

The Future of the UK

Between Internal and External Divisions

Edited by

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4. European, not British? Scottish Nationalism and the EU Referendum

Neil McGarvey and Fraser Stewart

The EU Referendum campaign, result and aftermath have ensured that Scotland's constitutional status both within the United Kingdom and the European Union remains in sharp focus. Eyes are now firmly fixed on the Scottish government, as they initiate plans to hold a second vote on Scottish independence. Whether or not the people of Scotland are ready for another referendum, having already voted on independence in 2014 and on membership of the European Union earlier this year, remains to be seen.

Of course, there is a palpable desire among vastly pro-Europe nationalist voters and politicians for a second campaign, with data suggesting most favour another ballot within the next 24 months (Stewart 2016, forthcoming). That would mean three major referenda in Scotland in six years. Already we have endured two major constitutional votes since 2014, with two major general elections in between. But it is important to note that the Scottish and European referendums were two remarkably different campaigns, predicated upon two very different nationalisms.

Two Very Different Campaigns

Naturally, some similarities between the Scottish independence and Brexit campaigns were evident; both invoked the image of an institutional oppressor to some degree, for example, as a means to creating something of an anti-establishment image. Both invoked a version of nationalism. But even these shallow similarities are vastly different on closer inspection. Beyond surface level, the two 'change' campaigns – 2014 'Yes' and 2016 'Leave' – in fact shared very little in common. Stark contrasts were evident in everything from content to strategy to engagement.

First, Scotland's Yes campaign was one underpinned by an unerring optimism. From the name itself to campaign slogans and propaganda, the Yes movement was almost entirely positive by design. It was an initiative governed by the notion that people want to vote *for* something, rather than against it – a lesson learned perhaps from previous campaigns won by the then first Minister and figurehead of the Yes campaign, Alex Salmond, in 2007 and 2011 respectively (see Mitchell et al. 2013). Central messages focussed not on the oppression of Westminster, but rather on decidedly egalitarian and progressive messages, such as peace, fairer wages, heightened prosperity within the international community and a closer relationship with government. Vote Leave, on the other hand, was very much a negative project, hinged predominantly on the principle of invoking social anxieties. Voting to leave the EU and 'Take

Back Control' was sold as the only way to placate these concerns: control of borders and citizenship were especially prominent sentiments.

Participation in each campaign was equally divergent. Between 2012 and 2014, Yes Scotland successfully mobilised grassroots participation to quite an emphatic degree, with over 250 local Yes groups formed throughout the campaign (not including other initiatives, such as Radical Independence and Labour for Indy). Tens of thousands of activists quite famously took to the streets, canvassed, delivered leaflets and debated the merits of Yes across the country. Social media was also employed as a key and thriving battleground. Indeed, the 'political awakening' created by the Scottish referendum is well-renowned (Geohegan 2014; Blain et al. 2016). The EU referendum, on the other hand, remained a largely elitist debate. Grassroots mobilisation was virtually non-existent in comparison. Instead both the Leave and Remain campaigns were represented almost exclusively by a handful of elected Westminster MPs, and fought very much across newspaper and television platforms.

Two Very Different Nationalisms

Each of these factors ties in with the matter of nationalism. Much is often said, quite lazily, about the badness of nationalism; its insularity and its regressive tendencies and

often discriminatory sentiments (see Brown 1999 for a review). But these two campaigns show just how immensely diverse the topic of nationalism can be.

Derived from its message of positivity, the Yes campaign promoted a nationalism which was far less about the cultural superiority traditionally associated with nationalist movements, and far more to do with political empowerment. It forged a tenet of what has since come to be known as 'civic' nationalism – a diverse and forward-thinking ideology, premised on the vision of Scotland as an open and equal society.

Vote Leave, however, very much presented the populist and xenophobic vulgarities of old. Immigration, refugees and terrorism would all become key spectres in the race to win votes. Underlying scepticism towards immigrants in the UK was fuelled into something far more socially divisive, while the image of pure and imperial 'Great Britishness' was invoked as a collective identity.

Such 'Great British' values are little recognisable in Scotland. In recent years, British identity has shifted from the New Labour vision – one with 'global connections and European roots' (Parekh 2000, 260) – back to the more 'cartoonish' superiority complex of the Conservatives (Kidd 2008, 5). It is a version of British identity articulated by and commonly associated with the likes of Enoch Powell and Margaret Thatcher, and hinges on four main criteria: the absolute

sovereignty of the UK parliament; Britain as an individualist society; pre-political unity of the British people under shared values; and the centrality of British interests in all matters, foreign and domestic. It is a British identity sceptical of European involvement, opposed to a large welfare state and staunchly against the principles of Home Rule in Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Scotland has not given backing to such discourse in decades, decisively rejecting time and again the politics of Thatcherism and Britishness so synonymously associated with traditional Conservative philosophy (Hassan 2014, 130). The EU debate of 2016 thus never did look like the one in Scotland two years prior – largely because it felt like the Scottish people had no part in it. Viewed from north of the border, the EU debate was one taking place elsewhere; an alien debate reminiscent of the imperial British nation pre-Common Market. Conservative versus Conservative debates were intensely Anglo-centric, and lacking in the egalitarian principles so often attributed to the Scottish electorate (Cairney and McGarvey 2013; Hassan 2014). Even the immediate Brexit fallout – the impact on the City (of London), the collapse of sterling, the resignation of David Cameron and mass exodus of Labour’s shadow cabinet – felt like foreign issues, and existed in immense disparity to the seemingly stable nature of politics in Edinburgh.

By the time votes were counted, the sense of political divergence was obvious. If Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage’s

version of Britishness is inherently Eurosceptic, Scottish sentiments were far from harmonious. This divergence was reflected perhaps most unambiguously in the final result, which saw the UK as a whole vote to leave the EU (52 per cent to 48 per cent), with Scotland voting quite conclusively to remain (62 per cent to 38 per cent). Every single one of Scotland's 32 local council areas, including its island councils, voted to stay part of the European Union. The Anglo-centricity of the debate and indeed the collective British identity had not resonated with voters in Scotland as it had elsewhere in the UK. Quite the contrary in fact: this outcome would present a brief but sharp spike in support for independence, and afford Nicola Sturgeon precisely the 'material change' she had been seeking to demand a new Scottish referendum.

European, not British? Scottish Nationalism and the EU

Considerable uncertainty has hence been thrown up in Scotland by the EU referendum result. Despite Scottish political leaders surviving the post-Brexit cull, nothing else is particularly secure in either European or domestic affairs. The 2016 Scotland Act, with its maelstrom of shared responsibilities between Holyrood and Westminster, looks like a recipe for volatility. Combined with the residual and unerring support for independence amongst a substantial

portion of the population, the constitutional question remains far from settled; if anything, it looms more prominently now than ever before. Without question, the two referenda have done substantially more to de-stabilise, rather than solidify, Scotland's place within the United Kingdom.

Further uncertainty is to be found in the actual process of leaving. The UK government has indicated it will not invoke Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty until Spring 2017, meaning that the UK is likely to remain an EU member state until 2019. Nobody quite knows exactly what the triggering of Article 50 will mean in practice. Beyond affirming that the will of the electorate will be implemented with a series of meaningless soundbites ('Brexit means Brexit'), information regarding how to proceed is scarce. Needless to say, whenever Article 50 is triggered in 2017, it will have implications across a huge range of policy areas in the UK, as outlined by a recent House of Commons paper (2016).

But the effects to UK policy areas are perhaps the least of the UK government's worries, knowing now the very real threat posed by Brexit to the Union. At the 2016 Scottish Parliamentary elections, the Scottish National Party (SNP) insisted that a vote to leave Europe against Scotland's will would potentially trigger a second independence referendum; the promise now-famously alluded to as a 'material change in circumstances' in their manifesto. Some might assume, then, that the nationalist attachment to

Europe is merely an act of political opportunism to achieve the ultimate aim of independence – this would be a very narrow and selective interpretation to make.

This European/Scottish nationalist affinity is more than a recent political invention. Since launching their 'Independence in Europe' slogan at the party's 1988 Annual Conference, the SNP have utilised attachment to and membership of the EU as a counter to the unionist charge of separatism. Given their desire for full Scottish autonomy, many have quite reasonably questioned the ideological consistency of being both pro-Europe and pro-independence. It is not, however, an impossible position by any means. The SNP have long sought to cement a relationship between their brand of outward, civic nationalism and emphasise its cogency with the European project. Its written constitution, shared rule and intergovernmental politics are all attributes favoured within Scottish nationalism over the centralised single-party governance of Westminster. An independent Scotland would seek a formal constitution which was modern in its assertion of ideals, rather than adopting the UK's instrumentalist approach. An independent Scotland would ultimately be a European one.

Herein lie the ideological roots of the Yes movement and indeed much of the enduring support for Scottish independence – what Barton Swaim of *the Washington Post* described as 'post-national nationalism' (2016). At the very

heart, Scotland's nationalism is not insular, and nor does it seek autonomy for autonomy's sake; it is not culturally superior or nationally charged in any significant way, as was the conservative British nationalism of the EU referendum. Rather, it is an almost practical and decidedly political position that seeks both a closer relationship between people and power, and Scotland and the international community.

Conclusion

The path to independence remains fraught with obstacles. Gaining consent to host a second referendum from an especially hostile Conservative government will not be straightforward. Nor will winning one – opinions on both the Yes and No sides have hardened since 2014 (Khomami 2016). Despite a flurry of post-Brexit opinion polls in late June showing majorities for independence (Philip 2016), more recent polls still tend to show a small majority against. Indeed, the economic case for Scottish independence has suffered as a result of falling oil prices since 2014, while the question of currency remains unanswered.

But it is impossible to deny that Scotland's relationship in the UK since 1999 has been that of an ever-looser Union. The 2014 referendum vote may have affirmed that the people of Scotland were not quite ready for divorce, but this is no longer 2014. Two years later, the paradigm has very much

been altered. Remaining in the UK is no longer the status quo option. There is no middle-ground choice. One involves leaving the EU with the rest of the UK, the other leaving the UK whilst remaining on the EU. The UK of 2014 is gone.

Moreover, this is no longer the age of New Labour's British identity, with its Europhilia and internationalism in line with the Scottish nationalist ethos; this is a decidedly Conservative British identity – one that looks and feels regressively Anglo-centric at the heart of it, and foreign to many in Scotland. The chasm between contemporary Scottish and British nationalism is only widened when viewed through the lens of Europe.

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