

**The Discourse of Education and Nationalism: education policy and the SNP  
government**

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## Introduction

This paper reports on recently completed research that explores the discursive framing of policy in education by the SNP government in Scotland.<sup>1</sup> The research is shaped by a number of ideas which we introduce very briefly here. We return to some of them later in the paper. The first is about governance and its connection to education policy. Current research in CES is exploring the shifting nature of government and its apparent transformation through the 'governance turn' recognised by political scientists as marking a significant shift in governing practices in Europe and beyond (Hooghe and Marks 2001, Beukel 2001, Mayntz 1994). We argue on the basis of this work that education and policy for education/learning now occupies a critical role in the governance turn-though one that has not been recognised sufficiently in the dominant disciplines of politics and law that engage in governance studies. We draw attention to the way in which policy for education/learning contributes to Europeanisation by doing the work of 'fabricating' Europe as a coherent policy space, governed by new policy elites using new policy instruments and projecting the idea of 'Europe' through the redesign of institutions, the organisation of networks and the flow of comparative knowledge and data (Grek et al 2009, Lawn and Grek 2009). This pre-occupation with governance and the increasing significance of education/learning policy to its changing operation is also part of our agenda here, in exploring the SNP government's education policy. We see a reflection of changing modes of governance in the Scottish Government's (TSG) adoption of (social) partnership working through collaborative networks, and in its heavy reliance on discourse as a governing resource-in this case the discourse of (modernised) nationalism, located within the European 'project'.

This brings us to our second framing idea-the significance of discourse for understanding policy. We say more about this below, but for the moment wish to emphasise that we see a connection between changing governance and the enhanced significance of discourse in policy, as discourse is the resource that provides coherence and direction to networked forms. The final element in our framing of the paper is nationalism. We argue that nationalism is a complex discursive resource for the SNP government, as it has to avoid the impression of lack of realism or nostalgia for less interdependent and risky policy environments than those that currently obtain in market-exposed economies (Cerny 1997). TSG also has to reconcile rather contradictory ideological tendencies within the SNP, while attempting to bring about a gradual shift in the public perception of independence for Scotland. Support from the electorate for independence cannot be assumed, and TSG thus face the linked challenges of demonstrating their competence in government and using that as a basis for building support for their longer-term agenda. Too much emphasis on competence may dilute messages about the longer-term agenda, while too strong an emphasis on independence may lose them support in the Parliament and in the country. In this context, the significance of discourse as a resource is heightened. We say a little more about the complex political context in which the first SNP government took office-as a minority government-in the next section.

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## Politics and Governance

The 2007 elections to the devolved administrations marked a significant shift in UK politics for a number of reasons. For the first time the UK Government was faced with the task of governing across the constituent nations of the United Kingdom with a nationalist party running a minority administration in Edinburgh and a nationalist party as coalition partners alongside the Labour Party in Wales. Furthermore, the 2007 election marked a significant rise in support for the SNP, in both the constituency and party lists (Denver et al, 2007). In consequence, there has been greater attention since 2007 to the issue of the constitutional future of the UK, and acknowledgement that the devolution 'settlement' could be re-opened. The National Conversation (Scottish Executive, 2007) launched by the SNP administration in August 2008, sets out constitutional options for Scotland and demonstrates an SNP vision firmly tied to political self-determination and independence. The SNP remains committed to introducing legislation for a referendum on independence in 2010. Unionist parties responded by setting up a Commission on the Future of Scottish Devolution (Commission on Scottish Devolution, 2008) known more generally as the Calman Commission. The Commission's remit excluded consideration of independence and focuses on how legislative devolution might be developed further within the context of the UK. Nationalist and Unionist discourses about the future constitutional arrangements of the UK have until recently run in parallel rather than being intermeshed. Events surrounding the passing of the Scottish budget in the Scottish Parliament in spring 2009 have, however, changed the dynamic somewhat (Arnott and Ozga 2009). The SNP Government agreed in response to pressure from the Scottish Liberal Democrats to submit evidence to the Calman Commission on borrowing powers for the Scottish Parliament. In return the Liberal Democrats supported the budget at the Scottish Government's second attempt to gain parliamentary support for its passage. Among other things, this account reminds us of the minority status of the SNP government, but it also illustrates the fact that, for the most part, the government has not had the appearance of a minority administration but has projected itself as 'actually governing' rather than relying on new legislation (Lynch 2008: 92). This self-presentation as 'governing' underlines our argument about the importance of discourse.

It also draws attention to the SNP's strategy of promoting discussion about the nature of government, and about the constitutional position of Scotland, and its complex set of relationships within a devolved environment (both with the UK and European governments). These discussions help to promote the idea of TSG as 'hemmed in' by the devolution settlement, but also as pushing at the edges of the settlement in pursuit of more responsive and accountable government. This creates a space which allows for debate about governance, its best forms and processes, and its purposes (see, for example, the National Conversation) (TSG 2007). For example, as one of our informants put it<sup>2</sup>:

*"I think there is a reasonable understanding in Scotland generally not just in the political classes or in the media... A constant of the SNP government narrative is we can do what we can with the powers we have got but we could do more with more powers".*

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with senior policy maker: January 2009.

The practicalities of minority government mean the SNP has to govern on the basis of co-operation and consensus. In a multi level system this requires the devolved government not only to work with other parties in the Scottish Parliament but also to develop working relationship beyond the Parliament. The ‘new style of politics’ underpinning devolution in Scotland envisaged coalition as the main mode of governance, but minority government also requires cross party working. On different occasions the SNP government has secured support from all parties in the Scottish Parliament. After the 2007 elections the SNP signed a co-operation agreement with the two Scottish Green MSPs. The Scottish Conservatives supported both SNP budgets in 2008 and 2009 while the Labour Party voted with the SNP on issue of the running of the water industry. The Scottish Liberal Democrats supported measures to end student debt. The SNP government has attempted to present some policy areas such as controls on guns and also anti drugs policy as non-partisan issues. The style of policy making under the SNP government has been one where coalitions and shared interests have been developed. This approach is perhaps epitomized in the agreement (the Concordat) the Scottish Government signed with COSLA about their future working relationship. All of these developments suggest that the SNP is shaping its governance style in accordance with new governance forms, building networks and alliances in a flexible and responsive way, and, in particular, promoting a strong overarching narrative to maintain direction and identity.

For the SNP, moving the terms of the debate towards the language of popular sovereignty is vital to the success of their longer-term agenda. Couched in the SNP’s rhetoric, it is the right of the Scottish people, expressed in a referendum vote rather than through parliament (either at Holyrood or Westminster), to support or reject the case for independence. It is clear that both constitutional forums - the Calman Commission and the National Conversation - accept devolution as an on-going process. This, as we argue below, has particular implications for the SNP’s political stance and strategies. In this context the importance of ‘crafting a narrative’ of governance is heightened:

*‘I think we already see the country go into that phase of the debate so what are seeing now is significant policy debates open up around economic powers, around borrowing powers, around the ability or the inability of a Scottish Government to properly respond when they have their hands tied behind their back. So we will craft that narrative as we crafted the Arc of Prosperity narrative but events will also craft that and the public debate will aid in that as well.’<sup>3</sup>*

The SNP government’s approach to governing has also been shaped by recognition of the interdependencies which exist between the layers of government within Scotland, and of the need to draw these levels and interdependencies into the ‘project’ of governing while enabling and promoting a new sense of responsibility and capacity. As indicated earlier, the Concordat agreement between the Scottish Government and COSLA is a very good example of this approach, which is based on ‘mutual respect and partnership’. TSG promotes the concordat as enhancing the role of local government, and ‘localism’ has become a powerful resource in the shaping governance narrative. The Concordat introduced single outcome agreements with the stated intention of changing the relationship between local and national government,

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with senior policy maker January 2009.

so that local government could 'govern' rather than administer, by responding flexibly to local priorities and needs. It is a risky strategy, but one that marks a break with the previous regime.<sup>4</sup> Reflecting on the election result of 2007 and on the developments behind the rationale for the Concordat, John Swinney, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Development argues:

'It confirmed to me that in the eight years of devolution up to that point, local government had been frustrated by a completely pointless relationship with national government...Local government was being crowded out and national government was trying to micromanage. Not only did we think it was a pointless relationship, but it just didn't represent our politics as a party; not to secure powers for us from local government, but to secure powers from Westminster for the Scottish Parliament to enable decisions to be taken at the most applicable level' (Swinney quoted in Peakin, 2009)

This shift in governing culture signals a break from centralised government of public and social policy in Scotland, that is deeply embedded historically and that reached its apogee under the previous Labour administration.<sup>5</sup>

The National Performance Framework (NPF) not only exemplifies the new relationship with local government, it is also a good example of the deployment of discursive resources to shift culture and behaviour in Scottish government. The framework is driven by a narrative that has an overarching theme: the pursuit of economic prosperity-now recovery-in order to achieve a wealthier and fairer, healthier, safer and stronger, smarter and greener, Scotland. This can be easily understood and referenced across the different social and public policy fields. It links wealth and fairness and so defines economic growth as a public good. The text conveys direction and clarity, claiming and exhibiting the authority of the government through its statement of purpose:

'To focus government and public services on creating a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth' (TSG 2007a:1)

This purpose is to be delivered through 15 national outcomes and 43 national indicators. The strategic role of governance is underlined; the shift from target-setting and monitoring to partnership is stressed, and the role of government re-defined:

'We are moving the whole of government to an outcomes-focused approach to performance. That means we will be judged-as we should be-on the results that we achieve; results which reflect real and meaningful improvements in public services and quality of life for people in Scotland.....The whole of the public sector will, for the first time, be expected to contribute to one overarching Purpose and all performance management systems will therefore be aligned to a single, clear and consistent set of priorities. The transition to an outcomes-based approach with delivery partners, including local government, will leave the detailed management of services to those who can best

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with policy maker March 2009

<sup>5</sup> Interview with policy maker February 2009

understand and tailor their resources and activities in line with local priorities. The Scottish Government will concentrate on providing leadership and direction, and focus on strategic priorities’  
(TSG 2007a:1-2)

In highlighting the importance of discourse, we draw attention to the following characteristics of this text. Firstly, it references an implicitly nationalist narrative through references to a shared project that is social democratic with a Scottish accent. The implicit narrative is one that understands the necessary references to fairness in conjunction with wealth, and the prioritisation of the ‘wicked issues’ (Clarke and Stewart 1997) endemic in Scotland and associated with poverty. Indeed throughout the social policy arena the pairing of economic growth with targeted resources to address deep-seated problems of poverty is a central element of the discursive turn through which historically-embedded qualities of the Scottish polity are linked to newer, more contemporary imperatives. In this next section, we discuss the workings of discourse in more detail.

### **Discourse as Policy/Policy as Discourse**

As indicated earlier, we see the governance turn as both dependent on and evidenced by the use of discourse by the minority SNP administration. Discourse is not ‘just words’ but has concrete effects: it makes things happen. In this we follow Stephen Ball’s framing of ‘policy as discourse’ (Ball, 1993). We thus see TSG not as devising policy in response to ‘problems’ that exist ‘out there’ but rather defining ‘problems’ discursively in their policy ‘responses’ (Bacchi 2000). Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992, 1995, Fairclough and Wodak 2008) enables analysis of TSG’s representation of ‘problems’ of education policy, and also draws attention to the transmission of policy, its translation and reception but policy partners. Our resources for this approach to policy include texts, speeches and other public forms of communication. These texts carry definitions of problems, reference particular kinds of evidence and argument, and produce ‘knowledge’ of particular kinds to guide the implementation of policy solutions. Critical discourse analysis enables the study of key policy texts, interviews and speeches with a focus on their interdiscursive features. That is, we are able to study policy texts as persuasive, but also as referencing particular contexts and connections-in this case a move away from governing practices that marked previous administrations, and the combined mobilization of new governing forms (networked and collaborative) with redefinitions of nationalism (as flexible, responsible and realistic). Attention to these discursive strategies helps to reveal the connections between text, discursive practices and wider policy, and may also reveal the relations between discourse and power relations, and between text production and networks of policy actors. We suggest that it helps to understand the strategic choices made by the SNP administration, not as continuous set of compromises forced upon it by minority status, but as a reflection of its belief in the centrality of their narrative of governance to future electoral victory and support for independence.

The SNP government uses discursive resources both to display its responsibility and capacity for bringing different elements into government and also to present a vision of what an independent Scotland could look like. Not all nationalist parties wish to secure statehood for their nations (Guibernau, 2007; Keating 2001) but for the SNP

this remains central to the party's political programme. Narrative is an importance resource for nationalists and both records and promotes forms of identity. As Ciută (2007; p.194) argues:

'Simply put, narrative is an account which has the properties of a story: a central character, an unfolding plot, a beginning, middle and end. Narrative is therefore a species of discourse whose main feature is its linear and sequential *form*, which reflects the common representation of temporal structure (past, present and future) as well as the linearity of narration. Stories are woven together by the vehicle of narrative...'

In relation to nationalism, the projection of 'Scotland' by the SNP attempts to de-problematise the 'elusiveness and contingency of the nation's precarious existence' (Baumann 1992:677) and work with the acceptance that 'commonality itself...is always an artefact of boundary drawing activity: always contentious and contested, glossing over some (potentially disruptive) differentiations and representing other (objectively minor) differences as powerful and decisive separating factors (Baumann 1992: 677). Nationalism, in this approach, is itself a form of discourse: it is a system of representation through which people make sense of their worlds. Moreover it is what Baumann and others have described as 'we-talks': that is it is always in construction 'against' others (Özkirimli 2005). It is also hegemonic, seeking to conceal fractures and differences, its preferred values are 'naturalised', becoming common sense and taken for granted, but this requires constant work to renew and develop the discourse (Calhoun 1997). TSG currently promotes an approach to nationalism that is open, negotiated and inclusive<sup>6</sup>:

*'..we started off the National Conversation with a White Paper that was very very broad, very inclusive. ... It has made us look non-prescriptive as a Party. We've got our prejudices and our views, of course we have, but it's non-prescriptive.'*

The inclusive and non-traditional version of nationalism has been noted by media commentators:

*'What they've tried to do really is to make themselves tantamount to Scotland. They are doing it quite deliberately...What they are trying to do is say well- Scotland-what is it that you want? We think that you are broadly social democratic left on social policy and we think that you probably welcome more tax powers and welcome the freedom to choose on a referendum and so they position themselves like that'*<sup>7</sup>.

As illustrated by the quotations, TSG uses discourse to foreground certain key ideas in relation to nationalism and thus restrict or reduce the significance of other competing ways of seeing or thinking about the issue. Discourse, in effect, creates and recreates the world by eliminating some possibilities and focusing on others. For a minority government, seeking to persuade the public that government is safe in its hands, and that independence is a realistic and unthreatening possibility, discourse is very significant as a policy resource. Indeed since coming to power the SNP administration has been highly focused on 'crafting the narrative' -a phrase used by

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with senior policy maker February 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with media representative May 2009.

senior TSG members- for example in this response to a question about whether crafting the narrative is a policy strategy.

The need to ‘modernise’ nationalism shapes the narrative: as Keating (2001; xii) has argued in relation to minority nationalism: ‘...in many cases they represent modernizing and democratizing movements in the face of archaic states.’ The SNP essentially blends older traditions of political sovereignty and self-determination alongside a ‘modernised’ vision of what an independent Scotland may look like, and this blend contains considerable tensions. In the same way, the discursive turn towards partnership and consensus building marks a break with a heavily centralized past, but it also creates tensions about lack of guidance and support from government, especially where resources are scarce. We turn now to look at how these tensions are ‘managed’ discursively through the development of ‘modernised nationalism’ in the policy area of education since 2007, to illustrate our argument about the significance of discourse in achieving this project.

### **Education Policy Since 2007**

Education policy is a key area for the SNP because it combines a central focus on the economy with well-established, if implicit, ideas of national identity. Education in Scotland played a particularly strong role historically in the shaping and support of national identity (McCrone, 1992; Paterson, 1997), as one of the ‘holy trinity’ (Paterson 2003) of institutions-Law and the Church being the others- that encapsulated Scotland’s ‘stateless nationhood’ from 1707-1999. The contemporary relationship of nationalism and education is not yet well-researched in Scotland: research on education policy since devolution tends to focus on convergence or divergence with the UK government’s education policies (Arnott 2005; Humes and Bryce, 2003; Menter et al, 2004, 2006; Ozga 2005, Raffe 2005). Convergent pressure followed from the fact that from 1999 until May 2007 the Labour Party was in power both in Scotland and at the UK level and as a consequence there were common themes in education policy in both Scotland and England-themes such as choice, privatisation and standards (Arnott, 2005; Croxford and Raffe, 2007). These tended to be actively promoted by the Westminster UK government and reflected in policy in Scotland. However even with this close relationship there were divergences: policy texts in Scotland sometimes conveyed an uneasy blending of rather contradictory approaches: for example the ‘Ambitious Excellent Schools’ programme (Scottish Executive, 2004) echoed English based reforms in its apparent support for the introduction of more diversity in provision but within a framework that stressed the centrality of the principle of comprehensive provision.

As we suggested earlier, education is an increasingly significant arena of social policy, because of its centrality to the new governance project, and to economic recovery. It thus has growing links to policy on health, crime and welfare more generally. In the wider context from which we began this paper, we stressed the redefinition of education as ‘learning’ and its centrality in policy for economic recovery across Europe. In that context, we see evidence of conventional economic and individualising policy (to develop skills and personalise learning, for example) across the European Union and beyond, promoted by powerful transnational organisations like OECD. This policy agenda is strongly signalled in the early days of the new Scottish government where education/learning is required to create ‘new’

Scots who are ‘better educated, more skilled and more successful, renowned for our research and innovation’ and young people are expected to be and to become ‘successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens’ (Hyslop 2008).

However the SNP’s education/learning policy discourse has not been entirely scripted by globalising pressures: instead it reflects a very interesting site of ‘modernised’ nationalism. It has moved beyond the historical project of education as ‘the space for the construction of national identity’ (Novóá 1996:46), but positions Scotland’s education/learning policy as a site of construction of modernised nationalism through a complex mix of ‘inward’ and ‘outward’ referencing. Through inward referencing, implicit characteristics of the education system and the nation are mobilised, through outward referencing, Scotland is repositioned and realigned in a global, competitive polycscape (Appadurai 1996).

In making this argument we are drawing on discourse analysis of interviews conducted with policy makers in late 2008 and early 2009 [28 interviews in all] and on analysis of relevant policy texts. Drawing on that analysis, we identify a major discursive shift since May 2007 in education policy. We suggest that education policy provides a key arena for the formation and propagation of the SNP’s discursive blend of social democracy and wealth creation as the key ingredients of modernized nationalism. The discourse draws on established myths and traditions that reference the ‘public’ nature of schooling and its role in both the construction of ‘community’ and in driving economic progress. The social democratic elements of this discourse refer to historically-embedded themes in twentieth century Scottish education policy especially in the period of post-1945 social democracy (McPherson and Raab, 1988; Paterson 2003). At the same time, education offers a key policy arena for the pursuit of wealth creation and for the promotion of new forms of inclusive nationalism, which ‘people in Scotland’ can opt into. One further significant element of the discursive shift is a marked move away from referencing England as the significant ‘other’ in education policy: this underlines the break with the policy focus of the previous Labour government, which tended to follow the Westminster lead but-as noted above, with a Scottish inflection. However it is more significant than that, in that ending the pre-occupation with England enables the SNP to produce new ‘imaginaries’ (Anderson 2006) of the nation with which Scotland may be aligned.

In the remainder of this section of the paper, we look at three separate policy developments and their discursive framing, firstly, the shift of resources towards very young children and young adults from poor backgrounds, secondly the use of international comparisons of performance, and thirdly in the framing of the new policy for higher education.

*Referencing Poverty alongside wealth Creation:* In the first months of the new government, the dominant discourse in education policy was very much that of the global ‘knowledge economy’ and skills agenda as set out by the First minister in his presentation of the strategic objectives of the new government to the Scottish parliament (Salmond 2007). Here the need for an education and skills strategy to support economic development is presented without much reference to education as a resource for fairness or new forms of national identification. Early statements by the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Fiona Hyslop, also stress the need to tie education to

the promotion of sustained economic growth (Hyslop 2007 a and b). However fairly soon after this there is a shift in parliamentary and committee debates towards incorporating education's capacity to address problems of poverty in the speeches and statements that supported a shift of resources towards early interventions in order to more directly address the links between underachievement and poverty. Scotland has one of the highest proportions of any OECD country of 15-19 year olds designated 'NEETS' or 'not in education, employment or training'. The previous Labour administration had prioritised investment in both early years and the 'NEETS' group. We are not suggesting that the SNP developed a new policy direction: what is important for our purposes is the new way in which this policy is promoted. It is harnessed more explicitly to the 'fairer' agenda: long-term investment is being made in a group now said to be in need of 'more choices and more chances' (MCMC) rather than in some sense 'not in' the system. A significant issue here is the long horizon: TSG positions itself<sup>8</sup> as strategic despite its minority position:

*Despite the fact there is a sense we were vulnerable because we are a minority government we have made decisions and taken on board policies that are transformational and are long term. We are not shying away from that despite it would be easier to do short term things. So for example in terms of education we have basically got three main strategic areas that we are focussing on. One is the early years agenda, the second is curriculum for excellence and the third is the skills strategy and all of these are not immediate wins. These are long-term strategic issues for the country.*

A further point, stressed by TSG members in our interviews, was that policy differed from the previous administration because of its scope (looking across the life-course and all policy areas) and its means of development and delivery:

*[the previous policy] wasn't about transformation and looking at things in a holistic way which is our approach. So it is our approach to these policy areas which I think is different.... Looked at from volume, activity and emphasis we have done far more to the early years framework in Scotland and we have actually delivered it with local government as well. Again policy making recognises that we have social partners and that is very different and European. So part of it has social democratic aspects in content and delivery.*

In prioritizing investments in early years and NEETS TSG worked discursively by embedding the discussion in descriptions of a system that was successful and worked well for most, thereby reminding people of their use of, and success in, a meritocratic system, while raising their obligations to help particular groups overcome the disadvantages caused by their material conditions.

This way of characterizing the education system is also to be found in TSG's response to the previous administration's reform package 'Curriculum for Excellence'. In its previous existence, it was described in terms that tended to reference the knowledge economy agenda of the Lisbon Council, and the policy discourse around CfE was very much that on modernization in pursuit of economic growth. CfE was promoted as an example of a European-even global-policy agenda for increased

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with senior policy maker May 2009.

‘personalisation’ of learning with attention to building learners’ confidence, enterprise and a range of intelligences in order to better align schooling with KE requirements for self-managing, responsible entrepreneurs.

The SNP administration does not neglect the economic imperatives, far from it, but it aligns the delivery of CfE more directly to ideas of using education to challenge inequalities. In this connection they have made some use of the 2008 OECD Review of education in Scotland that was commissioned by the previous administration. Though they have welcomed the report, apart from using it to provide evidence that Scotland is a ‘well-educated country’, there have been few concrete policy developments, beyond its use to add a further reference point that supports a policy narrative of modernization in pursuit of both economic capacity and fairness. While this is low key it is significant, in that a shift away from the traditional academic character of Scottish schooling is being quietly promoted through references to the need to extend opportunity and fairness, as well as ensure effective economic growth through education. The discursive shift is accomplished by foregrounding the social justice issue (ie we are well-schooled but the poorest pupils do very badly) and using that shared idea of Scottish education (as socially just and fair) to displace its meritocratic character and thus enable the dilution of academic curricula and the development of CfE. Thus referencing ‘inward’ to particular social democratic elements of ‘shaping myths’ allows for a shift in a fundamental characteristic of Scottish provision, supported by international evidence, which does not extensively reference England.

#### *Referencing Outward: repositioning Scottish education*

The question of international comparisons also features in the second policy case; that of the selection of comparator nations, and the judgement of performance. One of the most powerful forms of international assessment is OECD’s PISA test, which creates league tables of more or less successful nations. PISA has been a complex issue politically for the UK, as OECD originally recognized only one system (ie the UK), but has shifted over time to acknowledge the separate Scottish system, which was entered separately in PISA in 2003 and 2006. Before the SNP election victory, PISA was often used by politicians in Whitehall and latterly in Holyrood to score points in an inter-UK competition for status as best performers in the OECD league. Since 2007, however, there is a shift in the discussion, which reflects a wider shift in ‘referencing outward’ to other systems. The UK-and specifically England-has been displaced discursively in the reception of PISA. Other comparators are referenced. As one of our informants puts it:

*‘ I think we should start really to look at some of the Baltic countries – say Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia – there are some other countries coming along.... how those countries are developing, their economies and developing how they operate...’*

(SG 1)

In other words, interviewees suggested that PISA can now be used to reinforce Scotland’s distinctiveness (from England) by providing knowledge about the performance of the system that can be used internally (in the UK) to resist pressures (from the UK government) for more testing and for the publication of individual test results on a national comparative basis. It is also available as a source of discursive

framing of Scotland's education in relation to a new set of comparator nations, so that it is used both to reinforce Scottish distinctiveness (as a system that does not adopt widespread testing and monitoring of performance unlike England but still does well) while repositioning it through new relations with small strong-and emergent-states.

At the same time as referencing PISA to both reassure and move the international frame of reference, TSG began to extend the principles of comparison so that they were more generalized across social policy areas and more general OECD data, not just PISA data, were used to create an independent research report – the Index of Children's Well-being in Scotland. Categories included suicide rates, dental health, child poverty; teenage pregnancy rates etc and Scotland came almost last of 24 OECD comparator 'western' countries. Thus although PISA data looked healthy, other OECD derived data showed the severe problems in Scotland and the need for a more considered approach to Children's services as a whole. [The kids aren't all right 6 July, 2007]. This attention to the social indicators of health, wealth and well-being enabled the further development of the modernized nationalist narrative-one that takes some embedded myths or ideals about Scotland and brings them into relationship with continuing social problems.

The two strands of the discourse are combined in December 2007 when the Cabinet Secretary for education uses these data to support the Nationalist government's policy shift towards investment and intervention in early education. The speech underlines the SNP's focus combining attention to the economy and addressing problems of poverty and society-again, a shift in emphasis towards provision for the 'whole' child rather than focusing on education as a separate policy sphere:

'Finally, only yesterday, the programme for international student assessment—PISA—report was published. It showed that Scotland's reading and maths scores have experienced one of the highest drops of all the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. Scotland also has one of the biggest gaps in performance, which can be identified as related to poverty and deprivation.

She goes on to reference PISA directly in explaining the early years strategy-again, the emphasis on the roots of poverty is strongly present:

'By 2006, Scotland was outscored by four countries in science, five in reading and eight in maths. We are determined to reverse that trend. If we are to tackle Scotland's challenges as identified in the international PISA survey and to climb back up the international tables, we must deal with poverty at its roots and tackle the impact that it can have on families.'  
(Hyslop 2007a)

#### *Higher Education: 'New Horizons'*

The final example of the role of the modernized nationalist discourse in framing education policy comes from higher education, and draws on analysis of TSG's policy text, produced in collaboration with Universities Scotland: 'New Horizons: Responding to the Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'. This text sets out to develop a shared agenda for Scottish higher education that will 'optimise and shape the contribution which the Scottish university sector can make during the next 20 years to

the Scottish economy, to Scottish culture and society and to the political priorities of TSG'

A key element in making constructing this shift in the universities has been the promotion of a perspective that positions them as a collective interest within Scotland. Devolution prompted this shift, and was followed by some divergence in the areas of tuition fees. However perhaps more important was the new landscape of higher education provision in Scotland, that became evident post-devolution. At a very basic level, as one of our informants put it<sup>9</sup>, this meant seeing what the sector looked like. For the first time, data on the Scottish universities were produced separately (rather than being subsumed within the UK statistics) and, as a consequence, the sector became better informed about itself and also more aware of its identity as a collectivity.

Another informant underlines the strengthening of collective identity through initiatives such as research pooling and the allocation of RAE funding by the Scottish Funding Council-which was concerned to ensure widespread collective benefit rather than selective funding of one or two institutions. The New Horizons initiative, through which the universities are 'aligned' with TSG's strategic purposes, fits into this developing agenda<sup>10</sup>:

*'The strength of Scottish university system is that we have diversity within the universities themselves and that is to be celebrated and supported and we will do that. That is one of the outcomes of the report but it also forced them to think as part of a collective responsibility.'*

The steering parallels global developments in which higher education institutions are brought into closer alignment with wealth creation and the economic and political priorities of their governments (Ozga, Seddon and Popkewitz 2006). Here, however we want to signal the congruence of this text with the general orientation of TSG in working with embedded assumptions or shaping myths about the role of Scottish universities (as civic institutions, with strong commitments to building civil society through fostering 'the democratic intellect') while at the same time insisting on the priority of the economic. It is not the foregrounding of economic imperatives for higher education that is distinctive, rather it is their combination with social democratic aims and ends, that are designed to persuade a possibly sceptical and resistant audience, by excluding those who do not opt in to this narrative, and judging them to be deficient in their attention to such principles as 'prosperity and opportunities for all'. The universities are characterized by TSG as 'among the strongest and most vibrant institutions in civic Scotland' and as key components of cultural identity and contributors to a more enlightened society. The discursive framing of the universities combined their academic excellence, economic importance and civic and social contributions and responsibilities in ways that seek to use nationalism but in a modernized form, so that references 'inward' are combined with allusions to world class quality, and excellence sits alongside social and civic contributions. In sum, universities represent 'the soul of Scotland'.

This framing provides the justification for a policy move intended to persuade the universities to work in new ways-principally collaboratively in order to give priority

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with senior official May 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with senior policy maker May 2009

to TSG's policy priorities, and strategic steering in this direction is to be achieved through loosening reporting requirements on the institutions and freeing them and the funding council up to develop new relations with one another and with Scotland's business base. There are significant changes in the funding regime, with funding to be delivered in two streams, the General Fund for Universities (GFU) and the Horizons Fund for Universities (HFU). The GFU is described as offering more flexibility and enabling more university discretion in its use-though delivery is judged against the government's key objectives, while the HFU is directed by government and 'incentivised' delivery is linked to key Government strategies and priorities. Thus as well as the mobilization of modernized nationalism, we see here the use of new networked forms of governance through co-option rather than regulation.

This is a very significant change in the relationship of the universities, TSG and the funding council-indeed it is described in the New Horizons document as a 'redefinition of roles and responsibilities' of each of these organisations. Universities are described as seeking more freedom to make decisions and adapt more quickly, and the new funding regime is presented as de-regulation; as 'lighter touch' – accompanying the acceptance by universities that they 'must play a different role' (New Horizons 2009:27):

'.....universities should be explicitly recognised as a key sector of the Scottish economy and accept the challenge of demonstrating how their objectives align closely with the Scottish Government's Purpose and Strategic Objectives. By accepting this challenge, their case for continuing and increasing levels of funding will become much stronger.

This is the crux of the 'something for something' deal between the Scottish government and our universities.

In these three education policy examples-from early years provision, to international comparisons and higher education-we are drawing attention to the use of discourse in framing the debate, and the mobilisation, through particular references, of embedded resources through the 'inward' referencing of ideas about Scotland and especially about Scottish education that are linked to fairness and civic and national identity. These principles are carried forward and outward through the use of social democratic references in the wider international context. Thus discourse carries the policy agenda of modernised nationalism through its blending of inward and outward references.

## Conclusions

We argue on the basis of this work that education and policy for education/learning now occupies a critical role in the governance turn in which the SNP administration is engaged. We connect that governance turn to more general development, especially in the education/learning policy work of the European Commission, which-like the SNP-cannot rely on legislation to effect change in that sphere of policy. The Scottish Government is post-bureaucratic in its modes of operation, especially in its emphasis on social partnership working through collaborative networks, and in its heavy reliance on discourse as a governing resource-in this case the discourse of (modernised) nationalism, located within the European 'project' and played out through education/learning policy that mixes economic imperatives with civic responsibilities and collective good.

This changing mode of governance has been developed by the SNP government in the context of its minority status and the complexity of the agenda in relation to nationalism and independence. This context greatly enhances the significance of discourse in policy, as discourse is the resource that provides coherence and direction to networked forms, and that pushes forward the project of modernising nationalism, by bringing the embedded references into alignment with social democratic principles. Attention to the discursive framing of policy by TSG enables their minority status to be seen as a resource rather than a weakness, within the context of a devolution process, rather than a 'settlement'.

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