

## **SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM:**

### **WHAT'S NATIONALISM GOT TO DO WITH IT?**

**David McCrone**

Well, you might reply, everything, surely? This may seem to be a statement of the obvious; that the September 18<sup>th</sup> 2014 referendum was a set battle between two opposing armies: nationalists versus unionists. It was, however, far more complicated than that. This article explores the context in which the referendum took place, analyses the results, and considers the political aftermath. It argues that seeing this as a binary contest is far too simple, and that it was set up to be so was a political decision.

#### **Understanding Nationalism**

For the orthodox student of nationalism, the Scottish referendum was a puzzling exercise. If one follows the classical analysis of Ernest Gellner, it is even stranger that 'nationalism' exists in Scotland at all. Gellner deemed nationalism to be the political ideology which delivers territorial independence for a people in the throes of making the transition to modernity. Scotland was the second country in the world (after England) to undergo industrialisation and modernisation, so it cannot be the case that 'nationalism' is the political vehicle for getting us there when the process had manifestly taken place 200 years before. We might tweak the explanation by calling such modern forms '*neo-nationalism*' or '*post-nationalism*', but manifestly there is something going on, not only in Scotland but in Catalunya, Euskadi, Quebec, Flanders and elsewhere, which do not conform to classical explanations. 'Nationalism'

emerges in places like Scotland which manifestly do not conform to the classical Gellnerian thesis.

The cases of ‘neo-nationalism’ are interesting, and there are distinct parallels between Catalunya, Euskadi, Quebec, Flanders and Scotland, but while there may be parallels, the thing about parallel lines is that they never converge. Certainly, there is a category question: much depends on how concepts like ‘nationalism’ (and unionism for that matter) are operationalised and understood. The historian Colin Kidd commented that much of nationalism in Scotland is tinged with unionism, and vice versa. He observed: ‘It is a category error to think of unionism and nationalism as opposites. Rather, the relationship of unionism and nationalism is very complicated and defies easy parsing.’ He goes on: ‘For much of modern political history there was an ill-defined – and neglected – middle ground where moderate unionism and moderate nationalism were in surprisingly close proximity’<sup>1</sup>.

Kidd, speaking ostensibly from a unionist position, is surely correct. Nevertheless, having a referendum based on a simple binary Yes/No, the chosen ground of the unionist parties, problematised the category question. There was a double binary here, for the assumption was that self-identifying Brits would vote No, and ‘Scots’, Yes. As is usual in these matters, it turns out to be more complex, and far more interesting, than that. Let us start with how people voted and which party they voted for.

### **Who voted for what?**

Here is the composition of the Yes vote in terms of how people voted in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election. A word of warning: the data provided by this poll<sup>2</sup> carried on and the day after the referendum do not include those who did *not* vote in 2011. This is important because much has been made of the ‘disenfranchised’ who

were mobilised by the Yes campaign. Still, the proportionate division among those who did vote in 2011 is revealing. You might surmise that a No vote resulted because fewer Scots were SNP supporters than supporters of unionist parties (Lab, Cons and Lib Dem). You would only be partly correct.

Yes was made up mainly of SNP voters (70%), but also a quarter who had voted Labour in 2011; that's 94%. Six percent of Yes voters had voted Lib-Dem, and a mere 1% had voted Tory. On the other side, there was no majority base to the No vote; 42% had voted Labour, 29% Tory, 16% Lib Dem, and even 14% SNP. Is the latter not a contradiction? No; think of it this way. If you believed in the Union but wanted the strongest-possible Scottish government at Holyrood to defend Scotland's corner within the UK, then vote SNP; they are the party which most people across the political spectrum trust to work in Scotland's long-term interests.

We might draw the following conclusions from these figures. The opportunity, as well as the challenge, for the Yes side was that there was one main party political engine, the SNP, but whereas that might have been necessary for success, it was never likely to be sufficient to pull Yes over the line. On the No side, while Labour was the biggest block, it did not have such pulling power, especially as more than a quarter of its 2011 vote voted Yes. Labour was split; and in any case did not have majority clout in the No campaign. It is still living with the jibe that they were in bed with the Tories.

### **Constitutional conundrums**

Now that we have dealt with party allegiances and referendum voting, let us look at the constitutional question another way. Let us start with the 'traditional' question on constitutional preferences: whether people are in favour of independence, devolution, or the status quo ante-1999, that is, no parliament at all. For 2014, we find one-third

in favour of independence; 50% for devolution, and 7% status quo ante, with 10% don't know. That seems a long way from the 55%/45% in favour of No, does it not? How does one get to 45% from 33%? That's a substantial jump.

The way to answer that is to remember that a simple Yes/No did not reflect Scottish public opinion. Bear in mind that setting out the vote in binary terms – *yes vs no* – was a political ploy to force choice rather than reflect the complexity of constitutional choices in Scotland. The Scottish Social Attitudes surveys has been asking a different and more subtle question, with 5 options.

- The Scottish Parliament should make all the decisions for Scotland (independence);
- The UK government should make decisions about defence and foreign affairs; the Scottish Parliament should decide everything else (devolution-max)
- The UK government should make decisions about taxes, benefits and defence and foreign affairs; the Scottish Parliament should decide the rest (status quo)
- The UK government should make all decisions for Scotland (status quo ante 1999)

Averaged out over the 5 years between 2010 and 2014, we find Independence on 35%, devolution-max on 31%, the status quo on 24%, and the no devolution option on 7%.

So why this apparent discrepancy between 'traditional' measure of constitutional preferences (of 3 options: independence/devolution/no change), and the 'new' measure which distinguishes between devolution-max and the status quo, and which uses 'softer' descriptors? This apparent discrepancy is mainly due to 'devolution' in the old measure covering two different options. Thus, those supporting 'devolution'

as a single option split 44% in favour of *devolution-max*, and 35% for the devolution status quo. There is some ‘leakage’ up (16% of ‘devolutionists’ would opt for ‘independence’ on new measure), but it is differentiation of the ‘devolution’ option which makes the difference. This reinforces the point that constitutional preferences in Scotland are more complex and nuanced than a simple Yes/No distinction.

To reinforce the point that there is a spectrum of constitutional choices rather a simple binary one, here is a table showing people’s first and second choices:

*Table 1: Constitutional preferences, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> choices*

<i>% by column</i>	Indep	Dev-max	Status quo	none	All (2 <sup>nd</sup> )
Indep	-	28	5	8	11
Dev-max	77	-	76	9	55
St quo	6	63	-	73	28
none	3	2	17	-	6
All (1 <sup>st</sup> )	42	30	22	6	100

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes survey 2014 (base=1342)

If there *had* been a multi-option referendum, and one based on multiple choice, then clearly the consensus would have been around devolution-max, with more than three-quarters of pro-independence supporters, of status quo supporters opting for devolution-max as their second choice. Indeed, if we add up those for whom devolution-max was a first or a second choice, fully 78% would have supported it. So why was it not on the ballot? - because unionists, and notably the UK government, saw it as the thin end of the wedge. They judged that this would have given encouragement to ‘separatists’ who had adopted a gradualist strategy: first

devolution-max, and then independence. Better, they thought, to force the pace in the hope that Independence would be removed from the scene for a generation. In a word, devolution-max was deemed too threatening to the British state to be allowed on to the ballot paper.

### **Did national identity matter?**

If a binary choice of Yes/No is far too crude to reflect constitutional preferences, how people do national identity, in any case, does not map on to a simple Brit/Scot distinction. Once more, we find a range of national identity options which are not reducible to simply choosing between being a Brit or being a Scot. In recent years, the so-called Moreno scale has tried to gauge the balance between being Scottish and being British. The 5 point scale runs from ‘Scottish not British’, ‘more Scottish than British’, ‘equally Scottish and British’, ‘more British’ than Scottish, and ‘British’ not Scottish’. The scale implies that one must choose one of these options. Arguably, the scale implies that if you are strongly one, you are weakly the other. But what if you feel strongly Scottish *and* strongly British, or, for that matter, weakly Scottish *and* weakly British? How do you respond on this 5-point Moreno scale? One might, for example, find two people who say they are ‘equally Scottish and British’ but one person is *strongly* both, and the other is *weakly* both. More recently (discussed at length by the author in *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 84(4), 2013) we have been using separate 7 point scales for ‘Scottish’ and ‘British’ where 1=weakly Scottish/British through to 7=very strongly Scottish/British. Respondents are thus able to treat the Scottish and British scales as distinct. It is not a matter of having to choose one over the other, even if the Moreno scale permits greater latitude. Thus, while 75% of Scots (according to 2014 SSA data) place themselves on the strongly Scottish end of the scale (points 5, 6 or 7), 42% do likewise on a British scale. So not only can

constitutional preferences *not* be reduced to a simple Yes/No, but neither can national identity be reduced to a British or Scottish binary. This is not some reprehensible inability to choose. It conveys subtlety and nuance as befits the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

With this in mind, let us return to the relationship over time between national identity and constitutional preferences. Do we find a tightening up of the relationship between national identity and constitutional preferences? We might hypothesise that (a) over time, more people would choose to say they are Scottish not British; (b) that there has been a rise in the proportion opting for independence in any case; and (c) that among those who thought of themselves as Scottish not British, a higher proportion than previously were now in favour of independence. In actual fact, we find trendless fluctuation in each case.

*Table 2: Scottish Identity and Constitutional Preferences*

	% Scottish not British	% pro-Independence	% of 'Scottish not British' who are pro-Independence
1997 (UK election)	24%	28%	48%
1999 (Scottish election)	34%	28%	46%
2001 (UK election)	36%	27%	41%
2003 (Scottish election)	35%	27%	46%
2005 (UK election)	33%	38%	57%
2007 (Scottish election)	28%	25%	48%
2010 (UK election)	29%	25%	46%
2011 (Scottish election)	32%	32%	53%
2014 (Sc Indep Ref)	27%	35%	60%

Note: based on respondents born and living in Scotland, i.e. 'natives'

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes surveys 1997 to 2014.

Manifestly, there is no straightforward linear relationship between national identity (saying you are Scottish not British, and being in favour of Independence). Thus, of the nine time-points between 1997 and 2014, in three of them (1997, 2005 and 2014) a higher proportion are in favour of Independence than say they are Scottish not British. It *is* the case that in 2014, the year of the referendum, the largest proportion – 60% - of Scots not Brits were in favour of Independence, but the relationship is not time-linear, and 2005 (57%) was not substantially different from 2014. And while there has been a strengthening of relationship at ‘Scottish’ end of the scale in 2014, it seems that national identity matters no more than before, especially at ‘British’ end.

### **Competing nationalisms**

So how can we explain what is going on? We might fall back on the argument that Scotland is peculiar and not typical, but that is a tricky argument to make. How do we decide on what is typical, and why? Forms of modern nationalism (Scotland, Catalonia, Quebec etc) are quite different from the ‘classical’ ones which Gellner was describing. In any case, exceptionalism – to say that Scotland is peculiar - is not very convincing as an explanation, because, as the saying goes, the exception usually proves to be the rule.

Second, such an argument is premised on only some forms of nationalism being in operation. Thus, one might focus on ‘Scottish’ nationalism, but make the mistake of ignoring ‘British’ forms; or treat each form as uniform and distinct. Thus, to take ‘British’ nationalism, it comes in different shapes and sizes, and was used differentially in the campaign by different parties (Labour focused on welfare state; Tories appealed to land of hope and glory; and all focused on threats of isolation and



promoted negativity). What became clear during this campaign was the iron fist in the iron glove wielded by the British state, what one commentator described as state-sponsored scaremongering: vote Yes, and you'll pay for it – quite literally: you won't be able to use the £; companies will move out; supermarket prices will rise; the BBC licence fee will double (if we allow you to watch it at all, that is). RBS (81% owned by the taxpayer, and long since having abrogated its Scottish identity) in an example of 'brass plate banking' even threatened to move its own plate to London in the event of Yes (the No vote meant they didn't, but not before many customers simply closed their accounts in protest).

Nevertheless, the prime focus of the referendum campaign was on *demos*, not *ethnos*. This was borne out of the fact that there was little truck with the notion that 'Scots' (that is, people born in Scotland) had the right to vote wherever they resided. If you vote with your feet in either direction, you make your decision, and in any case, the Scotland Act of 1998 was aimed at making sure Scots understood that theirs was a 'local' election, and not one for *bona fide* citizens. This had consequence, presumably unintended, that anyone residing in Scotland and registered to vote there had right to vote in both SP elections and by implication, the referendum. Thus, 400,000 'English' people had the right to vote in referendum because they lived in Scotland; while around 800,000 'Scots' (in terms of birthplace only) now live in England, having voted with their feet.

What this helped to do was translate who was a 'political Scot' into a matter of residence, not of birth; to reinforce 'demos'. In other words, the tariff for being Scottish is not based on ethnic factors, on birthplace, language, religion, skin colour/ethnicity or 'cultural' matters. This chimes with much older tropes of diversity and place (king/queen 'of Scots' – note the plural). The historian Christopher Smout

described it as having a sense of place, not of tribe, as a matter of *realpolitik*, not of morality<sup>3</sup>.

As a result of longstanding state-building processes in Scotland since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, coupled with the fact that the Unions of 1603 and 1707 did not ‘abolish’ Scotland as a frame of reference with regard to ‘low’ politics and administration, multiple identities – of nation and state- remained central to what Scotland was, and who Scots took themselves to be. One answer, then, to our initial question: ‘what’s nationalism got to do with it?’ is to argue that ‘we are all nationalists now’, in that the Scottish frame of reference is the dominant one, and has become all the more dominant in the last four decades; and the main thing that the Yes campaign taught us was how quickly it floated free of its party moorings; this was not about voting for or against the SNP government. And the problem for No was that it had a top-down, somewhat sour, flavour, not simply because it chose to run a (Project) Fear campaign coordinated by the elite, that is, the British state, the political parties, the civil service, corporate business, and the media including the BBC, and the so-called ‘liberal’ press all had their part to play. And then there was the head of state who, Cameron told us inadvertently, purred with pleasure when a majority voted No.

Back in 1977, Tom Nairn commented that: ‘The phrase “We must preserve the unity of the United Kingdom” is currently intoned like a litany by most leaders of British public life. Its magic properties are obviously derived from the cults of Constitution and Sovereignty<sup>4</sup>. That old trope is still being employed 37 years later; and the magic, the ‘glamour’<sup>5</sup> has waned considerably. There is a strong sense that the British state ‘won’ the vote, but lost the contest; it may have won the battle, but is rapidly losing the war.

Further, the reasons given for voting No related to perceived risk rather than attachment to the state. ‘No’ voters gave as their main reason<sup>6</sup> the perceived *risks* of Independence (currency, EU, jobs, and prices – 47%), rather than because they felt a *strong attachment* to the UK and its shared history, culture and traditions (27%; indeed, only Tories (38%) disproportionately agreed). And one-quarter of those voting No even said that they had done so because they thought it would mean **more** powers for the Scottish Parliament. A few days before the vote, The Daily Record published a ‘vow’ that in the event of a No vote, the leaders of the three UK parties would undertake swift action to give Scotland more powers. It turned out to be something of a Zinoviev letter in that no such ‘vow’ had taken place other than a scissors-and-paste job by the Daily Record<sup>7</sup>.

Almost half of voters in Scotland<sup>8</sup> also thought that there would be another referendum on Scottish Independence within the decade (with 31% that this would happen within 5 years). Only Tories thought (hoped?) that it would be off the agenda for much longer.

One cannot conclude, then, that the Union has been strengthened by this No vote, because it seems to have laid bare so many contradictions in the British state: the term EVEL (English votes for English laws) has entered the political lexicon, and is a constitutional time-bomb waiting to explode (it is, of course, a delayed bomb: we forget that is at least 100 years old – Irish parties showed the power of this contradiction); it has made the regional imbalances of power in England (northern regions and cities, and disaffections from London) much more transparent. The Pandora’s box is well and truly open, and one might argue that it is not simply (or even) the Scottish question which will be the cause of its downfall, but the complex of

contradictions therein: the power of London; the dominance of finance capital over manufacturing; the offshore island syndrome which aids and abets the break-up.

Nor is it clear what ‘more devolution’ will mean for Scotland, or how it will come about. Devolving income tax, as proposed by the Smith Commission set up post-September 18<sup>th</sup>, is a two-edged sword, and in any case would deliver only 40% of revenues. Corporation tax which is being devolved to Northern Ireland to take account of the border with the Republic is deemed too dangerous to trust to the Scots, and oil revenues too valuable to the British state to include in the Smith Commission package.

Scotland was always likely to be the catalyst of UK state disruption because of its historic state identity, its institutional distinctiveness, its nation-ness, its capacity to mobilise the democratic deficit on ‘national’ lines; the mandate question – who are *they* to tell *us* what to do? What right do *they* have (‘effing Tories’, to use Cameron’s descriptor during the campaign)? That sense of ‘nation’ has come to dominate over ‘class’ in identity politics of last three decades in both Scotland and England.

*Table 3: Who do you feel you have most in common with?*

% by column	Scottish natives*	English natives*
<i>Same class, different nation</i>	32	43
<i>same nation, different class</i>	68	57

Sources: Scottish Social Attitudes survey, 2006; British Social Attitudes survey,

2006; \*‘natives’ are respondents born and living in the same country.

The preference for ‘nation’ over ‘class’ is clear among Scots by a ratio of 2 to 1, but the English too share this view by a ratio of 1.3 to 1. Nor do these results reflect social

class differences in the two societies because among those identifying themselves as ‘working class’ in Scotland and in England, the ratios are to all intents and purposes the same as in the wider population<sup>9</sup>. It appears that the propensity of both Scots and English ‘natives’ is to prioritise nation over class, albeit to different degrees. We have to go back 35 years, to 1979, to find the inversion of this statistic in Scotland, when 44% identified with ‘same class, English’, and 38% with ‘opposite class, Scots’. By the early 1990s, the inversion had happened, and there it has stayed, with Scots more likely to make ‘national’ identifications than with ‘class’ ones across the border.

### **The wider context**

And overlaying all of this in these islands are global shifts to disengage ‘nation’ from ‘state’. Ben Anderson’s ‘crisis of the hyphen’ in the nation-state has accelerated, especially in the context of the end of the Cold War when it became much harder to corral territories under the ideological banners of ‘solidarity’ and ‘freedom’. We can see that elsewhere, but above all in rest of Europe under the umbrella of the EU. Despite its very real crisis and contradictions, Europe has provided ways of handling supra-national problems. The historian Alan Milward once argued that the European Union has been the salvation of nation-state:

In refusing to join [the Common Market], British governments were weakening the nation more than defending its sovereignty. They were left to carry their own burdens of welfare and agricultural policy and the consequences for manufacturing were immediate. Economically and politically, Britain’s role became increasingly peripheral, and the benefit from not having joined the communities were reduced to no more than the

preservation of that same illusion of independence which led to the mistake [not to join] in the first place<sup>10</sup>.

Milward wrote that over 20 years ago; given what has happened since – and the real possibility of *Brexit* – how prescient he was. Not for nothing was his book called *The European Rescue of the Nation-State*.

There is of course nothing inevitable about political trends, especially those relating to nation and national identity. Nevertheless, there is now a real possibility of a scenario which looks something like this.

- A Conservative (or Conservative-led, such as with UKIP) victory in the British general election of 2015;
- An SNP victory in the Scottish parliament elections of 2016;
- A referendum on the UK leaving the EU (so-called Brexit) in 2017 or 2018 in which Scots to remain in the EU while the rest of the UK (notably England) vote to leave;
- A second Scottish independence referendum held on the question: *Do You Agree that Scotland should be an independent country **within the EU?***

One might wonder why the British state bothers to keep the troublesome Scots in the union at all. Surely, you might say, it would suit the Tories to be rid of you because it would make Tory governments far more likely. That is a misreading of political history, because, by and large, Labour governments get elected in the UK when England votes Labour. There are very few occasions (the minority governments of the 1970s) when the non-English made that difference. But then again, so did the Irish Party at both UK elections in 1910, the last elections before the Great War, and held

the balance of power between the two main British parties, Liberal and Conservative.

So, you might ask, what's in 'us' for 'them'? First of all, Scotland matters materially to the British state. North Sea Oil has bankrolled the state for 40 years; Thatcher and Thatcherism would not have happened without it. It was a spectacular windfall which is still not ended, despite scare stories that the oil is running out. True, but only in the long term; and in the long run, as Keynes said, we're all dead. Being told that 'oil' is a mixed blessing sounds like so much special pleading. Second, there are geopolitical interests, not least Trident nuclear submarines on the Clyde. The Americans would not be best pleased if an independent Scotland had insisted on their removal; during the campaign we heard Obama, both Clintons and sundry US powerbrokers telling Cameron not to 'lose Scotland'. And if Trident had to go somewhere else in rUK, where to, exactly? How would you persuade the people of Plymouth and Devonport that nuclear weapons are a good thing to have on your doorstep? Third, there is the 'seats at the top table' syndrome. The British state seeks to preserve its rather moth-eaten 'great power' stature with a seat on the UN Security Council, G8 and so on. Losing Scotland would, in the words of Lady Bracknell, not only be a misfortune, but rank carelessness. In any event, rUK would need to be downsized – in status if not in self-importance.

## **Conclusion**

So where do we go now? What is the prognosis? The key problem is in differential velocities, never mind variable geometries. 'Doing something' to give the Scottish parliament more and meaningful powers, and devolution-max is the obvious place to go, and would seem urgent if Scotland is to be kept in the Union (45%, after all, is the

new platform for Independence). On the other hand, if the Barnett Formula by which Scotland is 'paid' to stay in the union is replaced by tax-raising income tax powers which simply replace one sort of funding with another, and is harder to collect, then it is likely that Scots will draw their own conclusions. But now that sundry cats are out of the bag, including EVEL, the threat or promise of Brexit, what to do about 'the regions', it is difficult to see what the long-term future of the British state might be. 'Federalism' is theoretically back on the agenda, but it is quite impossible to implement, and in any case its time has come and gone – about 100 years ago, when most of Ireland left the union in any case. What we are more likely to see is a more voluble, but rather inarticulate, nationalism – British – which struggles to make itself heard just at the point where commentators are talking up the 'English' variety (see, for example, Michael Kenny's *The Politics of English Nationhood*, 2014; and *The English and Their History*, by Robert Tombs, published by Allen Lane also in 2014). We are likely to have a cacophony of constitutional campaigns which will cancel each other out because circles cannot be squared, at least soon enough. The Independence referendum of 2014 may have seen off a Yes vote, but it entrenched the new platform for independence at 45%. Ironically, conferring more powers on the Scottish parliament may hasten Scotland's exit from the United Kingdom rather than prevent it, because substantial new powers are seen as the price of staying in the Union, at least for the present. And this political game is far from over.



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- <sup>1</sup> C. Kidd *Union and Unionisms: Political Thought in Scotland, 1500-2000*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p.6
- <sup>2</sup> <http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2014/09/scotland-voted/>
- <sup>3</sup> T.C. Smout 'Perspectives on the Scottish identity', in *Scottish Affairs*, 6, p.107
- <sup>4</sup> T. Nairn 'The Twilight of the British State', *New Left Review*, 1977, pp.101-2
- <sup>5</sup> The Scottish painter Allan Ramsay defined 'glamour', according to the Oxford English Dictionary thus: 'when devils, wizards or jugglers deceive the sight, they are said to cast glamour o'er the eyes of the spectator'. The etymology of 'glamour' has the same root as 'grammar' (*grimoire* in Old French), a sorcerer's book of spells.
- <sup>6</sup> <http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2014/09/scotland-voted/>, tables 9 to 11.
- <sup>7</sup> see <http://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2014/oct/31/daily-record-scottish-independence>. On the publication of the Smith Commission report on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2014, The Daily Record was holding to its position ('The Vow Delivered' <http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/vow-delivered-new-income-tax-4704612>).
- <sup>8</sup> <http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2014/09/scotland-voted/>, table 15.
- <sup>9</sup> By a ratio of 2:1 in Scotland, and 1.4:1 in England
- <sup>10</sup> A. Milward *The European Rescue of the Nation-State*, London, Routledge, 1992, p.433.