

Archival Review: The Scottish Political Archive – A Contemporary Collection

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[The Scottish Political Archive](#) (SPA) was established in October 2010 as a research project in the Division of History and Politics (now History, Heritage and Politics) at the University of Stirling. It was intended to create a publicly accessible archival research repository to support the division's research relating to devolution within Scotland – with emphasis on the referenda of 1979 and 1997 – and the campaign for a Scottish Parliament.¹

When SPA was established Dr Peter Lynch, a Senior Lecturer in Politics, was instated as the director of the archive and Sarah Bromage as the archivist. Sarah had a previous wealth of experience in the creation of oral histories, a practise which was very much embedded into SPA's collecting from the outset. There was a scarcity of material for the period that SPA wanted to collect around in other existing collections and both referenda were sufficiently far enough in the past that it was unlikely a general call out for material would yield much. Oral history, therefore, was seen as a natural way to fill in the gaps by speaking to those who were there at the time and might remember all that was missing from the physical record. As with many oral history projects, Sarah soon found that interviewees often owned items which they were happy to donate to the archive and so SPA was able to accession physical material to accompany the interviews.



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*Campaign to save Gartosh Steel Works which eventually closed in 1989
'How many Scottish jobs must be lost before you vote for self-government?'*

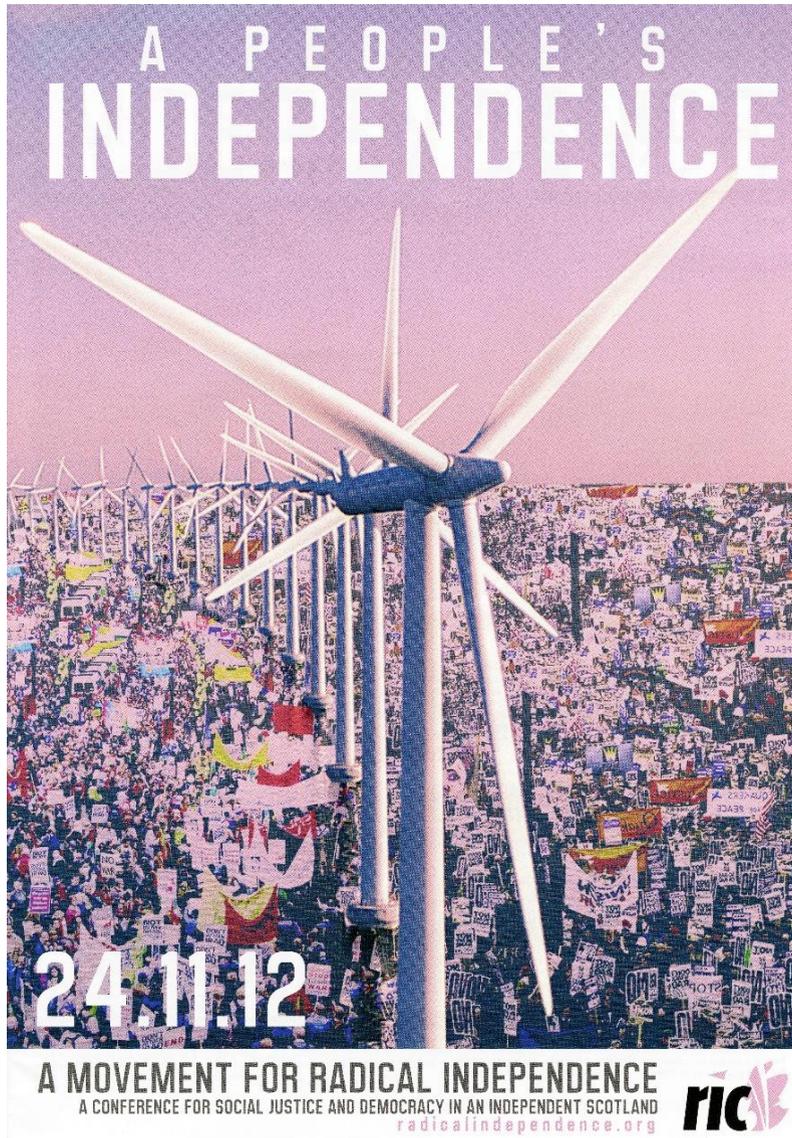
The first complete collection that came to SPA was that of [George Robertson](#), MP for Hamilton (1978 – 1999) and Secretary General of NATO (1999 – 2004). Owing to his long career in politics, much of his professional papers cover the pre-devolution period and illuminate the road to Scotland re-establishing its own Parliament.

SPA has very much continued in this vein of collecting, creating oral history interviews for personal insights and first-hand accounts, supplementing this with ephemera, publications, speeches and photographs and taking in the professional papers of Scottish Politicians

who have worked closely with issues of initial and further devolution, Scottish Independence and the creation of a Scottish Parliament. In this way SPA can evidence official reasoning and actions in contemporary Scottish Politics as well as attest to the contextual public opinion.

October 2012 was a significant period in Scottish politics, particularly with respect to SPA's collecting focus – it was announced that Scotland would be holding a referendum in 2014 to decide whether or not Scotland would become an independent country. Collecting around this event was the natural progression of the archive whose existing collections often touched on the issue of Independence, so closely entwined with devolution as it is. The announcement gave SPA the opportunity to consider what material it wished still existed from the referenda of '79 and '97 and set out to try and preserve something similar for the run up to 2014 and that referendum's immediate aftermath. Volunteers were sent out to events to take copies of pamphlets and flyers, take photographs of campaign stalls, demonstrations, billboards and posters and by creating a wide network, SPA aimed to document both the grassroots Yes and the No campaigns, and evidence messages from across the whole of Scotland, not just the big cities.

Indeed, the varying of political messages from place to place across Scotland had long been something SPA was interested in preserving. After consulting with various institutions across Scotland who also collect around Scottish Politics SPA realised that material which evidenced regional messages was a huge gap in these collections and set out to remedy this, beginning with the 2011 Scottish Election. Ever since, a network of volunteers and donors from across Scotland send in party pamphlets, leaflets and campaign letters relating to election periods. In this way researchers can see parties' succinct policies and evidence whether messages vary across Scotland.



Radical Independence conference leaflet, 2012

This kind of collecting practise is now called contemporary collecting and has swept the record-keeping profession particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. What began in SPA as a gut instinct solution to capture ephemera which, by its nature, often ends up in the bin very quickly or billboards and public posters which are often overlooked as evidential material, has become a widespread way for archives to record the effect the pandemic has had on their communities. At the heart of doing contemporary collecting well is the task of creating strong links with a motivated community. Contemporary collecting the way SPA does it, asks for material time and time again, for every election, peaceful protest and rally. Because of this, it is important to us to build a community of people working *together* to preserve and make Scotland's political history accessible.

During the period of the 2014 referendum, SPA took in the papers of former First Minister of Scotland, Lord McConnell of Glenscorrodale (now the Chancellor of the University of Stirling). Not only was he a student at the University where his political career arguably began as President of the Student's Association, but he also served on the Stirling District Council before becoming an MSP in the first Scottish Parliament in 1999. The archive of Scotland's first First Minister Donald Dewar did not survive and thus Lord McConnell's archive provides a unique insight into the establishment of the Parliament and the first decade of this institution.

Rosie Al-Mulla came on board as a second part time archivist in 2019 as SPA launched their [Holyrood Graphic Novel crowdfunder](#). The goal of this project is to create a graphic novel illustrating the road to a Scottish Parliament - touching on the referenda of '79 and '97 and the processes and practices of the new Parliament that SPA had originally been formed to document – in a bright and striking medium, employing a Glasgow based illustrator and small amounts of text from lecturers in the Division of History, Heritage and Politics. After a period of fundraising, SPA raised

enough money to begin putting this book together, to commission the illustrator and create the graphic novel in PDF form. The ultimate goal is to print physical copies and provide every school and public library in Scotland with one, not only to provide an innovative and easy way to explain how Scotland's Parliament was formed and what it does, but also to highlight the wonderful archive collections from whence the novel's original source material comes. SPA is still a way from its target of being able to provide all these free copies so please do support the crowdfunder if you too would like to see a printed version of our graphic novel!



Jack McConnell, then President of the Student's Association at the University of Stirling addresses crowds on campus during the 1981 anti-cuts demonstrations.

Creating the Holyrood Graphic Novel appealed greatly to the team behind SPA who are always keen to provide alternative means of accessing the collections to encourage engagement not only from the researchers we have come to expect but also by people who might not be used to accessing archives at all or find politics as a subject inaccessible, difficult or boring.



Photographs from SPA collections have been used by illustrator Jules Scheele to create new and vibrant art work for the Holyrood Graphic Novel

For those with an interest in visual evidence, a vast amount of our photo collection is available on [Flickr](#) and we have an upcoming section relating

to Bus Party material on the University of Stirling's Archives and Special Collections' digital collections page on [ISTOR](#).²

SPA proactively works with volunteers from across the University community – from Politics students at every level to University alumni – and their work is integral to the cataloguing of our collections. Through their work, the volunteers also gain skills which will prepare them for undertaking archivist qualifications or enhancing their research skills. As archivists at SPA, we also teach on a number of courses, discussing collecting practises, exhibition skills, digital marketing and research and dissertation writing techniques.

Sometimes our work with students and staff collide, as is the case with our partnership with MicroPasts, an open-source platform co-created by staff at the University of Stirling which crowdsources tasks that general members of the public are able to easily perform from their own homes such as transcribing, geo-tagging and describing cultural heritage collections to increase accessibility. This has been particularly wonderful for our volunteers during the pandemic while they were not able to come onto campus and engage in their usual tasks. Following a very [successful project](#) transcribing leaflets from the 2014 Independence Referendum collection, we now have an [ongoing project](#) to tag photographs from the same collection. Here, volunteers can learn digital heritage skills whilst also greatly improving the accessibility of our collections for a variety of users, collecting and recording additional information on items in our collection.

As archivists, Sarah and Rosie come from quite different heritage backgrounds. Because of Sarah's background working in art collections and museums, she has an eye for active outreach between the archive and the public, taking the form of exhibitions, research projects and events. Rosie, coming from a purely archives professional background has, since joining SPA, focused on catalogue arrangement, archive

policies and sharing SPA with the record-keeping sector. Together, they are excited for the next chapter of the Scottish Political Archive and a continuation of our collaboration with NISE.

The collections of SPA are available through the reading room at the University of Stirling's Archives and Special Collections. If you have any further questions or comments, you can contact us on scottishpoliticalarchive@stir.ac.uk

Endnotes

¹ These two referendums were key to the creation of the Scottish Parliament. In 1979, the referendum was held to decide whether or not there was sufficient support for a Scottish Assembly as was proposed in the Scotland Act 1978. As fewer than 40% of the Scottish electorate voted 'Yes' (51.6% voted in support of a Scottish Assembly but as there was only a turnout of 64%, the equivalent vote was 32.9%) the Act was repealed. In the intervening years the case for a devolved Parliament was strengthened and in 1997 the new Labour Government announced a referendum. In this referendum, a majority voted 'Yes' in favour of a Scottish Parliament with devolved powers and for the Parliament to have tax varying powers. The Scottish Parliament was subsequently established in 1999.

² The Bus Party toured around Scotland in 1997 to encourage political debate and a good turn out for the Referendum irrespective of party preference. In 2014, The Bus Party toured as The Listening Lugs Tour, travelling around 16 communities in Scotland over the course of a week, encouraging discussion about communities' hopes for a future Scotland. Again, the goal was not to support a particular vote or standpoint but to embrace all viewpoints and have faith in a future Scotland.