

Scottish Independence Referendum – Referendum Reservations



Jonathan Hearn is Professor of Political and Historical Sociology at University of Edinburgh

So far I have been relatively quiet about my personal views in regard to the Scottish referendum on independence on 18 September. But some close to me have wished that I would join the conversation. There are two things to say at the outset. First, although I have been resident in Scotland for about sixteen years, I am still only a US citizen, and thus not eligible to vote in this referendum, or any UK election. So what I have to say about how I might vote if I could is, as they say 'academic'. I am not really compelled to make a decision. Second, I have no doubt that Scotland could be viable as a small, independent European country. Scotland's natural and cultural endowments are at least on a par with the rest of Europe, and its people have as much talent and wisdom as any other five million randomly selected Europeans. So it's by no means impossible. I have always liked the idea of Scotland as a culturally vibrant social democracy. Neither do I have any particular attachment to the United Kingdom. It has good points and bad points, but it is not sacrosanct, and in due course all things must pass.

Having said this, I have serious reservations about the present proposals and campaign for independence, and have to say that, as it currently stands, I think I would probably vote 'no', if I could. My views arise out of an attitude of political realism, a certain phlegmatic patience about politics. They are an assessment of the present situation, not

an expression of unwavering underlying principles. I am an egalitarian, a middle-of-the-road social democrat, distressed by the fact that social democracy is no longer in the middle of the road. For me questions about sovereignty, independence, nationalism, are pragmatic, not principled. So let me try to elaborate my reservations under a few headings.

1. Quality of debate. Many months ago I was concerned about the relative absence of public debate on the issue, but that has been corrected. However, the quality of the debate has often (not always) been disappointing. The recent Salmond/Darling debate is a case in point. Some of the questions from the floor were abusive and inappropriate (towards Darling in particular) but also ill-informed. To say to Darling 'If we're better together, why aren't we better together now?', sounds clever, but really isn't. Darling's obvious and honest reply should be 'we are better together, that's why I'm taking this position'. But given the rhetorical situation, it is difficult to say that without sounding as if one is being dismissive, or saying there are no problems with the status quo. The question assumes that things will be better in an independent Scotland, and takes this as proof that an unsatisfactory present is caused by lack of independence. But whether an independent Scotland will be a better place (I admit it is a possibility) can only be confirmed by making it so, and then finding out. Our unhappiness with present circumstances in no way proves things will be better. My point here is simply that stylish rhetoric is not a good substitute for disciplined reason.

This goes to a basic point that needs to be acknowledged. The 'Yes' campaign has a built-in rhetorical advantage, which is not the same as a superior argument. It is always more attractive to offer a hypothetical better future than to offer a grubby compromise with the present. 'Yes' just sounds better than 'no', in a word, more 'positive'. People need to look beyond the rhetorical structure of the debate to deliberate

about the substantive points at issue. Some will find this easier to do than others.

However, problems with the quality of debate go deeper still, because there is a lot of 'talking past one another'. For instance, there is no contradiction between Salmond's assertion that North Sea oil is an asset, and any country would regard it as such (true of course), and Darling's assertion that the oil provides a volatile tax income stream, and will eventually run out (also true). There was no real debate here, partly because the future is imponderable and beyond the ken of either debater, but also because listeners are only being asked which aspect of the situation they want to fix their attention on—the happy one or the worrying one. That is not a debate, at least not one that leads to a deeper understanding of the issues and possibilities.

2. Political culture and social composition. One of the attractive things about Scotland for me has always been its left-leaning political culture. The fact that the post 1970s Conservative Party has been so weak in Scotland, and the post-devolution politics largely a contest between two moderate left-of-centre parties (the SNP and Labour), with other small left parties such as the Greens in the mix, is a good thing in my view. But I think this reflects a distinctive political culture in Scotland, which is not the same thing as the overall composition of Scottish society and its various social and political attitudes. Reliable social attitudes surveys over many years have indicated that while there is slightly stronger support for a more active welfare state in Scotland than in the rest of the UK, that this difference isn't large, and might be reversed if the comparison was with, say, the north of England. These surveys also indicate some conservatism on social attitudes, for instance towards the acceptance of homosexuality and abortion rights. Anyone who recalls the uproar that happened in Scotland shortly after devolution over the question of repealing 'Section 2A' about

teaching that homosexuality can be an acceptable lifestyle, should be a bit wary about assuming the resolutely left nature of Scottish public opinion.

For complex historical reasons, a more social democratic, socially liberal politics has been hegemonic in Scotland's political institutions and other major professional institutions associated with health and education. This is a good thing. But there is a risk of a view from the 'left-liberal bubble' that predominates in the Central Belt and key institutions misreading the wider society. Scotland has bigots and racists and xenophobes just like other parts of the UK. It is normal. They are peculiarly marginalized and silenced in public discourse by the political culture. But people should expect that the political culture will be fundamentally altered by independence, and no longer so constituted in contrast to the rest of the UK and the dominant parties there. This is likely to create the conditions for new political entrepreneurs (in the style of Nigel Farage) to appeal to some of these sentiments more directly. This is not to say that this trend would be unmanageable, or likely to become dominant. It is to say that we should have no illusions about the inherent virtues of the Scottish people, nor should we rest expectations about the political culture in an independent Scotland on such illusions.

Another thing that needs to be stressed here is that the nature of modern democracy tends to teach citizens to view political parties as if they were economic firms offering products. Each party puts forth a policy 'offer', and citizen-shoppers choose the offer they like the most. In routine democratic politics, parties out of power tend to make unrealistic offers, and then trim these back if they gain power. And parties in power gradually lose luster as the limits of their abilities are revealed, and they tend to counteract this by using what powers they have to reward core voters and keep them faithful. It's all a bit grubby, but this

is the way the game is played. If what can really be offered is so prone to abuse in these circumstances, we should expect that offers in regard to highly incalculable future conditions of independence are similarly prone. But more than this, we need to look through the pretense that we are buying our preferred policy options, shopping for the kind of society we would like. What politicians and their parties really offer is a set of political skills and know-how, and a broad reputation for how they will tend to use those, within the limited scope for action that circumstances allow them. An independent Scotland will want able yet tractable leaders, and its citizens will want politicians who reflect their (probably diverse) values. The precise policies on offer, while of course relevant, should be viewed with a certain sceptical, 'wait-and-see' attitude.

I have been as frustrated as many others with the compromises of the left in recent years. I voted for Ralph Nader in the 2000 US presidential election to express my frustration (while knowing the electoral college system in that instance would render my vote inconsequential and merely symbolic, as I was voting in a firmly Democratic state). Much of the support for independence is driven by a similar frustration with the political left and the Labour Party in the UK, with which I deeply sympathise. I have already indicated that I think there is a tendency to over-estimate how far to the left an independent Scotland, as a whole, will be. But apart from this I think we need to appreciate how hemmed in the political left has become. There is no longer a broad base of industrial working class support to mobilise, and all political parties operating in the advanced capitalist economies have to deal with citizenries that want to consume beyond their means, and elites that so thoroughly monopolise the circulation of wealth that their interests must be courted to win elections. To change this would require profound political and economic restructuring, in a coordinated way across a series of advanced capitalist countries. Rising countries such as China

have a material interest in our political stability and penchant for over-consumption, making it even more difficult to change the direction of things. The fact that the model 'Nordic', relatively more egalitarian, social democratic countries have been drifting in the same rightward, 'neoliberal' direction is an indication of the severity of the situation. An independent Scotland would be a small country in the same general situation. It would not be able to adroitly step outside of it. Scotland could lend its weight towards global reforms of capitalism either as an independent country or as a constituent of the UK. This is not an argument against independence. It is a caution against misconstruing the problems the left faces as problems of national political will alone. They are problems brought on by the global maturation of capitalism, and connected concentration of capital in very few hands.

3. Political timing. I think the best conditions for establishing an independent Scotland would be when the world economy is fairly stable, and it is possible either to align Scotland with a reformed Eurozone, or establish a new sovereign currency. That is not the situation we are in. Another catch is, under such conditions, people would probably be less inclined to make a radical move. As it is, Scotland has had this question put before it under less than propitious circumstances. One result has been the decision of the SNP to turn away from the long established proposal to join the Euro, and instead propose sharing the Pound with the rest of the UK. Now I suspect that if it came to independence, despite the unionist parties aligning against this option, it would be accepted as the most feasible alternative. I think it was a political blunder of those parties to suggest they would block it. They should have stuck to the unavoidable facts, that this option would severely curtail Scottish sovereignty, in effect leaving fiscal policy in the hands of the Bank of England and the UK government. The argument that the problems of the Euro stem from having a shared currency without common fiscal

discipline is correct. (In an integrated economy it's perfectly possible and reasonable for richer regions to subsidise poorer regions, that's a separate matter.) The same principle holds for a Pound shared across the rUK and Scotland. Salmond's counter-thrust, that if Scotland is not allowed to keep its share of the assets of the Pound, it can walk away from the debt, isn't tenable. If it did so the new country's fiscal reputation would be dismal. That would not be a good start. The bravest thing would be to say that Scotland would at least begin with a new independent currency, accept its share of the debt, and accept that fiscal austerity might have to be the order of the day for some time to come (and hope some help with the debt would come in the form of long term inflation). But that is a hard sell to people who are looking for a better world.

At the moment it appears that the UK economy, including Scotland, is in recovery, growing again. But this is deceptive. The wider European economy, a crucial context, is still on the ropes. In the UK we are basically seeing a return to the status quo ante, with all its attendant problems. A return to growth in an economy that cannot continue to grow endlessly, with no real solution to the tendencies towards over-consumption, over-concentration of wealth, and over-valuing property (private and commercial) as a way of creating capital value. More boom and bust cycles should be expected in such uneven economies where capital is not circulating widely. An independent Scotland would need to be very disciplined to protect itself from these cycles. That is possible, but very difficult under present circumstances. These difficulties have not been very present in public discussions.

I've already mentioned the North Sea oil question. Following Norway in using income from tax revenues to set up something like a sovereign wealth fund is all well and good. Would that this had been done a long time ago. How long this source of revenue will last is disputed and hard to guess. But the

timing is less than ideal, given that an independent Scotland will need to service its debts, which however the accounting is done, is likely to eat into this fund. More generally, one wishes there was a more realistic and hard-minded debate about the larger issues here. The world is heading into the endgame for fossil fuels, failing to deal with the problem of global warming, slouching towards a nuclear solution, and soon likely to see conflict over precious water resources heat up. This last is an area where Scotland is well endowed, but talking in realist terms about this as a hard geopolitical asset is unattractive. It is easy enough to celebrate Scotland's water resources and renewable energy potential, and these should be put to good use. But ultimately all this needs to be contemplated within the rather darker context of intensifying geopolitical conflicts over resources. Serious Scottish politics will have to take difficult geopolitical positions on these issues. It is very difficult for mainstream politicians to talk about these troubling prospects, but citizens need to be thinking about them nonetheless.

Final Thoughts. Democracy is an uneasy business. When it's in rude health it creates social friction. In my 'homeland', the US, the election of Obama saw a substantial reinvigoration of political engagement, but also a corresponding backlash. As pitiful as it is for the functioning of US politics, the pitched opposition between the Republicans and Democrats, especially at the extremes, is a symptom of democracy at work. Similarly, the strong feelings that have emerged around the Scottish referendum, though at times uncivil and unpleasant, are unfortunately normal for periods when democratic people become engaged but divided over a central issue. And the political antinomy has been exacerbated by the absence of a middle, 'devo-max' option in the referendum, artificially shunting many people toward the extremes. Both sides, and the many who, even up to the wire, will be uncertain about what is best and make a decision at the margin, will need to move on after the referendum, and allow tempers to cool. Democracy has

to operate on a slow boil, turning the fire up and down as needed.

If Scotland were to become independent, I think it would face some difficult times, and many new compromises that had not been anticipated, but I don't think it would be the end of the world. I think necessity would force Scotland to trim its sails. There would be some withdrawal of capital at least for a while, with ensuing unemployment. Professionals in both public and private spheres used to working and circulating in wider UK institutions and job markets will find their horizons of employment and funding, at least for a period, more curtailed. I suspect Scotland would find itself in some sort of Sterling currency union, and that despite noises to the contrary, it would be welcomed into the European Union. I doubt Scotland can continue to charge English and Welsh university students full fees, but will have to treat them on the same terms as other EU students. My argument is not that these challenges cannot be confronted, but that it will be a rougher ride than is often being suggested. To continue the nautical metaphor, becoming independent now would be launching a small craft in particularly rough waters.

This is not a council of despair. I am not saying that Scots cannot become independent and therefore must be politically impotent. I am saying they have choices about how to realise their political powers, and will continue to have choices in the future. As a small independent country there would be choices about how to manage national resources, and how to ally with or oppose other countries, that would not be there otherwise. But as a constituent part of the UK, Scots exercise some power over the composition of Westminster, and over the direction of UK policies, and are able to amplify their political will to a degree in those contexts. People in Scotland, within the UK, have a kind of national agency, even though the alienation from the rightward political tendencies in the larger state may seem to obscure this. It is not a

matter of either regaining self-determination or remaining helpless. In either scenario, Scotland will have limited scope, but nonetheless real scope for action. It is a question of which scope is to be preferred.

Finally, I see no reason to believe that the independence issue can be resolved 'once and for all' in the negative by a single referendum. Energies may be temporarily exhausted, but changing circumstances may bring the issue back on the agenda. Changes in the disposition of the UK in regard to the EU may well 'reheat' the matter. After London, Scotland is the most distinctive and politically integrated component of the UK system, and as long as that's the case, and there is no reason to expect it to change, its aggregate support for or dissent from the larger system, will be a potential point of political tension (as many electoral maps of recent decades have illustrated). That is a fact of life in the UK, not in itself a case either for or against Scottish independence.

Submitted by [Jonathan Hearn](#)