

Duncan, P.J.S.  
School of Slavonic and East European Studies  
University College London  
Senior Lecturer in Russian Politics and Society  
BCom(Russian Studies), MA, PhD

### **Scotland and the Question of Self-Determination in Europe**

It was Alex Salmond, the First Minister of Scotland and leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), who formulated the referendum question: ‘Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?’ All United Kingdom citizens resident in Scotland over the age of 16 (the normal minimum voting age is 18) were eligible to vote, and did so on 18 September 2014 with an impressively high turnout of 84.6%. The final vote, 55.3% ‘No’ and 44.7% ‘Yes’, is sufficiently decisive to bury the issue of independence for some time, but the promise of more devolution to Scotland and the demand for it in other parts of the United Kingdom means that the issue remains at the fore of British politics.

Support for Scottish independence, as opposed to greater devolution within the United Kingdom, has grown rapidly in recent years and has increased faster than support for the SNP. This sentiment is not essentially an ethnic nationalism, directed against the English, but rather a desire for self-government of the territory by the inhabitants irrespective of race and ethnicity. The growth of this aspiration is linked with the growing inequalities in British society; the belief that London, and especially the Conservative Party, cannot represent the people of Scotland; the impact of the international financial crisis from 2008; and the failure of the Labour Party to offer a credible alternative.

The growth of support for separatism in Scotland since the 1990s cannot be seen in isolation from the desires of other small nations and ethnic minorities

in Europe to separate from the states containing them. With television and the Internet, Scottish nationalists are informed about and may be encouraged by movements for independence in Ukraine, Kosovo or Catalonia. One can speak of waves of nationalism spreading across Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the rise of nationalism in the USSR and Yugoslavia leading to the disintegration of both states. This was followed by the split of Czechoslovakia and threats from Chechen separatism to the integrity of the Russian Federation. In 2008 the recognition by many Western countries of the independence of Kosovo was followed by Russia recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; and in turn by the growth of separatist sentiment in Flanders (Belgium), the North of Italy and Catalonia and the Basque country in Spain. It is noteworthy that Spain refused to recognize the independence of Kosovo because of fears of creating a precedent for the Basques and Catalans. The case of the Crimea in March 2014 is rather different, because the referendum was organized at short notice after a coup facilitated by the presence of Russian troops; there was an atmosphere of intimidation which allowed no opposition campaigning; and the decision was to join Russia rather than to form an independent state.

In 1707 the parliaments of England and Scotland agreed to unite the two countries in a United Kingdom with a single parliament. In the period leading up to the First World War, the Liberal Party in opposition and government advocated Home Rule for Scotland, Ireland and Wales. The bill for Scottish Home Rule passed its two first readings in 1913 but made no further progress because of the outbreak of the war. Within the emerging British Labour Party created by the trade unions and socialist societies, Scotsmen such as Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald played a leading role.

Although founded in the 1930s, the SNP began to gain serious electoral support only in the 1970s, when it became commercially profitable to exploit the oil discovered in the North Sea around Scotland. Using the slogan 'It's

Scotland's oil', the SNP promoted the idea that Scotland would be better off if it were independent and did not have to share the oil revenues with the rest of Britain. It is notable that in Europe, separatist waves were initiated by the wealthier parts of larger states: Slovenia and Croatia in Yugoslavia, the Baltic States in the USSR, Flanders, Catalonia and Northern Italy. The Labour Party, in government in Westminster from 1974 to 1979, had become converted to the idea of 'Home Rule' in the sense of the devolution of some areas of domestic policy to elected assemblies in Scotland and Wales. In 1979 the Labour government put its proposals to referenda in Scotland and Wales. In Wales the proposals were easily defeated; English-speakers in Wales feared domination by the Welsh-speaking minority in the principality. In Scotland, on the other hand, the majority of the voters supported the proposals. Opposition to devolution from some Labour Members of Parliament (mainly from the North of England who feared that their region would suffer if Scotland received devolution while their region did not), had however led to a clause in the referendum law saying that the referendum would be valid only if at least 40% of the whole electorate (as well as 50% of the participating voters) voted 'Yes' to the assembly. This threshold was not reached. As a result, the Scottish Assembly could not be introduced, and the SNP spread the view that the Labour Party had betrayed the plan for devolution.

After the referenda, the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher won the British general election. Thatcherism both under her rule and under John Major who succeeded her as prime minister in 1990 meant an attack on trade union and welfare rights, the closure of much of traditional British mining and manufacturing industry and a huge rise in unemployment. Economic inequality grew as profits and bonuses, especially of finance capital in the City of London, increased. The miners' strike of 1984-5 revealed and enhanced social and political divisions across Britain. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 meant that the employers and government no longer had to compete with an

alternative socialist model for the support of the working class; capitalism, neoliberalism and the market reigned supreme.

Geographically, Thatcherism divided Britain between a poor North and a wealthier South, with the impact on Scotland with its coal mining and shipbuilding industries being particularly strong. Many people in Scotland were radicalized. Notably, Mrs Thatcher abolished the system of local government finance whereby residents paid rates according to the value of their property, and replaced it with the 'poll tax' whereby every person in a district paid the same, quite substantial, amount, regardless of their economic position. The tax was tried out first in Scotland. After it was extended to England it led to a riot in London in 1990. In Scotland, however, it led to a mass resistance movement. A quarter of the population refused to pay, despite people being imprisoned for this, and mass demonstrations were held to protect those facing the threat of arrest or seizure of property. Mrs Thatcher's insistence on keeping the poll tax, despite such wide opposition, was a major reason why the Conservative Party decided to force her resignation in 1990 and replace her with Major.

In 1997 the Labour Party, under the label 'New Labour' won the British general election. Tony Blair and from 2007 Gordon Brown led Labour governments from 1997 to 2010. The political impact of Thatcherism on Scotland was such that the Conservative Party was practically destroyed there, and Labour won the great majority of Scottish seats. The Blair government held referenda in Scotland and Wales on new proposals for devolution, which were approved by voters in both countries, and in Scotland by a large majority. The British parliament then passed laws establishing a parliament in Scotland with extensive powers of self-government, and a rather less powerful assembly in Wales. In 1999 Labour won the first elections to the new Scottish parliament, and did so again in 2003. Support for the SNP was increasing, however; the policies of Blair and Brown in London were in several respects continuations of Thatcherism, although without Mrs Thatcher's rhetoric against the European

Union (EU). Blair and Brown were equally committed to further privatization, deregulation and globalization of the economy, in the interests of finance capital. The SNP began to implement some more socialistic policies, including free university tuition of residents of Scotland and free social care in homes for the elderly. In the 2007 Scottish parliamentary election, the SNP were the largest party and formed a minority government under First Minister Salmond.

The following year the international financial crisis hit Britain, undermining the hegemonic ideology of neoliberalism and globalization. Brown's government began to cut expenditure and unemployment rose. Disillusionment with Labour in Scotland and the rest of Britain grew. In 2010 Labour was defeated in the British elections and the coalition of the Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties was formed under David Cameron as prime minister. In 2011 Salmond won an outright majority in the Scottish elections with a promise to hold a referendum about independence.

It should be emphasised here that there is a consensus among all three traditional major parties in Britain – Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat – that if a majority of people living in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland ever expressed in a freely and fairly conducted referendum the desire to leave the United Kingdom, then they would be allowed to do so. It was inevitable, therefore, that Cameron would agree to the Scottish first minister's demand for a referendum; since the constitution remains a prerogative of Westminster, the timing of the referendum and the questions to be asked had to be negotiated between Cameron and Salmond.

At the time of the negotiations opinion polls showed that only a minority of voters in Scotland supported independence, and Salmond wanted to include both the question about independence cited at the beginning of this article and another asking whether people wanted more powers for the Scottish parliament within the United Kingdom. Cameron, not wishing to devolve more powers to Edinburgh, vetoed the second question, expecting that voters would reject

independence and settle for the *status quo*. Cameron allowed Salmond to choose the timing of the referendum; and it was agreed in 2012 that it would be held in September 2014. This gave the SNP a full two years to use their base in the Scottish government to build up support for independence.

Against the ‘Yes Scotland’ campaign run by the SNP in support of independence, the Labour, Liberal Democratic and Conservative Parties in Scotland united in the ‘Better together’ campaign for a ‘No’ vote. Under the leadership of the former Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer Alistair Darling, it argued that the Scots were ‘better together’ with the rest of the United Kingdom. Most but not all of the Scottish press opposed independence. British and international business interests, dominant in the Scottish economy, also opposed change but did so generally quietly until the last stages of the campaign.

Economic and social issues were dominant in the campaign. The SNP’s vision of an independent Scotland within the EU foundered when EU leaders made it clear that Scotland would not automatically be accepted as a member. The SNP policy that Scotland would use the euro had already been abandoned with the crisis in the eurozone; instead Salmond promised to keep the pound. Since this would leave financial power in London, he argued for a currency union between Scotland and what was left of the United Kingdom; but the leaders of the British parties unanimously refused to allow this.

As late as 7 August 2014 opinion polling showed the No vote on over 60% support (excluding don’t knows).<sup>1</sup> Two televised debates were held between Salmond and Darling that month. Darling was judged to win the first by showing Salmond’s weakness on the currency. Salmond won the second, however, by attacking Darling from a left-wing stance, accusing him of getting into bed with the Tories instead of running an independent Labour campaign. Salmond promised to defend the National Health Service (NHS) – free social

medical treatment. The desire to protect the NHS in Scotland from the Conservatives in London, who are perceived as threatening it with policies of privatization, was a major reason given by voters for supporting a Yes vote.<sup>2</sup> After this support for ‘Yes’ increased in successive opinion polls, and a poll published on 7 September for the first time showed a Yes majority at 51%.<sup>3</sup> It seems that this was the first time that the British political leaders realised what was at stake. Gordon Brown, himself a Scot, went to Scotland and in an emotional speech promised, on behalf of all the British parties, that if Scotland voted against independence it would receive many more powers. At the same time major banks and other businesses threatened to withdraw their headquarters from Scotland if there were a Yes vote.<sup>4</sup> Following this, polls moved in the other direction, with a small majority for the No side.

The turnout on 18 September was very high at 84.6%, ranging from 75% in Glasgow to 91% in East Dunbartonshire. Only four of the 32 districts of Scotland voted Yes, including Glasgow and Dundee.<sup>5</sup> These districts are the poorest parts of Scotland and are traditional centres of working-class Labour support. Their support for a Yes vote reflects the view of part of the Scottish Left which is disillusioned with the pro-business policies of the Labour Party and believes that the only hope for radical social change in Scotland is through independence.<sup>6</sup>

In general, one can conclude that separatism in Scotland, unlike many other cases in Europe, is primarily social and economic in content, and ethnicity and culture plays a relatively weak role. Paradoxically, while support for the SNP originally grew on the basis of Scotland’s expected oil wealth, by 2014 it

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<sup>1</sup> [1, p. 1]

<sup>2</sup> [2, p. 8]

<sup>3</sup> [3, p. 1]

<sup>4</sup> [4, p. 1]

<sup>5</sup> [5, p. 6]

<sup>6</sup> [6, pp. 18-9]

was the poorer sections of society which were most strongly in support of independence.

## **Bibliography**

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