

Scotland: Independence loss contains seeds of future victory

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After a campaign that lasted two years, Scotland voted on September 18, for or against independence, yes or no. And it was the No that carried the day, by a majority of 55 per cent to 45 per cent. So it was a victory for the British political establishment and a defeat for the forces of independence. And as good democrats, the losers have accepted the verdict.

Yet those who were expecting to see the supporters of independence dispirited and those who hoped that the issue of independence was settled for at least a generation were quickly disappointed.

This defeat bears the seeds of future victory, for at least three reasons. First, the way campaign unfolded. The rate of participation was massive. No less than 97 per cent of potential voters registered on the electoral roll: 118,000 of them did so in the month prior to the September 2 closure of the list. They are part of what was called “the missing million” those who never voted and were often not even registered.

This time they voted: the turnout was 84 per cent. You have to go back to 1910 — before there was universal suffrage — to find a higher level of participation. Many of these new voters had been mobilised and motivated by the Yes campaign through door-to-door canvassing, one to one discussions and meetings in local halls, in which the radical wing of the campaign played a key role.

Second, an examination of the vote leads to several conclusions. It was very clearly a class vote. The voting took place in 32 regions or cities. Yes won a majority in four of them. These were Glasgow, Dundee and two areas near Glasgow. Sociologically, these are working-class areas; they are the most socially deprived areas, with the highest levels of unemployment and of all the other symptoms of poverty. They have also been historically, and still are today, strongholds of the of the workers’ movement. Furthermore, the information we have now indicates that everywhere the vote for independence was higher in poor neighbourhoods.

These are also areas that were dominated for nearly a century by the Labour Party, although the Scottish National Party (SNP), which runs the government in Edinburgh, has made inroads in recent years. In contrast, areas that have been strongholds of the SNP since the 1970s, with more mixed populations, all voted no.

A survey released on September 20 gave a series of indications that show the limits of the victory of the No vote. The Yes vote was predominant in all age groups except 18-24 (48 per cent), 55-64 (43 per cent) and over 65 (27 per cent). The Yes vote was 71 per cent among 16-17 year olds, 59 per

cent for the 25-34 age group, 52-53 per cent for those aged between 35 and 54. So it can be concluded that the result was obtained by the votes of older voters and that despite the narrow No vote among 18-24 year olds, the Yes vote won an overall majority in the population under the age of 55. We can respect this result from the arithmetical point of view. Politically it is anything but final.

This is confirmed by the motivations of those who voted Yes and No. For Yes voters, 10 per cent were motivated by the perspective of never again having a Conservative government; 20 per cent because they thought that an independent Scotland would have a better future; 70 per cent cited the principle that all decisions concerning Scotland should be taken in Scotland. The latter figure is perhaps the most important of the survey. These 70 per cent are for independence for the most basic of reasons: democracy, because the national question is basically a democratic, political question. Obviously not in the abstract, because those who voted Yes have also very clearly expressed their opposition to neoliberalism and war, for social justice and redistribution of wealth.

Project Fear

The corresponding figures for the No are just as interesting: 47 per cent were motivated by the risks associated with independence. This is the result of what the leaders of the No campaign themselves apparently called “Project Fear”: a vote for independence would supposedly endanger employment, pensions, prices would go up, Scotland would not be allowed into the European Union, the English would not accept a monetary union, North Sea oil would soon run out.

Most of these fears would have proven to be unfounded or at least exaggerated if Yes had won. But they were assiduously circulated by the three unionist parties [1], the media and business leaders. Some employers wrote to all their employees to tell them to vote No — a practice that was justified by a Labour Party MP on the evening of September 18.

Twenty per cent voted no because they believed in the promise of more powers for the Scottish Parliament. The unionist parties called it a vow: increased powers would be sure and certain. Unfortunately the powers in question were never specified, among other reasons because the three parties do not agree on them.

And only 27 per cent voted No from attachment to the United Kingdom. These figures confirm what everyone should have known already: the motivations of supporters of independence are more solidly entrenched than those of their opponents.

Pro-independence parties surge

The third reason to doubt the soundness of the verdict of September 18 lies in what has happened since. It is astonishing. People are flocking to the pro-independence parties, which have all had a huge wave of recruits. The SNP doubled its membership in four days, passing the 50,000 mark. The Green Party went from 2000 to 5000 members. The Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) recruited 2500 new members. As for the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC), a coalition of parties and movements of the left and of many who are in no party, it has received at least 7000 registrations for its upcoming conference in November. By way of comparison, the two previous conferences in 2012 and 2013 had 900-1000 participants, which was already considered a success. [2].

People who commit themselves now are doing so to continue the fight, because nothing has been settled, not the fight to extract the maximum powers from Westminster, nor the fight to put independence back on the agenda as soon as possible. The survey cited above also asked people how

long this result would stand. Among Yes voters, 45 per cent said five years, 16 per cent 10 years.

Ironically, therefore, the big winners of the referendum are the parties that lost it. And who will be the losers? The Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties have fairly negligible quantities in Scotland. The biggest loser is likely to be the Labour Party. In the No campaign (“Better Together”) it played the central role, particularly through the intervention of former prime minister Gordon Brown, who thought up the “vow”, in the last two weeks, when the No campaign was panicking at the prospect of a victory for independence.

But Labour’s victory may well be Pyrrhic. To start with, 37 per cent of the voters of this fiercely unionist party voted for independence. And it seems that there is an opposite process to what is happening among the pro-independence parties, people are starting to leave the party. On the left of the movement for independence, there is a strong rejection of Labour. No one would think of accusing the Conservatives of having betrayed, they have always been the enemy. But the Labour Party will be held accountable.

There will probably be a change in its leadership: it is more than doubtful that this will be enough. Labour voters began to desert the party with the experience of it being in government between 1997 and 2010 in Westminster, and from 1999 to 2007 in Edinburgh. The experience of the referendum may accelerate and amplify the process.

How to assess the situation today? Compared to the hopes of September 18, the result is a disappointment. Compared to the situation at the beginning of the campaign for the referendum, it is a huge step forward. Not quite enough to win, but huge nonetheless. As we have seen, the victory of the No was largely due to the fears spread by the No campaign and to promises of which we have not yet seen the colour. In 2012 Britain’s Prime Minister David Cameron thought he would win by at least 70%-30%. What a mistake that was; he came close to losing.

Profound politicisation

We saw in this campaign a large-scale mobilisation and a profound politicisation of Scottish society, which affected especially those who do not normally take an interest in politics, those among the poorest in society. We can be pretty sure that this genie is not ready to be put back in the bottle. Furthermore, every sector of the population was drawn into the campaign.

Since citizens of the European Union residing in Scotland could vote, we saw the appearance, for example, of “Poles for Independence”. Then there was Women for Independence, well to the left, Scots Asians for Independence and last, but not least, “English Scots [sic] for Independence”. Moreover, it appears that the majority of the community of Pakistani origin and about a quarter of English people living in Scotland voted Yes.

The pro-independence forces have a good strength to demand more powers from London. SNP leader Alex Salmond has resigned as first minister and as leader of the SNP. Nobody asked him to do that, his record was better than good. He did it to hand over power to the person who is virtually certain to succeed him, his very able deputy, Nicola Sturgeon. In her first interview after announcing her candidacy for the succession, she refused to rule out a referendum within five years if London does not give sufficient powers to Scotland. Perfidious Albion has been warned. As for Salmond, he has not retired, he will continue to sit in parliament and he will remain a force to be reckoned with.

‘I am not a nationalist, I am an internationalist’

Let us hope that everyone outside Scotland will now have understood: the movement for Scottish independence is not based on narrow nationalism; for many of its participants, it is not nationalist at all. On the eve of the referendum, at a mass pro-independence rally in the main square of Glasgow, activist and lawyer Amer Anwar was loudly applauded when he declared, “I am not a nationalist, I am an internationalist”.

This movement is not anti-English; it is for democracy, social justice, for a new society, against war. The majority of its activists are on the left in the broad sense.

This character of the movement has nothing automatic about it. It is the result of changes that have occurred in the last 30 years. First, there was a change of leadership in the SNP in the 1980s and 1990s, the arrival of a group of leaders, personified by Salmond, who became leader of the party in 1990, which intended to outflank the Labour Party on the left and win its electors to the cause of independence. It must be said that the SNP was considerably helped in this by the evolution of Blairite New Labour.

Also, the major part of the radical left in Scotland succeeded in the 1980s and 1990s in going beyond a sterile ideological discourse that claimed that socialists had to oppose independence so as not to divide the British working class. The radical left started to support independence, giving it a socialist content. This development was important, because there is a space to be occupied to the left of the SNP. It was occupied between 1999 and 2007 by the SSP, before the crisis that struck it, and from which it now seems to be recovering. But this space still exists and it was very effectively occupied during the campaign by the RIC, the SSP, the Greens and by movements such as Women for Independence.

The radical left has an important role to play. The SNP may be to the left of Labour, but it remains a centre-left, social-democratic party, which in the present situation is not so bad. That made it possible for the Greens and the SSP to be involved in the “official” campaign for the Yes (“Yes Scotland”), headed by the SSP, while also taking part in the RIC.

The SNP is relatively progressive on social issues, but it is not opposed to capitalism, either in Scotland or internationally. Early in the campaign Salmond gave some guarantees that he would not be too radical — for example by proposing to keep the Queen as head of state and abandoning the SNP’s longstanding opposition to NATO. That decision was made by a small majority at an SNP conference. It led to the resignation from the party of two members of the Scottish parliament (MSPs); a third MSP has resigned, explaining that he had waited until the end of the campaign.

Today some of those joining the SNP are doing so with the intention of pulling it to the left. We can wish them good luck; there is already a left in the SNP. But it seems more important today to create a political force to the left of the SNP, an anti-capitalist and pro-independence force, a radical left that fights for the republic and for socialism.

The elements of this left already exist and have contributed a great deal to the Yes campaign. Today they need to come together, to organise in order to face the new challenges.

Following the referendum, the audience for the ideas of the radical left has expanded considerably. That is a chance that should be seized with both hands.

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P.S.

* <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] These are the Conservative Party, the Liberal-Democratic Party and the Labour Party. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats form the governing coalition in London. All three parties are in opposition to the SNP government in Edinburgh.

[2] These figures are approximate. They were as accurate as possible when this article was written, but they may be quickly outdated. That is a sign of the times in Scotland.