

# **September 18 referendum in Scotland: 'Yes': A non-nationalist argument for Scottish independence**

Tuesday 16 September 2014, by [DAVIDSON Neil](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2014).

On the evening of 16 May 1973, around halfway through the *Aladdin Sane* tour, I watched David Bowie play his second sold-out show at the Aberdeen Music Hall. I could not have imagined that one day I would be listening to him - or, rather, listening to Kate Moss speaking on his behalf - intervene in the debate over a Scottish independence referendum. Mind you, I cannot pretend that the national question was a high priority for my 15-year-old self; nor could I have imagined that there would ever be a Scottish independence referendum. The message that Moss read out for Bowie at the Brit Awards on 20 February this year - 'Scotland, stay with us' - nevertheless deserves to be taken more seriously than it has been, and certainly more than the mixture of bluff and bullying that Scots have recently received from Messrs Osborne, Barroso and the directors of Standard Life plc. Bowie is actually a more political artist than is often supposed, but he is in no sense a conventionally left-wing one. Yet his intervention was typical of a widely held view on the left that a 'yes' vote for Scottish independence on 18 September would be a disaster for 'us' (meaning the English), and perhaps also for the Scots themselves. These views are also widely held in Scotland itself.

Before turning to these arguments it is worth considering one pro-independence position which can only be held in England. Expressed most recently (if eccentrically) by Will Self in the *New Statesman*, this holds that an independent Scotland would be a social-democratic - perhaps even socialist - inspiration to the English Left, finally galvanizing it into posing a serious challenge to neoliberalism and imperialism. And in some respects a survey of social legislation in Scotland even under devolution, including that passed by the first two Liberal/Labour coalition governments, tends to support this perspective.

Scotland has free care for the elderly, free prescriptions for all, no student tuition fees (at least for Scottish students); and the bedroom tax, while it is beyond the power of Holyrood to abolish, has effectively been neutralized by the current Scottish National Party (SNP) government declaring (in a move supported by Labour) that it would set aside £15 million to meet the additional costs of the 76,000 social housing tenants deemed to have a 'spare bedroom'. Furthermore, although there are long-standing private schools in Scotland, education has not been subjected to the disintegrative effect of Academies and Free Schools; water remains in public hands; the extent of privatization of the National Health Service (NHS) in England has not been replicated north of the border; private finance initiatives (PFI) and public-private partnerships (PPP) are no longer in use. And while it would be absurd to pretend that racism is not a problem in Scotland, the public culture in this respect is different from England, not least because the SNP government - to its endless credit - has argued for welcoming migrants rather than attacking them.

We should nevertheless be sceptical about claims that, on the basis of these modest but real reforms, independence would automatically lead to the creation of a social-democratic, let alone socialist, society: there is nothing intrinsically progressive about Scottish statehood - otherwise it would not be supported by eminently reactionary types like Sir Brian Souter of Stagecoach or Sir George Mathewson (formerly) of the Royal Bank of Scotland, both of whom are perfectly aware of

their class interests. It is also true that, in economic terms, the SNP is committed to the neoliberal agenda – it is almost entirely in social terms that it has deviated to the left. This means that the SNP is presenting a highly contradictory programme: on the one hand arguing for an Irish-style ‘competitive’ tax regime for the corporations, while on the other claiming that it will be able to provide a Scandinavian-style welfare state. Nor is this the only contradiction: the SNP is committed to removing nuclear weapons from the Clyde, but also (following a Conference decision two years ago) to remaining within NATO, positions which are likely to conflict with each other, to say the least.

These contradictions form the starting point of the left critique of the independence movement. But even so, a vote for independence in the referendum is not the same as a vote for the SNP. It is conceivable that independence might be won and the SNP still lose the next Scottish parliamentary election, or vice versa. Support for a national demand such as Scottish independence is quite distinguishable from support for a party that advocates it: it depends on what your reasons for supporting the demand are. Indeed there are good reasons for thinking that the SNP – or at least its leadership – are not as committed to independence as it and almost everybody else finds it convenient to pretend.

‘Maximum devolution’ or ‘devo max’ is the constitutional option probably supported by most Scots, although it is not an option on the referendum. This would leave the Scottish Parliament in control of all state functions (including taxation) with the exception of those controlled by the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Bank of England, in relation to setting interest rates. The bulk of the SNP leadership recognize that there is unlikely to be a majority for independence in September. Devo max is therefore what they hope to achieve – and, more importantly, what they think they can achieve – in the short to medium term. Salmond cannot of course openly argue for this without incurring the wrath of the fundamentalist-nationalist wing of his party, for whom anything less than independence is betraying of the blood of Wallace and The Bruce, and so on. Thus the way he has framed the outcome of a ‘yes’ vote is as close to devo max as possible – retention of the monarchy, the pound sterling (under the tutelage of the Treasury and the Bank of England) and membership of the EU – the last two in themselves guaranteeing that the neoliberal ascendancy would continue, regardless of the intentions of the SNP leadership. Ironically, Osborne’s and Barroso’s intransigence may have inadvertently provided Salmond with an escape clause, if he is capable of taking it.

The situation is further complicated, however, by the fact that, in certain circumstances, devo max would probably be acceptable to a majority of Tories, if it was politically necessary. Cameron certainly wants to win a vote against independence but, tactically inept though he is, is also aware that even if this is achieved the demand for further devolution will be unstoppable, and would probably result in pressure for devo max. Cameron effectively conceded this early after the announcement of the referendum, in a speech in Edinburgh on 16 February 2012, when he offered further measures of devolution if voters rejected independence. For tactical reasons, Salmond affected to believe this was a ruse to lull the Scots into voting for the status quo, after which the promise would be quietly forgotten. It is usually wise to believe the worst about Tory intentions, but in this case Cameron is probably genuine. If the essential integrity of the British state was maintained at the military-diplomatic level, the latter would be an acceptable outcome, particularly since it would place the responsibility for raising taxation and cutting expenditure on the Scottish government. Indeed, some Tory intellectuals, notably Tim Montgomerie, are already arguing that Cameron should seize the opportunity to reconstruct the British Constitution on a federal basis. This is a position that would bring the Tories into harmony with the Liberal Democrats, for whom this is a policy dating back to the days of the original Liberal Party.

In other words, given the amount of shadow play involved in the current debates, the Left needs to present arguments for a genuine independence from the British state; but the Scottish Left is split

on the question. The Labour Party is officially part of the Better Together campaign ('Project Fear') along with the Tories and the Liberal Democrats, although an unquantifiable but substantial number of Labour members either want the party to campaign separately from the parties of the ruling Westminster Coalition, or even for it to support independence. The 'Yes Scotland' campaign is unsurprisingly dominated by the SNP, with support from the Greens and the remnants of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP). Aligned to it, but much further to the left, is the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC), which involves the SNP left, the Greens, the SSP and the rest of the radical and revolutionary Left (Solidarity, the Socialist Workers Party, etc.). RIC has held two large conferences in Glasgow and is now conducting voter registration drives in the housing schemes of Central Scotland. (For the purposes of full disclosure I should point out that I support RIC, although this will soon become obvious.)

What are the respective arguments of the two camps?

## **No?**

Some left arguments for Scotland remaining within the Union deserve to be taken more seriously than others. One which does not deserve to be taken seriously is the claim that the desire for independence is the expression of an atavistic identity politics, a nationalist diversion from class issues which are essentially the same on both sides of the border. I would like to say that the presumption and lack of self-awareness involved in making these claims is extraordinary, but unfortunately it is very ordinary indeed. Supporting Scotland becoming an independent state apparently marks one down as a nationalist, but supporting the British state remaining as currently constituted does not. This is what is usually referred to as a double standard.

Left-wing opponents of Scottish independence tend to become incensed when they are themselves accused of nationalism, as though British nationalism was not really a nationalism at all - a venerable conservative position dating at least as far back as Lord Acton's writings on the subject. Very well, but if they can apparently detach their desire to maintain the British state from British nationalism, why do they assume that supporters of establishing a Scottish state cannot do the same with regard to Scottish nationalism? In fact, there are good socialist (and, indeed, capitalist) reasons for supporting either position which do not depend on possessing any nationalist feelings at all. It is possible to support the continued existence of the United Kingdom without being a British Unionist, just as it is possible to support secession from Britain without being a Scottish Nationalist. As I will argue below, for socialists, as opposed to British Unionists or Scottish Nationalists, support or opposition to Scottish independence is essentially a tactical question.

A more concrete set of arguments for voting 'no' concern the potential weakening of the British working class. These involve varying degrees of intellectual coherence. One is that the Labour Party will find it more difficult, perhaps even impossible, to form a government without the numeric weight of Scottish votes and MPs: the Scots who vote for independence are condemning their English brothers and sisters to an eternity of Conservative rule. There are a number of responses one could make to this type of political-emotional blackmail, but the most obvious, based on facts available in any reasonably detailed handbook of British electoral statistics, is that it is simply untrue.

In General Elections since the Second World War, Labour has only twice - in 1964 and February 1974 - relied on the results in Scotland to form a government, and in both cases these governments were subsequently re-elected - in 1966 and October 1974 respectively - without any such reliance. Labour's great majorities in 1945 and 1997 would have been reduced without Scotland, but not to the point where their ability to enact legislation would have been threatened. In other words, Scottish independence does not create an impossible logistical obstacle to the formation of a future

Labour government. If, subsequent to a Scottish secession, Labour was unable to gain an electoral majority in the Remainder of the United Kingdom (RUK), the responsibility would not lie with the departing Caledonians but with that party's electoral politics.

A second, more serious argument is that the Scottish economy is to a very great extent owned and controlled externally by foreign multinationals or their subsidiaries, while economic policy is determined by financial institutions based in the City of London and the EU bureaucracy based in Brussels. Deprived of the protective power exercised by the British Parliament, an independent Scotland would be at the mercy of these forces. It is true, of course, that an independent Scotland would still be dominated by capital, much of it external in origin; but who, apart from the most hopelessly naive ever imagined otherwise? And even - leaving aside the nationalist implications - the idea that there is something particularly pernicious about 'foreign' capital of course depends on how you see the socialist transformation of society being accomplished.

By far the most serious left argument against Scottish independence is that it will undermine the British trade-union movement, by preventing cross-border unity. This would indeed be serious if it was an inevitable consequence of secession, but it is not. Workers in Ireland can belong to the same unions as workers in Britain, workers in Canada can belong to the same unions as workers in the USA; there is no reason why workers in Scotland could not belong to the same unions as workers in England and Wales. More importantly, unity is not secured by the constitutional form of the state or by the bureaucratic structures of union organization, but rather by the willingness to show solidarity and take joint collective action, across borders if necessary. Grangemouth is in Scotland, yet the existence of UK-level Unite organization did not prevent the debacle which overwhelmed the workforce last November when the union effectively conceded a pay freeze, attacks on pension levels and a massive reduction in workplace rights. On the other hand, workers across southern Europe demonstrated the possibility of coordinated action across borders in strikes against austerity on 14 November 2012.

Finally, if Scottish independence is so unthreatening to capital, so divisive of the working class, why then are most sections of the British - and, indeed, the European and US - ruling classes so opposed to it? Why is Osborne so implacable about the impossibility of monetary union? Why is Barroso so determined that Scotland would not automatically be entitled to EU membership? The changing positions of *The Economist* - always the most reliable bellwether of neoliberal ideology - suggest an answer. During the glory days of neoliberal globalization it was forever insouciantly recommending that the Scots be granted independence so that they would be compelled to become more competitive by cutting wages and welfare. Now it runs cover stories bemoaning the fate of 'Skintland' were its inhabitants to opt for a constitutional option that the magazine had previously regarded as necessary to impose market disciplines. One suspects this change of heart is not prompted by a concern for the Scots, but rather a fear of the consequences for the British state, and consequently for capital invested in Britain, from whatever source. The problems posed by independence are not directly economic, but are related to the capitalist economy through a series of mediations. What are they?

### **Legitimation or delegation?**

For socialists the question is about whether or not independence strengthens the working class. But the working class with which we should be concerned is not only British, still less only Scottish, but international. Furthermore, the question cannot be posed in a purely economic way: strength comes from ideological and political clarity as much as from organizational capacity. So what, then, are socialist arguments for independence that would meet these requirements? The most obvious is the possibility of breaking up the British imperialist state.

Britain is still an imperial state at war; at war for every single year from 1914 to 2013. (The First World War Centenary commemorations begin a little over a month before the referendum, and the closing ceremony of the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow will seamlessly meld into the opening events of the Centenary across Britain as a whole, with a wreath-laying at the Cenotaph in George Square. This is not an innocent coincidence.) A referendum called while the occupation of Afghanistan was still ongoing, with the Iraqi and Libyan interventions a recent memory, is inseparable from the arguments against these wars and the British state's subordinate alliance with the American Empire. Scottish secession would at the very least make it more difficult for Britain to play this role, if only by reducing its practical importance for the USA. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has recently been leaking into its favoured urinal, The Telegraph, concerns for the international standing of the RUK, post-Scottish independence. The FCO fears that it might be removed as one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council - with the power of veto that this position confers - as the result of an Argentinian conspiracy backed by other Latin American states, although one imagines that India might also have good reason to see RUK removed. One Better Together leaflet, handed to me by a Labour activist on the streets of Dunbar, stated, as a reason to vote 'no' in the referendum: 'The UK means Scots get a seat at the top table at the UN beside Russia, China and America.' Indeed. And the fact that British state managers would find their geopolitical position weakened by the removal of the Rest of the United Kingdom ('Little Britain') from permanent membership of the UN Security Council seems an excellent reason to vote 'yes'.

There would also be difficulties if the SNP were to remain the governing party in an independent Scotland and actually fulfilled its promise to remove nuclear weapons from the Clyde. There are virtually no other deep water bases on the UK coastline where these submarines can be docked, and to construct them would involve massive expenditure. The Ministry of Defence is currently wringing its hands about the potential cost of relocating Trident from the Clyde to England, at a likely cost of £35 billion; although the SNP cannot be relied on to carry through the removal of Trident without mass pressure from below. Finally, in this connection, one immediate consequence of Scottish independence would be to place a question mark over the existential viability of Northern Ireland, since the Union has always been with Britain, not England, and - as Ulster Unionists of all varieties are perfectly well aware - Sinn Fein would almost certainly begin agitation for an all-Irish referendum on reunification.

Devolution has changed the context in which socialists in Scotland operate. The British state has already begun to fragment. To call for its further fragmentation on an anti-war basis, in a situation where a majority opposed the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, means that independence can be supported as a means to an anti-imperialist end, rather than as part of the political logic of Scottish nationalism. That fragmentation brings me to the second set of reasons to vote for independence: the nature of the alternative. The meaning of devolution has changed over the decades. Previously, it was a way of meeting popular aspirations without threatening the economic order. Now, it is also potentially useful for further implanting social neoliberalism. The more politics is emptied of content, the more social neoliberal regimes need to prove that democracy is still meaningful; not, of course, by extending the areas of social life under democratic control, but by multiplying the opportunities for citizen-consumers to take part in elections for local councillors, mayors, Police and Crime Commissioners, members of the Welsh and London Assemblies, and the Scottish, European and British Parliaments. It has not reversed the growing public withdrawal from official politics and in that sense has failed as a neoliberal strategy of legitimation. On the other hand, devolution is also part of a neoliberal strategy of delegation, and in this respect it has been much more successful.

Here, responsibility for implementing anti-reforms is spread beyond governing parties and central state apparatuses to elected bodies whose policy options are severely restricted both by statute and

- as in the case of local councils - by reliance on the central state for most of their funding. In the case of the devolved nations the assumption is that the people most likely to participate in local decision-making will be members of the middle class, who can be expected to behave, en masse, in ways that will impose restrictions on local taxation and public spending, and thus maintain the neoliberal order with a supposedly popular mandate: atomized citizens voting for which services they want to close. If the essential integrity of the British state was maintained at the military-diplomatic level, then further devolution, even to the point of outright federalism, would be an acceptable outcome for the majority of the British ruling class, particularly since it would place the responsibility for raising taxation and cutting expenditure on the Scottish government. Without fostering any illusions in the ability of individual states to remove themselves from the pressures of the capitalist world economy, the ability to hold elected politicians directly to account is preferable to the current endless displacement of responsibility. In particular, it would make it more difficult for the SNP to blame Westminster for the decisions that it has taken with regard to imposing the austerity programme.

One difficulty is that the entire issue of independence still feels slightly alien to most socialists and trade unionists, as if it were an irrelevance or distraction from our proper role of fighting austerity and expressing solidarity with the oppressed. Socialists may wish they were not faced with this issue, which many clearly regard as a diversion from more serious matters. But we are rarely granted the luxury of deciding the terrain upon which we have to fight. To evade the issue by affecting abstention between independence and the status quo is, in effect, to opt for the latter while pretending to be hostile to both.

The likely outcome is a 'no' vote, although in a closer race than is currently being predicted. But this is unlikely to be the end of the matter. It is essential, then, that the Left establish which reasons for supporting independence are valid and which are not, since we will be required to argue them again. In the meantime, the question of what kind of Scotland we want to see, and how we can fight for it now, regardless of the constitutional situation, might provide a bridge between sections of the Left currently divided by it.

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**P.S.**

\* "'Yes': A non-nationalist argument for Scottish independence"; Radical Philosophy 185 (May/Jun 2014):

<http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/yes>