

Defending welfare and the Scottish independence debate

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Introduction – 2014: A transformative year?

The year 2014 proved to be a momentous one with the UK state and the establishment facing a political crisis that had not been seen in generations. The event that provoked this crisis was the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, but the underlying factors have had a longer gestation, not least the rise of nationalism in Scotland over successive decades, culminating in the 2011 Scottish Election success of the Scottish National Party (SNP). Today, the political landscape of Scotland and the UK is shaped by the outcomes of the Scottish Independence Referendum of September 18 2014.

This landscape also reflects growing policy divergences between the different countries of the UK. The introduction of Devolution in 1999 led to a broad range of powers coming under the control of the Scottish Parliament, the majority of these in areas relating to social policy and it was around questions of the future of social welfare – and what might be broadly termed social justice issues – that the Independence debate was fought, and which both shaped the outcomes of the Referendum and the ongoing controversies that now characterise the post-Referendum landscape in the lead-in to the 2015 UK General Election.

The 2014 Scottish independence referendum: Key issues

Much has been written about the 2014 Referendum and the longer debate around Scotland's constitutional future, but the main factors driving support for Independence have often been misunderstood. There are many commentators who have viewed the growing popularity of Scottish Independence as a reflection of increasing national/ist identity. Scottish nationalists, of course, have long held to the goal of self-deter-

mination, founded on the claim that Scotland has historically been an oppressed nation, constrained by UK membership. However, to view the pro-Independence campaign as narrowly nationalist and driven primarily by issues of national identity is mistaken.

Nationalist aspirations when evident were almost entirely entangled with issues that cannot be interpreted as 'nationalist'. The Independence debate was not about a future Scottish state – or about the continuation of the UK state as such – but revolved around the future of the welfare state, within the context of Scotland either continuing in the UK, or of full Independence. The Referendum offered scope to both the *YES* (pro-Independence) and *NO/Better Together* (pro-UK membership) campaigns to highlight the potential for a Scottish political settlement that safeguarded welfare and public services, and which also generated proposals for a fully *Scottish* welfare state which would be markedly different from the social welfare landscape being forged by the UK Government.

In this debate the future of the NHS played a key role with arguments made by *YES* supporters that only Independence could prevent the kind of privatisation impacting on the NHS in England. Controversies around the NHS acted a vehicle for concerns about the future of public services more generally – as well as for opposition to the 'austerity' measures of the UK Government.

That these issues are intertwined with questions around national futures is not new. There is a powerful narrative that the historical development of the welfare state in post-1945 era, for instance, played an important role in forging the UK as a nation. One of the many ironies that have emerged in the Independence debate has been the readiness of SNP politicians to claim that an Independent Scotland would remain

true to the founding principles of this 'classic' UK welfare state at the very time, they claim, when the UK Government is diverging more and more from those ideals – highlighted not only by privatisation but by austerity and wide-ranging 'welfare reform', including the 'bedroom' tax and so on.

That these issues were core to the arguments made by pro-Independence supporters also signals that support for Independence extended well beyond the SNP. The mobilisation in the YES campaign of tens of thousands of supporters including many who were politically energised for the first time was strongly led by opposition to austerity and by campaigning around a range of social justice issues. The SNP worked alongside the Scottish Greens and Scottish Socialist Party, but many other groups were formed during the course of the two year campaign, the *Radical Independence Campaign* and *Women for Independence* groups among the most notable. The YES campaign was in many respects a broad social movement (Mooney and Gourlay, 2014).

However, given that the wide appeal of Scottish Independence spanned many disparate groups, it would be mistaken to suggest that all shared a same commitment to social justice issues (Mooney, 2014). Some sections of the YES movement offered aspirations that went beyond the rather limited constitutional vision of Independence of the SNP and beyond defending existing services and provision; for example, arguments for a Nordic-type welfare regime or a welfare state that was organised on a radically different kind of economy from the neo-liberal social and economic policies dominating today. Other proposals included free childcare for all pre-school children and arguments that a living wage should be a feature of an Independent Scotland built upon principles of social justice. Conversely, the NO campaign argued that it was only through Scotland's continuing membership of the UK would welfare and public services be safeguarded.

The 2014 referendum result and consequences

The 2014 Referendum saw 55% of voters voting NO to Independence and 45% voting YES. However it was clear from the 45% who voted for Independence and of a significant number of the 55% voting NO, that considerable change was being sought. Change, not just in terms of additional devolved powers for Scotland, but in the direction of social and economic policy making more generally. The majority NO vote was not a vote against change, for the status quo. While this was expressed in terms of a particular constitutional future, nonetheless behind these choices were more fundamental demands for a different kind of society, for a fairer Scotland.

The Referendum results reflect the inequalities that characterise contemporary Scotland and diminish the falsehood of Scotland as a homogenous nation. Four of Scotland's 32 council areas returned a majority YES vote: Dundee, Glasgow and its two Clydeside neighbours, West Dunbartonshire and North Lanarkshire. But these contain the most deprived areas in Scotland (and two other Clydeside districts with a high incidence of deprivation were very marginal NO voting districts). The YES vote here reflected the desire for radical change amongst the poorest sections of Scotland's working class. It was a rejection of Westminster politics and, with enduring consequences today, of the Labour Party also. With the exception of Dundee, those areas voting YES in large numbers, including all 8 Scottish Parliament constituencies in Glasgow, have traditionally been Labour Party heartlands. In contrast all 5 of the constituencies in Edinburgh returned a NO vote.

The result reflects the divided and uneven geo-political landscape of Scotland. The poorer the area, the more likely it was to vote YES, and the more affluent and elderly the population of an area, the more likely it was to vote NO. The middle classes largely voted NO, while it was the more vulnerable working classes – often in the large urban housing estates – where the pro-Independence vote was strongest. More securely employed sections of the working class tended to vote NO, many of them encouraged to do so

not only the Scottish Labour Party but also by many of the trades unions. In relation to gender, more women voted NO but this may in part be a reflection of the larger number of women in the more aged sections of the population.

Conclusion – The post-independence referendum landscape: Political and constitutional turmoil?

The Independence debate was not simply a matter of controversy over territorial justice or constitutional futures, but provided opportunity for new ways of thinking about welfare and measures to address disadvantage and inequality. These arguments now also shape the political climate that has emerged in Scotland since September 2014. Much of this has revolved around the proposals of the Smith Commission, set-up in the wake of the Referendum to produce proposals for additional powers to the Scottish Government (Smith, 2014). The controversy around Smith, that it contains too few powers for Scotland, especially in the key welfare areas that many in Scotland had anticipated, has also been linked with possible devolution in England, with huge consequences for the future of the UK.

It was claimed that the Scottish Independence Referendum would settle the constitutional future of Scotland 'for a generation'. In the early months of 2015, few if any would put money on this. Depending on the outcomes of the May 2015 General Election and of any Referendum on UK membership of the EU, demands are already being made for another Independence Referendum. The SNP are enjoying unprecedented popularity in terms of membership and are riding high in the Scottish opinion polls and look certain not only to be the party with most Scottish MPs, but could hold the balance of power in a hung UK Parliament. Opinion polls at the end of 2014 show that 60% of Scottish voters believe that the higher the number of SNP MPs, the better the deal for Scotland, including further additional powers that go beyond the Smith Commission recommendations (Gordon, 2014). SNP support at this time sits on 43% (more than double what it got in the 2010 General Election), while Labour sits on 26%. The 2010 UK Govern-

ment partners, Tories and LibDems, score just 13% and 6% respectively (Clark and Severin, 2014).

As the 2015 General Election campaign begins to heat-up, social welfare, austerity and inequality will be key political issues. The majority of Scots are in favour of far reaching redistributive social justice. *In Defence of Welfare* in this regard, then, is once more entangled with and linked to the question of constitutional futures, not only for in Scotland – but also increasingly for the UK as a whole.

References

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