

Tom Nairn and Scottish Politics

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Abstract

This article examines a less familiar side of Tom Nairn's career: his role as a commentator-participant in Scottish politics. It argues that Nairn was not only a radical critic of the UK but also an exponent of feasible strategies to advance Scottish self-government. The article draws on Nairn's journalistic writings for Scottish political magazines and the Scottish press to show that he combined a maximalist critique of the UK state with a pragmatic orientation to Scottish electoral politics. Nairn abjured the commitment to extra-parliamentary action favoured by his erstwhile colleagues in the metropolitan New Left and instead supported what was, *de facto*, a constitutionalist popular front strategy for Scotland.

On 21 January 2023, then Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon tweeted that she was 'very sorry to hear that Tom Nairn has died. He was one of the greatest thinkers, political theorists and intellectuals that Scotland ever produced'. On the same day, Alex Salmond, Sturgeon's predecessor as Scottish National Party (SNP) First Minister, wrote that Tom Nairn's 'scholarship was vital in producing the intellectual base which turned Scottish nationalism from a romantic notion to a powerful left-wing challenge to the British state. I was part of the generation influenced by his work'. Perhaps more surprisingly, the former Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown chipped in: 'I am sad to hear of the death of Tom Nairn. A great writer, thinker, intellectual and good man. He disagreed with me on many things but his books and scholarship will long be remembered.'¹ As Brown noted, he and Nairn did indeed have political differences. Back in 2006, Nairn had described Brown as 'the Jeeves of Great Britain's last days, a courtier of self-abasement, sleaze, insanely false pretences, failed reform and neo-imperial warfare'.² But there are not many other New Left intellectuals who can expect to receive tributes from a nation's political leaders when they pass away.

Who was Tom Nairn and why did he inspire these encomiums? Nairn is best known for his caustic critique of the UK, which he unfurled across many articles and books, but especially in his essays for the *New Left Review (NLR)*, many of which were then collected in his 1977 book, *The Break-up of Britain*. These writings are funny, scathing, incisive—in short, masterpieces of the kind of invective on public affairs that can be found in the *NLR* and on the Marxist left more broadly. The weakness of this genre of writing is that, while it can summon up the righteous anger of the social critic, it is more effective at diagnosing injustice than at identifying feasible solutions. Here, I will argue that Nairn was

¹ Tweets available, respectively, at <https://x.com/NicolaSturgeon/status/1616904570667401220>; <https://x.com/AlexSalmond/status/1616880925526065152>; <https://x.com/GordonBrown/status/1616854146438811650> (all accessed 31 Mar. 2026).

² T. Nairn, *Gordon Brown: Bard of Britishness*, p. 9 (Cardiff: Institute of Welsh Affairs, 2006).

not only a critic but also an exponent of feasible strategies to advance Scottish self-government. This is a less familiar side of Tom Nairn: the commentator-participant in Scottish politics.

It is a story that shifts our gaze from Nairn's most famous writings in *NLR* to his journalistic output. This article draws on the Scottish political magazines which flourished in the 1970s and 1980s and played an important role in incubating the politicization of Scottish national consciousness in that period.³ Nairn was an assiduous contributor to these publications and an influential participant in that process of politicization. More generally, this discussion of Nairn joins with other recent research in underlining the importance of the study of ideas and rhetoric to the history of contemporary Scottish politics. While the social and economic context of post-war Scottish politics has been the subject of crucial historical research, this can profitably be complemented by deeper analysis of the ideological frameworks developed by political actors as they interpreted and responded to Scotland's changing circumstances.⁴ The political thought of Tom Nairn is a core topic in this research programme. As David McCrone has observed, 'it is impossible to imagine what analysing Scotland would have looked like without Tom Nairn's writing over half a century.'⁵

Alex Campsie has helpfully reconstructed Nairn's early life and political development, when Nairn left Scotland to study briefly in Oxford and then Italy before returning to live in England, during which he fell in with the New Left, the student movement, and the 1960s counter-culture. Campsie suggests that Nairn's turn to the politics of Scottish nationalism, which became a stronger feature of his work in the 1970s, reflected his frustration with the metropolitan left politics of the 1960s. Nairn felt that the student movement had failed (he had been involved, for example, in the occupation of Hornsey Art College, where he was a lecturer) and that the revolutionary aspirations of the New Left had run into the sand.⁶ An initial break from much of the left was Nairn's staunch defence of Britain's membership of the European Community (EC) in the early 1970s, culminating in his publication of *The Left Against Europe* (1973). This was a characteristic piece of Nairn pugilism that took no prisoners in castigating left-wing Euroscepticism. He later wrote he disliked the 'Tolkein-like features' of left-wing opponents of Britain's membership of the EC. He was 'worried', he said, 'about being locked up in the queer Hobbit country of *Tribune*, E. P. Thompson and the Trotskyites'.⁷

As Campsie also observes, Nairn's increasing enthusiasm in the 1970s for the project of Scottish independence, with devolution as a first step along the way, was a pivotal development in his political thought. Campsie argues that Nairn resisted 'programmatic statements' about how to achieve emancipation in practice, so that his positive political position remained elusive: he specialized in coruscating critique and confident predictions about the demise of the UK.⁸ However, there is more to say about Nairn's positive position. We can understand his programmatic politics in greater detail by following the story to Scotland, after Nairn left the London radical scene. He moved back to Edinburgh in 1975, where he shared a flat with a group of friends, including the journalists Neal Ascherson and Isabel Hilton.⁹ Nairn then became more actively engaged in the new politics of Scottish national identity that had been placed at the top of the political agenda by the SNP gaining an unprecedented number of Scottish seats at the 1974 general elections.

³ S. Hames and A. Piotrowska, eds. *Flyte: A Scottish Magazines Showcase* (Spring 2022), <https://campuspress.stir.ac.uk/scotmagsnet/flyte/>, accessed 31 Mar. 2026; E. Bell, 'Magazines, Devolution and Makars—the Institutions of Scottish Literature', in G. Carruthers, ed., *A Companion to Scottish Literature*, pp. 324–35 (Hoboken: Wiley, 2024).

⁴ S. Hames, *The Literary Politics of Scottish Devolution* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); B. Jackson, *The Case for Scottish Independence: A History of Nationalist Political Thought in Modern Scotland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); R. Scothorne, 'The Radical Left and the Scottish Nation: Print-Cultures of Left-Wing Nationalism, 1967–1983', unpublished PhD thesis, Edinburgh University, 2021; M. Petrie, *Politics and the People: Scotland 1945–79* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

⁵ D. McCrone, 'In Memoriam: Tom Nairn: The Man with Qualities', *Scottish Affairs*, 2 (2023), 144.

⁶ A. Campsie, 'Socialism, Nationalism and Tom Nairn's Dream of Escape', *Twentieth Century British History*, 32 (2021), 509–32; see also R. Scothorne, 'From the Outer Edge', *London Review of Books*, 6 Dec. 2018; R. Scothorne, 'The Detective of World History', *New Statesman* (24 Jan. 2023), <https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2023/01/world-history-tom-nairn-british-identity> (accessed 31 Mar. 2026); Jackson, *Case*, 61–89; S. Hames, 'Tom Nairn as Essayist: Romantic Negativity and the Critical Imagination', *Scottish Literary Review*, 17 (2025), 99–122.

⁷ T. Nairn, *The Left Against Europe?* (London: Pelican, 1973); T. Nairn, 'Intellectuals', *Q* (17 Dec. 1976), 6.

⁸ Campsie, 'Socialism', 532.

⁹ Scothorne, 'Radical Left', 116.

This 1970s rise of Scottish nationalism was crucial to Nairn's growing engagement with nationalism in general and his transition from a New Left Marxism to his mature writings, in which Nairn argued that nationalism was both analytically more important than Marxists had previously believed and normatively, in some circumstances, a more desirable form of political mobilization than a standard socialist class-based model. Nairn's initial writings in *NLR* on Scottish nationalism had been scathing. After his experiences of 1968, the European debate, and his move back to Scotland, however, Nairn became more positive about nationalism, or at least about small-state nationalism. Some on the left were sceptical of this turn—Eric Hobsbawm, for example, penned a memorable critique of Nairn in *NLR*.¹⁰ One of Nairn's friends, Bill Williams, an English New Leftist who had settled in Scotland and was sceptical of Scottish nationalism, voiced this critique in more personal terms. Nairn had discussed Williams in the Scottish political magazine *Question* as an example of how well-meaning people on the left, especially from England, erroneously conflated Scottish nationalism and racism. Williams replied that he wasn't sure if Nairn was 'still at heart the old radical we used to know'. Williams posed the question of whether Nairn was 'anything more than a follower of band-wagons. As the New Left bandwagon started to slow down our fearless radical looked around for another easy cause. What better than nationalism? Where more appropriate than Scotland?'¹¹

This made Nairn look like an opportunist, which was unfair, but then Nairn *had* just accused Williams in print of regarding Scotland with 'unconscious superiority ... not unlike the profound affection felt by so many British imperialists for India'.¹² Nairn had in fact explained his changed thinking about Scottish nationalism in his contribution to *The Red Paper on Scotland*, published in 1975 and edited by one Gordon Brown, at that time a leading Edinburgh student radical. This was an important book that brought together a range of leftists to debate the relationship between socialism and nationalism in Scotland. It was a leading indicator that the rise in SNP voting had posed difficult strategic and ideological questions to the Scottish left. As Neal Ascherson later observed, Brown's framing introduction to the book had been markedly influenced by Tom Nairn's analysis of nationalism.¹³ In his own contribution, Nairn reflected on why he had changed his posture towards the Scottish national movement: 'My main past mistake lay in assuming that the question of effective Scottish self-government would never be posed on this side of socialism.' Socialists, he noted, had simply paid too much attention to 'the rationality of the working class based social struggle (understood as a potentially international force)' and not enough to 'the non-rational strengths of nationalism'. In terms of his immediate political prescriptions, Nairn argued that the left should accept that it would be necessary to support rising neo-nationalisms in Scotland, Wales, Quebec, the Basque Country, and so on as broadly progressive forces. This was partly for instrumental reasons, at least in the Scottish case. Nairn's view was that the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalism signalled a new era in British politics because it had initiated a novel constitutional crisis for the UK state. But he acknowledged also that there were powerful intrinsic reasons to favour Scottish nationalism:

The question is really not at all whether new nationalism, has, or has not, a "positive" side to it. No intellectual from a repressed or destroyed nationality has doubts about this, if he is honest with himself. Return from oblivion, the reassertion of identity, adult control of one's own affairs—it does not matter what terminology is used, the value of national liberation is plain enough.

The problem, as Nairn saw it, was how to achieve such a 'national liberation' without also unleashing the chauvinism and xenophobia that typically accompanied nationalism. His answer to this dilemma was European integration: a federal or confederal union of states was necessary to act as a constraint on national self-assertion.¹⁴

¹⁰ E. Hobsbawm, 'Some Reflections on the Break-Up of Britain', *New Left Review*, 105 (1977), 3–23.

¹¹ B. Williams, letter to the Editor, with reply from Tom Nairn, *Q* (15 Apr. 1977), 6.

¹² T. Nairn, 'The New Exiles', *Q* (1 Apr. 1977), 7.

¹³ N. Ascherson, 'Life on the Ante-Eurodiluvian Left', *Observer* (5 Nov. 2000).

¹⁴ T. Nairn, 'Old Nationalism and New Nationalism', in G. Brown, ed., *The Red Paper on Scotland*, pp. 22–57 (Edinburgh: EUSPB, 1975), quotes at 49.

Despite these sentiments, Nairn remained averse to offering outright support for the SNP. Instead, he became a member of a breakaway from the Labour Party, the Scottish Labour Party (SLP), initiated by the Labour MP Jim Sillars in 1976 to promote a left-wing vision of Scottish independence in Europe (the SNP was a Eurosceptic party at that time).¹⁵ The SLP was a famously quixotic enterprise, splintering acrimoniously over policy and personal differences and winding up in 1981. But there was a high level of interest in the party among journalists, academics, and the radical left, indicating an under-served market for a Scottish nationalism garbed in socialist clothes. The SLP was important as an ideological crucible for key ideas and individuals who would later go on to be significant figures in Scottish public life. Alongside Nairn and Neal Ascherson, several future MPs and MSPs were members, such as the SNP's Alex Neil and George Kerevan, and Labour's John McAllion and Maria Fyfe. Other notable members included the poet and folklorist Hamish Henderson, the academic Lindsay Paterson, and the future Lord Advocate, Colin Boyd. The SLP had a broadly labourist leadership, exemplified by Sillars, who took a hierarchical view of party management and sought to eject Trotskyists from the International Marxist Group (IMG) and other dissidents who differed from Sillars's strategic vision. Perhaps surprisingly, Nairn was broadly on the side of the party leadership, at least when it came to expelling the IMG. He wrote to the SLP's National Organising Committee (NOC) that his own contacts in the IMG led him to believe that a confrontation with IMG members was unavoidable, given that their political objectives differed fundamentally from those of the party leadership. Henry Drucker, the historian of the SLP, believed that Nairn's letter to the NOC was influential in hardening the party leadership's position against the IMG. Nairn had previously criticized British Trotskyism during the European debate; the attempt by the IMG to shift the SLP away from support for European integration was one reason he was suspicious of their involvement.¹⁶ But he also believed that the radical left was still in hock to a sectarian socialism and had therefore failed to grasp the SLP's guiding maxim that 'questions of socialism and nationalism were about equally important in terms of strategy'.¹⁷

Nairn publicly derided leftists in the SLP who offered only 'strugglist rhetoric' about the need to reject a 'parliamentary' road to socialism. His conception of the SLP was that it aimed at creating a 'socialist breakthrough to accompany, inform—perhaps one day to lead—the national breakthrough created by the collapse of the old British state and the advance of the SNP'. Nairn was critical of complacency on the left about how easily this breakthrough might be achieved. The strategic objective of Scottish socialists, he said, should be to form part of a broad progressive front including 'the social democrats, the revolutionaries and everybody else in between' to engage constructively with parliamentarism and constitutionalism so as to create a new Scottish parliament whose 'spirit and functioning is the inverse of the old English model'. This, said Nairn, is 'the precondition of whatever "socialism" can be made in this nation'.¹⁸ Nairn was later critical of the SLP leadership for also breaking from this broad front philosophy by seeking to expel other party members who were not in the IMG but who the leadership nonetheless perceived as troublemakers. As a result, the SLP's first congress at Stirling in 1976 was, Nairn remarked, 'a grand-operatic explosion of expulsion, recrimination and nervous breakdowns'.¹⁹

In the late 1970s, Nairn believed that Scottish nationalism was an irresistible social force that would inexorably build from its 1974 bridgehead (as did many observers of Scottish politics at that time). But he was suspicious of the SNP as a conservative social organization and felt it was tied to a folksy, reactionary model of Scottish culture. In a break from Nairn's colleagues in the metropolitan New Left, he did not see extra-parliamentary mobilization as the most plausible way forward.

¹⁵ On Sillars's career, see G. Hassan, 'Jim Sillars', in G. Hassan and J. Mitchell, eds., *Scottish National Party Leaders*, pp. 409–34 (London: Biteback, 2016); B. Jackson, 'Jim Sillars's Journey', *Scottish Affairs*, 31 (2022), 233–9.

¹⁶ H. Drucker, 'The NOC Wades in and the SLP Lands in Deep Water', *Scotsman* (17 Jan. 1978); H. Drucker, *Breakaway: The Scottish Labour Party* (Edinburgh: EUSPB, 1978); Scothorne, 'Radical Left', 305–26.

¹⁷ T. Nairn, 'The National Question', *Scottish Worker*, 10 (December 1976), 11.

¹⁸ T. Nairn, 'Revolutionaries Versus Parliamentarists', *Q* (19 Nov. 1976), 3; see also T. Nairn, 'The English Dilemma', *Q* (4 Feb. 1977), 3–4.

¹⁹ T. Nairn, 'The SLP: Report on the First Year of a New Party', *Planet*, 37/38 (May 1977), 14, 16–17.

Instead, Nairn prescribed engagement with constitutional debate and the formation of a left nationalist electoral party that could support and then hopefully supersede the SNP as the leading nationalist force in Scottish politics.

Nairn was, in the parlance of Scottish nationalism, a 'gradualist'. He supported the creation of a devolved Scottish assembly as a first step towards independence, advocated a yes vote in the 1979 Scottish devolution referendum, and saw the arrival of such an assembly as a major disruption to the UK constitutional status quo. This position contrasted with 'fundamentalism', a major strand of SNP thought in the 1970s and 1980s. Fundamentalists were critical of devolution as a meaningless concession and advocated a direct transition to independence without any intermediate devolutionary step, which would be achieved, it was believed, by electing SNP MPs to a majority of Scotland's Westminster seats. This strand of the SNP was instrumental in pulling the party out of the Scottish Constitutional Convention in 1989, which had been formed as a cross-party body to develop plans for a Scottish parliament and was important in framing the eventual model of Scottish devolution that was created in 1999. Intended to bring together all the non-Conservative parties, the SNP famously declined to participate, leaving it to Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens.²⁰

This was not Nairn's position. He (and, e.g., Ascherson) saw devolution as a reform that would introduce a new dynamic tension into Scottish and British politics. As Nairn put it:

It would not matter if the initial powers 'allowed' such an assembly consisted of nothing but the issue, supervision and occasional confiscation of dog licences. Within a larger state in such visible and galloping decay as the British one, it would soon be in a position drastically to alter the odds.

The opponents of devolution were correct, Nairn thought, to perceive it as a 'slippery slope'. 'All we need', he said, 'is to get on it'.²¹

Nairn also supported pragmatic compromises to achieve devolution in the first place. The 1979 referendum was a narrow victory for Scottish devolution, but not a large enough victory to get over the 40 per cent threshold that had been imposed for a successful yes vote. Nairn supported a yes vote but was sanguine about the defeat because he believed it revealed that the Scottish working class was the social constituency most likely to support constitutional change and that the middle class had revealed itself to be an unreliable ally of the nationalist project. As he put it:

People were made to line up in some sort of vague battle-order, and Scotland was made to see more clearly that the growth of *real* national consciousness is a difficult conflict, a civil war within the nation as much as a struggle between it and the metropolis.

This was, Nairn added, in fact the strategy that the SLP had commended 3 years earlier—working class mobilization for greater Scottish political autonomy.²²

Partly inspired by this analysis, an important faction within the SNP called the '79 Group was subsequently formed to push a left-wing version of Scottish nationalism (among the members of the Group were Jim Sillars, now a member of the SNP, and a young Alex Salmond).²³ Nairn spoke at the opening meeting of the Group and, with characteristic confidence, predicted that 1979 marked the end of one phase of Scottish politics and of what he called the SNP's traditional 'bland, all-purpose nationalist ideology'. Now, said Nairn, it was time for a decisively left-wing nationalism to emerge with 'a less compromising, more republican spirit'.²⁴ Nairn's analysis of Britain and of the Labour

²⁰ A. Marr, *The Battle for Scotland*, pp. 148-52, 195-209 (London: Penguin, 1995 [1992]).

²¹ T. Nairn, quoted in K. Farquharson, 'Step-by-Step Stumbling Block', *Scotland on Sunday* (24 Sep. 1995).

²² T. Nairn, 'After the Referendum', *New Edinburgh Review*, 46 (May 1979), 8, 9.

²³ D. Torrance, 'The Journey from the 79 Group to the Modern SNP', in G. Hassan, ed., *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power*, pp. 162-76 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Jackson, *Case*, 105-10; Scothorne, 'Radical Left', 331-46.

²⁴ T. Nairn, 'Scotland After the Elections', in *SNP '79 Group Papers No. 1*, papers discussed at founding meeting, 31 May 1979, Belford Hotel, Edinburgh (no publisher/date), 5-7.

Party exercised a huge influence over the '79 Group and over subsequent Scottish nationalist ideology, which has consistently adopted an unforgiving posture towards the UK constitution and Labour as undemocratic bastions of a still quasi-imperial state.

Yet Nairn never joined the SNP. Indeed, when the SNP, with Sillars to the fore, ejected itself from the Scottish Constitutional Convention in 1989, he described it as a 'theatrical coup' that 'evokes ... everything ... which has over the centuries made the Scots a people of gallant losers and political imbeciles'. Nairn had been enthused by the development of the Convention, but at the same time couldn't help but wonder 'who will ruin things this time?' The SNP was Nairn's answer: the problem here, he said, was not about left versus right within the national movement but about 'realism versus sectarianism'. The SNP, Nairn said, had revealed itself to be basically sectarian in character. As Nairn pointed out, he had been denouncing the Labour Party since 1965 and endorsing Scottish independence in Europe since the 1970s, but he recognized that some form of cross-party alliance with Labour was necessary to move the ball forward on Scottish democratic autonomy.²⁵ Nairn used his platform as a columnist for *The Scotsman* newspaper in the early 1990s to press the case for tactical anti-Conservative voting and to dismiss the 'incurably phoney war' between the SNP and Labour (or 'the Snabs' as he collectively labelled them). Nairn disclosed that at the 1987 general election he had voted in the constituency of North East Fife for the Liberal Democrats' Menzies Campbell, in order to secure the defenestration of the sitting Conservative MP.²⁶ Nairn also later voiced surprisingly positive assessments of Scottish Labour politicians such as John Smith ('the outstanding Premier we will never have had') and Donald Dewar ('a singular and honourable man'), given that, for all their support for devolution, both men were, in essence, Gaitskellites.²⁷

Nairn therefore combined a maximalist critique of the UK state with a pragmatic orientation to Scottish electoral politics and coalition building. He abjured the commitment to extra-parliamentary action favoured by his erstwhile colleagues in the metropolitan New Left and instead supported what was de facto a constitutionalist popular front strategy for Scotland. Nairn's favoured approach was similar to that adopted by earlier New Left intellectuals such as E.P. Thompson at the British level: tapping into currents of historical radicalism as the basis for a unifying, patriotic leftism. Nairn and other later New Left writers such as Perry Anderson had famously rejected this approach at the UK level as untheoretical and nationalist.²⁸ But for Nairn's generation of the New Left, there was an exemption for Scottish nationalism—unlike British nationalism, they argued, Scottish nationalism could be used to advance progressive purposes. For a time, in the run-up to the creation of the Scottish Parliament, even the Labour Party could be enfolded within that popular nationalist front. But Nairn and those influenced by him were ultimately sceptical of Labour as a creature of the UK state. This was the key difference between Nairn and Gordon Brown. Brown, alongside figures such as John Smith and Donald Dewar, played a part in moving the Labour Party in Scotland towards a soft nationalism in the 1980s and 1990s, eventually expressed in the founding of the Scottish Parliament. But within Labour, this was always understood as a project to preserve the Anglo-Scottish union rather than to break it up. Once devolution was implemented, Labour was then jettisoned from Nairn's popular front. In the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, one side represented Nairn's vision of devolution as a bridgehead towards independence in Europe, and the other represented Brown's view of a renewed, semi-federal British Union. It was Brown's view that won out in 2014, but as Tom Nairn would no doubt prognosticate, were he still with us, the referendum left a weakened Anglo-Scottish Union closer to dissolution than ever before.

²⁵ T. Nairn, 'The Timeless Girn', in O. Dudley-Edwards, ed., *A Claim of Right for Scotland*, pp. 163–78 (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1989), quotes at 163, 164, 175.

²⁶ T. Nairn, 'The Snabs', *Scotsman* (7 Oct. 1991); T. Nairn, 'Lean-to Politics', *Scotsman* (21 Oct. 1991).

²⁷ T. Nairn, 'Shock of the News and its Ripple Effect', *Scotsman* (17 May 1994); T. Nairn, 'Scotland, the Blair Project and the Zombie Faction', *Arena*, 48 (August–September 2000), 22.

²⁸ S. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory: E. P. Thompson, the New Left and Postwar British Politics*, pp. 93–132 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).