

The British media's progressives are coming round to Scottish independence



by [Simon Pia](#), [Edinburgh Napier University](#)

As Theresa May and Nicola Sturgeon had their [Brexit stand-off](#) in Glasgow on Monday March 27 ahead of the Scottish parliament [voting in favour](#) of a second independence referendum, Richard Dawkins stepped into the fray – on the side of the Scottish first minister.

The renowned English evolutionary biologist and controversialist tweeted:

What made this particularly pertinent is that the best-selling author of *The God Delusion* had added cerebral heft along with Stephen Hawking to the [roll-call of 200 celebrities](#) wheeled out before the [2014 referendum](#) to appeal to Scots to stay in the union.

Dawkins' shift is part of a sea change among the progressive liberal left on how they view Scottish independence, reflected in their UK media bastions [The Guardian](#) and the [New Statesman](#). Nationalism is no longer anathema – well, the Scottish brand anyway.

The left's dilemma

Scotland's inclusive "civic nationalism" with its loosely social democratic values is now viewed as something to aspire to, particularly after its [resounding vote](#) 62%-38% to remain

in the EU. It stands in stark contrast to the right-wing populism that has produced the Trump presidency and its “America First” nationalism; Marine Le Pen and the other nationalist movements in mainland Europe; and UKIP, which has effectively infected the soul of Tory party.

Added to this is the prospect of a decade of Tory government due to the enfeeblement of the Labour party. This has been particularly grave in Scotland, where the party that once saw the country as its back yard now has a solitary MP – no better than the Tories or Lib Dems. Sturgeon’s SNP holds the rest, having won 56 of Scotland’s 59 constituencies [in 2015](#).

Polly Toynbee of the Guardian made a passionate plea in August 2014 at the Edinburgh Festival for solidarity and Scots to stay in the union. By the general election of 2015 she [was conceding](#): “No wonder SNP are confident – the Tories behave as if they want Scotland gone”.

And this week Toynbee [reflected](#): “On Monday May was in Scotland, arguing for the ‘unstoppable force’ of a ‘better together’ United Kingdom. But every word in defence of that union rang hollow, as all she said applies with equal force to the European Union she herself is breaking.”

Other Guardian writers have been even more forthright. John Harris

[said](#), “Hard Brexit is making the case for Scottish independence”, while

Suzanne Moore [wrote](#), “Brexit was an English vote for independence – you can’t begrudge the Scots the same.”

Paul Mason recently felt the need to [appeal to](#) “Scottish Labour to back independence”, while George Monbiot has been [calling for](#) Scotland to “cut to rope”. The Guardian’s [reporting](#) of this week’s Holyrood vote has meanwhile been very even-handed – in contrast, for instance, to The Telegraph’s [coverage](#) of Sturgeon’s “endless quest”.

Over at the New Statesman, Julia Rampen [has been](#) asking: “Who would oppose Scottish independence second referendum campaign?” The magazine recently ran a piece by David Clark, one-time special advisor to Robin Cook at the Foreign Office, [which said](#): “Scottish voters were warned that independence would leave them locked out of the EU. Now independence is their only hope of avoiding that fate.” In another piece, Simon Wren Lewis, a professor of economic policy at Oxford University, [argued](#): “Brexit makes Scottish independence more economically attractive.”

The view on the right

Sturgeon is even finding some sympathy on the soft right. Matthew Parris of The Times [believes](#) the Scots should have a second vote if they want one. The Guardian’s Simon Jenkins agrees, [arguing that](#) “Anglo-Scottish relations should be released from the lingering fog of Anglo imperialism”.

The Spectator’s Alex Massie [has written that](#) “anyone in Whitehall or Westminster who thinks this is all fine, there is no risk, no danger here and so on, is deluding themselves”. Independence, if voted for, could, “one day be seen as one of the Brexit consequences”.

Of course, the majority of the UK press – the most “right wing” and “biased” in Europe [according to](#) a recent YouGov poll of seven European countries – [has been](#) in full “enemies of the people” mode against the Scottish nationalists.



Old faithful.

telegraph.co.uk

The Telegraph’s Allison Pearson outdid even the tabloids with a [recent splenetic attack](#) on Scotland’s first minister, headlined: “Nicola Sturgeon is a liar and a traitor – off with her head!” It was later changed to “Nicola Sturgeon – another treacherous queen of Scots – has miscalculated”, as no doubt

even The Telegraph recognised its tastelessness.

Bolstering the unionist ranks have been two commentators somewhat on the left, [David Aaronovitch](#) of The Times and [Nick Cohen](#) of The Observer. Both are vigorous critics of nationalism and advocates of Western interventionism in the Middle East.

All the same, the shift in written opinion coming out of London has been discernible. As Theresa May triggered Article 50 and Sturgeon [warned](#) that she will be unveiling her strategy after Easter for bringing forward a second referendum, the battles lines between Edinburgh and London have been realigned.

Will the UK commentators fall into line and back unionism once a timetable for a vote has been agreed, or is a more permanent split developing? The signals will be fascinating to watch in the coming months.

[Simon Pia](#), Lecturer in Journalism, [Edinburgh Napier University](#)

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