or Norway, it has become commonplace. In recent years, the need for respective national polities to re-engage with their northern territories has been made by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in Canada, former Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg in Norway, and former Prime Minister and now, again, President Vladimir Putin of Russia.¹ Other "Arctic states," historically perhaps less emotionally-involved with the northern regions, such as Finland, the United States, Sweden, and the Kingdom of Denmark, have over the past half-decade also issued new frameworks and policies regarding the Arctic.

This state of affairs has been discussed by a range of commentators. It is generally accepted that, due to significant changes in the environmental and cultural milieu of the Circumpolar Arctic, the Arctic states have had to adapt *political* position (Powell and Dodds, 2014). As well as national interests, the wider institutions of Arctic governance, such as the Arctic Council, have also had to undergo revision and modification. This has been in response to the increasing engagement of new state actors from Asia in the Arctic. Most notable, and widely commented upon by media and policy analysts, is China, but the new Arctic Council Observers inaugurated at the Kiruna (Sweden) meeting in May 2013 included India, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore (as well as Italy).

This focus on Asia and the Arctic suggests a re-visioning of the connection between the Pacific and Arctic Oceans. But a different, if equally interesting, story can be told about current imaginings of the connection between the Arctic and the North Atlantic.² In some ways, this narrative should be about attempts by the European Union (EU) to open up a role in Arctic governance through its "Arctic Window" and "Northern Dimension" (Powell, 2011). However, I argue here that, at the national scale within the United Kingdom, a number of tropes about the Subarctic are being reinvented and deployed as part of arguments about separation and devolution across the political spectrum.

Readers will not need reminding of Britain's historical association with Arctic exploration, and the UK continues to maintain a sense of being a "serious player" through economic interests in fisheries, resources, and tourism, and through state funding for science and defence. However, the notion of Britain having wider policy interests in the Arctic has been much more contentious; the claim that Britain has deeper cultural ties to the region even more so. There have always been arguments about the "northernness" of the Shetland and Orkney Islands, previously part of the Danish-Norwegian crown until the fifteenth century. The importance of "The Arctic in your backyard" was also used as the title of a campaign by environmental groups in Britain to increase public attention about climate change in the Circumpolar Region (WWF-UK, 2009). Interestingly, in the past three years, arguments about the Arctic have become important to two, distinct, groups of political actors within the United Kingdom, but for reasons that have much more to do with relations between Britain and Europe and, at another scale, between Scotland and England.

This article, then, discusses the adoption of the idea of a *Subarctic backyard* by *Scottish* political figures within the United Kingdom. Paradoxically, this backyard has been used by Scots to advance both the cause of British secession from the European Union, and that of Scottish independence from the rest of the United Kingdom.

The United Kingdom and the European High North

Historically, the Arctic has been central to the British cultural imagination, whether through the voyages of Martin Frobisher or John Franklin or in media culture and film (Spufford, 1996; Powell, 2011). The UK maintains a strong scientific presence in the region, as evidenced, for example, in the £15 million Arctic Research Programme 2010–15 of the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), or the NERC Arctic research station at Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard (Depledge and Dodds, 2011).

However, since 1945, security and defence have formed the main basis for British interests in the North Atlantic. The United Kingdom, and particularly the Royal Navy, had a specific responsibility to defend the Greenland-Iceland-UK Gap during the Cold war. Following Mikhail Gorbachev's Murmansk speech in 1987, the Arctic was supposed to become an area for peaceful co-operation (Åtland, 2008; Griffiths, 1988; Möttölä, 1988). This new imagining of the Arctic led to initiatives around environmental pollution or the incorporation of Indigenous voices into discussions about political governance, facilitated by states such as Finland and Canada (Heininen, 2008; Koivurova, 2010; Powell, 2011).

Through these discussions, the Arctic Council was established in 1996 (Scrivener, 1996; 1999; Keskitalo, 2004; 2008). Despite commentary about the centrality of the rights and sovereignty of states under the Westphalian model in the Arctic, as re-emphasized in the Ilulissat Declaration by the Arctic coastal states in May 2008, the Arctic Council has proved a remarkably robust institution (Arctic Council, 2008; Powell, 2011).

The intertwining of security concerns with desires for innovations in governance around questions of environmental management and Indigenous self-determination has meant that the European Arctic has drawn a greater range of “new voices” than other parts of the Circumpolar Region. Discussing the Svalbard archipelago and Finland’s Åland islands, Alyson Bailes argues that: “Northern Europe is unusually rich, to this day, in territories that are (to some degree) de-militarized and/or neutralized, or where normal national sovereignty is qualified in other ways” (Bailes, 2011: p. 34).

It is within this context that the incoherency of UK policy towards the Arctic has evolved. Two English commentators, Duncan Depledge and Klaus Dodds (2011), recently argued for the standardization of British policy in the region. Thus, they argue, “the UK government needs to articulate a formal, cross-departmental Arctic strategy” (Depledge and Dodds, 2011: p. 72). This, in their view, “would represent and reinforce the UK’s commitment to the region, while also signaling to the Arctic Five that attempts to exclude non-littoral states (whether the UK or China) from the region is likely to prove detrimental to the political climate of the High North” (Depledge and Dodds, 2011: p. 75; Depledge, 2012b; Macalister, 2012).

In some senses, this call for an UK Arctic policy echoes discussions in the first decade of the twenty-first century about impacts of climate change in the Circumpolar Region. However, since the May 2010 UK election, which led to the new coalition government between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, policy discussions about the Arctic have changed rapidly. The Arctic has been brought into other political and ideological debates.

The Atlantic Bridge and the Growth of British Strategies in the Arctic

A critical influence on the growth of a northern focus in UK policy has been the Right Honourable Dr. Liam Fox. Fox was born in 1961 in East Kilbride, Scotland, and studied medicine at the University of Glasgow. Fox had a distinguished career within the Conservative Party during their years in opposition, including serving as Chairman of the Party (2003–05). Fox has served as the Member of Parliament (MP) for Wood Spring since 1992

(his constituency was renamed North Somerset in 2010). For much of this period, Fox was seen as a rising star of the party and, by many sections of the membership, as a potential leader. For six months in 2005, Fox was Shadow Foreign Secretary. Moreover, Fox stood, albeit unsuccessfully, against David Cameron, David Davies, and Kenneth Clarke for the leadership of the Conservative Party in October 2005.

Following Cameron's election to the leadership, Liam Fox moved portfolio to serve for five years as Shadow Secretary of State for Defence until the UK General Election of May 2010. After the election of the Coalition government, Fox acted as Defence Secretary until 14 October 2011, when his term was unexpectedly cut short due to irregularities surrounding the conduct of his charity, the Atlantic Bridge (d'Ancona, 2011). This think tank was established by Fox to develop *Atlanticist* thought through the creation of relationships between the right wing of the Conservative Party and senior members of the US Republican Party (d'Ancona, 2011; Doward, 2011). In the UK, this has been associated with free market economics and skepticism about European integration. The patron of the Atlantic Bridge was the late Lady Margaret Thatcher. Due to the unorthodox behaviour of some of its employees, Atlantic Bridge was closed down by the UK Charity Commission in early October 2011.

The particular details of Fox's fall from grace need not detain us here; what is important is his involvement in the cultivation of a new role for the United Kingdom in northern Europe. During the decade in opposition, the bulk of the membership of the Conservative Party remained, at best, disgruntled with Britain's relationships with Europe.³ Fox was the heir apparent of this key "Eurosceptic" wing of the Conservative Party. Through the Atlantic Bridge and his roles within the Conservative Party, Fox became a key voice in advocating various initiatives for British defence and security policy, including deepening "bilateral and multilateral relationships with key regional partners" (Fox, 2010: p. 1). A key agreement on co-operation, for example, was signed between the British and French militaries in late 2010. This was enhanced by Fox's launching of a northern European Defence forum for all the Nordic and Baltic states, Germany, and Poland, together with the UK (Fox, 2010). Underpinning these manoeuvres was a philosophy about the need for the UK to become a strong, independent policy-actor. By articulating a national agenda in northern Europe, and then seeking bilateral support with other states, Fox was trying to assert the continuing importance of the Westphalian model for Britain.

Fox's tenancy at the Ministry of Defence can be regarded as rather reactionary. Indeed, the Eurosceptic wing of the Conservative Party calls for

the complete withdrawal of the UK from the European Union. However, even Prime Minister David Cameron, generally seen as a centrist within the party, has argued for the need for EU reform, and has tried to position the UK to lead these discussions. Due to splits within the party, Cameron was recently forced to guarantee the holding of a referendum on British withdrawal from the EU before 2017.

It was in this context that Fox spoke in Oslo, on 10 November 2010, of re-focusing British attention on its “own backyard” (Fox, 2010: p. 1). The role of this new forum was to allow the UK to engage directly with regional partners outside of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union. Although these agreements, like NATO’s foundation in 1949, were about security matters in the first instance, it was obvious that Fox, and adherents of the Atlantic Bridge more widely, also saw them as precursors to deeper political and economic co-operation. The Nordic states have a relationship with the EU that is popular amongst the more Eurosceptic sections of the Conservative Party. In short, as one analyst puts it, “the inhabitants of Northern Europe, as well as the British, are usually described as the most reluctant Europeans” (Hille, 2003: p. 165). This is particularly the case with Norway.

According to Hille (2003: p. 166), “Northernness and Euroscepticism are obviously correlated.” It is partly for this that the Nordic states, and specifically Norway, are seen as a potential model for the UK by the Atlanticists in the Conservative Party. Norway is not a member of the European Union, at times almost belligerently so, but it is part of the European Economic Area (EEA) for liberalized markets. It is generally perceived as having a successful economy, with a strong national identity.

Although Fox began the development of the bilateral links between the militaries of Norway and the UK, his replacement as Secretary of State for Defence, Philip Hammond, MP, has continued to strengthen these relationships (Depledge, 2012a). These relationships are evident in continuing joint operations, such as Exercise Cold Response in northern Norway during March 2012 (Depledge and Dodds, 2012).

It should be noted that these actions by the UK government were also performed against the backdrop of increasing involvement by the European Union in the Arctic.⁴ It is also important that some many of the wider policy goals of the Conservatives have been hampered due to the restrictions placed through the realities of government by coalition. Their partners, the Liberal Democrats, remain a resolutely pro-Europe party. The Liberal Democrats’ leader, and current Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, was formerly a Member of the European Parliament and is staunchly “Europeanist” in his

policy agenda. Moreover, Liberal Democrat Diana Wallis, MEP, until January 2012 a Vice-President of the European Parliament, was the key figure behind the pushing of an Arctic Dimension within the European Parliament (Powell, 2011).

In July 2013, negotiations began regarding the creation of a transatlantic trading zone between the European Union and the United States (Politi, 2013; BBC, 2013). However, notwithstanding these attempts to use the Arctic to reshape relations with Europe, an imagined “backyard” has also been used by other political figures eager for the disaggregation of the United Kingdom.

A Nordic Scotland? The Future of Devolution in the United Kingdom

Ever since the unions of the Crowns of Scotland, Ireland, and England in 1603 under King James VI (or James I), there has been political tension between the constituent elements of Britain. As elsewhere in Britain and Ireland, there is a long history of desires for Scottish independence. During the twentieth century, these emotions began to be politically organized, and the Scottish National Party (SNP) was founded in 1934. However, for much of the century, support for the (British) Labour Party remained strong in Scotland, at least until the first stages of devolution in the UK, with the establishing of the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood, Edinburgh in 1999. The SNP were able gradually to build an electoral base at the Scottish Parliament, and secured a minority administration in the 2007 Scottish elections. Following the UK General Election of May 2010, and the establishment of the coalition government, support for the politically left-leaning and independence-focused SNP grew in Scotland.

In the Scottish parliamentary elections of May 2011, the SNP consolidated their place in the British political landscape, taking sixty-nine seats of the 129 available at Holyrood. It is important that, with this huge majority, the SNP argued that it had a mandate for its proposed referendum on Scottish independence from the UK. Under the First Minister for Scotland, and leader of the SNP, Alex Salmond, the date for this referendum has now been set for 18 September 2014.

It is within this context that the ideas of Northern, Nordic, and Arctic discourses and identities have (re)surfaced within Scottish nationalism. Angus Robertson, MP represents the constituency of Moray, northern Scotland, at the Westminster Parliament for the SNP. Robertson is one of six SNP members at Westminster, and he leads the group or caucus there. Robertson has tried to articulate an imagination of “Scotland’s back yard” in the High

North (Robertson, 2011: p. 1). Robertson argues that, notwithstanding the efforts of Liam Fox, at a recent global forum, “the UK did not even raise the massive challenges of the northern dimension” (Robertson, 2011: p. 1).

For Robertson, the model that Scotland should follow is Norway (Robertson, 2011; Boswell, 2011).⁵ He argues that the First Minister for Scotland has made frequent visits to Norway in recent years, but that “no UK Prime Minister has made an official visit to our closest North Sea neighbour in 25 years” (Robertson, 2011: p. 2). As the SNP see it, the political union in Britain since the early eighteenth century has impeded “links with Scotland’s immediate region” (Robertson, 2011: p. 2). As Robertson concludes:

Constitutional developments in Scotland and significant environmental changes offer a real opportunity and imperative to properly engage with our wider geographic region. ... The time has come to rediscover our neighbourhood and the issues, interests, opportunities and challenges we share. (Robertson, 2011: p. 2)

This idea of a Nordic Scotland has started to gain some currency in contemporary Scottish cultural commentary. In the creative and architectural industries, for example, a recent project, “Possible Orkney” speaks of the islands’ strategic position within a new Nordic network (Hogg and Hobday, 2013).

As well as the cultural parallels between the process of devolution within the Nordic kingdoms and that of Britain, there are similarities in terms of climate, position, and possible future economic options. Ultimately, the SNP’s prospectus for the new, independent Scotland is based around revenues from the development of oil and gas resources in the North Sea, specifically new resources offshore of the Northern Isles of Shetland and Orkney.

However, the growth of Nordic Scotland is not without opposition. Ironically, both the populations of Orkney and, especially, Shetland are resolutely opposed to Scottish independence according to most political commentators. Much of this opposition is attributed to the islands’ sense of independence, following their long connection to Denmark and Norway (Gordon, 2013). In 1468 (Orkney) and 1469 (Shetland) were given to King James III of Scotland by Christian I of Norway, as part of the dowry for James’s daughter Margaret. There has remained a long history of association through to the present. This includes the famous “Shetland Bus,” which

carried out covert operations between Britain and Norway during the Second World War.

This question becomes acute, because it is difficult for the SNP, given the thrust of the Scottish independence debate, to argue for anything other than the right of self-determination for the peoples of Shetland and Orkney. According to the Scottish National Party's Angus MacNeil, MP for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Western Isles), both Shetland and Orkney could be allowed to remain part of the United Kingdom in any case, regardless of the result of the referendum on Scottish independence (Johnson, 2012). The legal and economic situation on this is subject to much debate in the recent Scottish media (Gordon, 2013; Johnson, 2013). Rachael Lorna Johnstone (2012) provides an overview of a possible Arctic strategy for Scotland, regardless of the outcome of the independence discussion, focusing on governance, environment, and economic development.

Ultimately, the *realpolitik* is that the outcome may well depend on negotiations about respective revenue-sharing deals on offshore oil and gas development between the Scottish and UK governments. Without Shetland and Orkney, however, it is difficult to envisage what a future Scottish economy would look like. So, and with striking similarity to other parts of the Circumpolar Region, the development of the Subarctic backyard is seen as amenable to different political ideologies.

Conclusion

Following the changes in the rules at Kiruna in May 2013 regarding Observers at the Arctic Council, it may be that the UK now has an important role to develop in the governance of the Circumpolar Region as a "non-Arctic state." Certainly, this is presaged in the Polar Regions Department publication of the long-awaited framework for British policy towards the Arctic region in October 2013 (Polar Regions Department, 2013; Dodds and Powell, 2013). There remains, amongst some British actors, the familiar and perhaps, to some eyes, faintly comical assumption that the Arctic still needs the watchful eye of the British. This is exemplified in Depledge and Dodds's call for the UK to act as an "honest broker" in the Arctic, as if the current state of play requires the action of a latter-day, northern Lloyd-George (cf. Depledge and Dodds, 2011: p. 78). It must be stated that, for many British politicians and academics recently seduced by "call of the Arctic", it does seem that the North Atlantic is being perceived as a place to reclaim some fading, imperial glory; what we might call, after Ali Behdad (1994), "postcolonial belatedness."⁶

However, as I have argued here, at the same time the Arctic continues to be imagined by various British and Scottish political actors in very particular ways. In doing so, they summon into being ideas about identity, territory, and community that have parallels across the Arctic and Subarctic Region. The picture is complicated, and involves some rather prosaic domestic politics, whether involving factions in the Conservative Party over relations with the European Union, or Scottish independence. What remains the case, however, is that the Subarctic backyard continues to be viewed through the prism of the British Metropole—notwithstanding that London may soon be displaced in northern quarters by Edinburgh.

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Notes

1. There are a number of excellent discussions on the national dimensions of respective northern and Arctic policies that have recently emerged. See Abele (2011) for a discussion of Harper and recent Canadian policy; for the evolution of recent Russian Arctic policy, see Foxall (2014); and, for Norway, see Kristoffersen (2014). In Canada, at least, discourses of northern development have often been deployed to support particular political visions (Powell 2005; 2008).
2. There have also been attempts between the polities of the Kingdom of Denmark, and its former dependency Iceland, to reinterpret the role of North Atlantic (Thisted, 2014).
3. Dodds and Elden (2008) provide an assessment of the development of thought amongst the politicians and academics closer to the current Prime Minister David Cameron, with particular reference to another Atlanticist think tank, the Henry Jackson Society.
4. For a discussion of the development of the European Union's policy on the Arctic, see Powell (2011) and Offerdal (2011).
5. It is worth stating that the SNP value the Norwegian model for its economic resilience not its Euroscepticism. The SNP's stated position is that an independent Scotland would seek to remain within the EU.
6. Another interested Scottish Conservative politician, James Gray, currently Conservative Member of Parliament for North Wiltshire, has recently adopted this idiom in attempts to garner political support at Westminster for further British involvement in polar issues. See his *Poles Apart* (Gray, 2013) and a connected conference held at the Royal United Services Institute, London on 29 October 2013.

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