

The Festival of Politics: “To See Ourselves As Others See Us”



Two key things were immediately apparent as yesterday's Festival of Politics panel discussion got under way.

Firstly, Shetland was actually on the map—the day prior, at a similar panel, the cartoonish map of Scotland gracing the introductory PowerPoint slide stopped at Orkney, forgoing the northerly archipelago due to its remoteness. The thought crossed my mind that no one would even notice, until I realised that anyone from Shetland would, and would be sufficiently offended. But yesterday, a more cartographically sound outline of Scotland graced yet another PowerPoint slide, with all islands dutifully included.

Secondly, and more importantly, the crowd was fidgety. Not impatient, but earnest and rearing for audience participation time. Ostensibly, the panel topic was “To See Ourselves As Others See Us,” a useful outside-the-box approach to discussing the referendum boasting a roster of international journalists expounding upon the international perception of Scottish politics (it doesn't hurt that the line is originally from a Robert Burns poem). In reality, it was a forum for venting the pent-up frustrations over a marathon-like campaign that has birthed more animosity than it has answers—and the crowd didn't disappoint.

“That's not acceptable!” asserted a man to my left in response to a panelist. “I'm not finished!” he added as moderator Isabel Fraser of BBC Scotland tried to respectfully interject. A Scottish Jacobite Party member stood and lambasted all sides of the debate, shaking the microphone in his fist instead of using it. A retired teacher received a chorus of murmured boos as he took nationalists to task for hounding businesses to stay silent about the repercussions of independence—a bit of a debunked critique, as the audience was wont to let him forget.

But the panel grounded the discussion as well as it could in the task at hand—explaining how the rest of the world sees the prospect of an independent Scotland. The lineup of journalists represented a broad range of international interests: Oriol Garcia (Catalonia), Mark Hennessy (Ireland), Yushin Toda (Japan), Griff Witte (America) and Thomas Kielinger (Germany). Let's start with Catalonia. With its own independence movement eagerly watching the results of September 18, Garcia was clear that the east coast of Spain would treat a Yes vote as a precedent for its own eventual action. The notion isn't new; but it was refreshing to hear a Catalonian expert say it out loud, making the connection between the two nations more than mere conjecture.

Ireland? Hennessy, too, admitted that a Yes vote would prompt some awkward conversations about Northern Ireland—but given the steady No lead in the polls, he cautioned that few will pay much attention until the tables turn.

Griff Witte of The Washington Post relayed the Braveheart version of Scottish independence that most Americans harbor: blue face paint, English oppressors, kilted warriors (and a Hollywood love story somewhere in the mix, I'm assuming). Witte himself, however, lauded Scots for the perceived civility of the debate, or, if you will, the anti-Braveheart approach.

On to Japan. According to Toda, merely discussing devolution in Japan would be groundbreaking. With a heavily centralised national government, lawmakers nip any talk of increased local control in the bud. The fact that the United Kingdom is permitting the referendum in the first place is astonishing to a Japanese observer—a sobering point in itself, and one that reinforces Witte's previous comments on the debate's civility. Finally, Kielinger explained that the socially democratic outlook of many Scots—that egalitarian bent we keep hearing about—doesn't translate to a German audience.

But as each international view was put forward, audience questions kept bringing the room back to domestic issues. How do we pick up the pieces after September 18, regardless of the outcome? What do the panelists think about bias in the British media? (Fraser, of BBC Scotland, didn't offer to answer this one.) Eventually, the panel finished off on one main question: how do we best shoulder the risks of independence, and how

should we talk about them?

After some crowd contributions, Hennessy simplified the point: placing such a premium on the short-term economic risks of a post-Yes vote is demeaning to Scots. Individuals assign value to many things besides money: a more inclusive society for the next generation, a healthier nation, a more environmentally sound future.

Drawing on his homeland, Hennessy offered up the attitude of Irish nationalists—nearly one hundred years ago—as a template for shouldering the risks of the unknown: “We don’t know where we’re going, but we’re not staying here.”