

Scottish nationalism How did it come to this A confluence of historical forces North Sea oil and absent-minded politicians has put Britain's union at risk

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Scottish nationalism

How did it come to this?

A confluence of historical forces, North Sea oil and absent-minded politicians has put Britain's union at risk

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“WHAT’S ‘better together’ about here?” asks David Linden, a 24-year-old activist for the Scottish National Party (SNP), gesturing to a turd-strewn street of rundown public housing in Shettleston, in the East End of Glasgow. Mr Linden, who is campaigning for Scotland to choose independence at the referendum on September 18th, raises a fair question. Shettleston is one of Britain’s poorest, idlest and sickest places; at 64, male life expectancy is 15 years below the national average and falling. Why wouldn’t the ailing locals disdain the unionist Better Together campaign for the shimmering Utopia of the Yes Scotland separatists?

Out door-knocking one recent evening, Mr Linden and his team of activists gave them every encouragement. The sun was high, sparkling on Glasgow’s mouldering tower-blocks and the distant green hills beyond the Clyde, and so were their spirits. They were young—only one was older than 25—articulate and bursting with arguments for Scotland to go solo. It would be richer, fairer and more responsive to Shettleston’s needs, they claimed, on jobs, health care, you name it.

The Yes campaign—dominated by the SNP, which runs Scotland’s devolved government—has been hard at it for over 18 months and it shows. Lamp-posts, windows and billboards in Glasgow are pasted with separatists’ posters and scrawled with their slogans. **“Yes Scotland! No more Tory governments ever!” is a favourite.** Charged with visiting 400 houses a month, Mr Linden’s team is beating that target every week, and having a blast. “We find it very enjoyable,” he says.

Contrast that with the desultory unionist effort. A cross-party initiative of the Labour Party, Liberal Democrats and Conservatives, it is undermined by bickering and almost invisible. In half a dozen trips to Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Fife and elsewhere, your correspondent has seen hardly any Better Together posters on display. The campaign has a capable leader in Alistair Darling, a former Labour chancellor of the exchequer, plenty of money—including a £1m (\$1.7m) gift from J.K. Rowling, the creator of Harry Potter—and support from business. But it has few Mr Lindens. To post envelopes and man the phones, it is relying on hired hands and young, English-accented “posh Scots”, home from southern boarding schools.



Remember Culloden!

Part of the problem is that Labour, which holds 41 of Scotland's 59 Westminster seats, prefers to work alone. On a tour of the tough housing estates that dominate his north Glasgow constituency, the Labour MP Willie Bain hardly mentioned Better Together. **Gordon Brown, a Scottish former Labour prime minister who is the unionists' big hitter, has kept a sullen distance from the cross-party campaign.**

A graver hitch for the unionists is that their argument is unclear. It was always going to be tough to make a compelling case for an unexciting status quo. All the same, their efforts have underwhelmed.

Clever but uncharismatic, Mr Darling has focused on knocking down the separatists' wilder promises. An independent Scotland, he argues, would have less oil money and more financial and other risks than they pretend. It is unclear what currency it would use or whether it could join the European Union and NATO. These are important points. Yet the relentless negativity of Better Together has got up Scots' noses, by casting a pall over Scotland's future inside or outside the union. **The unionist vision for Scotland, many Scots complain, is of a poor wee country sustained by subsidies from English taxpayers. And no Scot wants that.**

These factors—a strong separatist campaign and weak unionist one—have helped put the world's most successful national union in a tight spot. Polls suggest it should survive: only one of over 70 has put the Yes campaign in front. Averaged out they

suggest a 59:41 win for the union. Yet there are reasons to think those figures may understate the Yes vote.

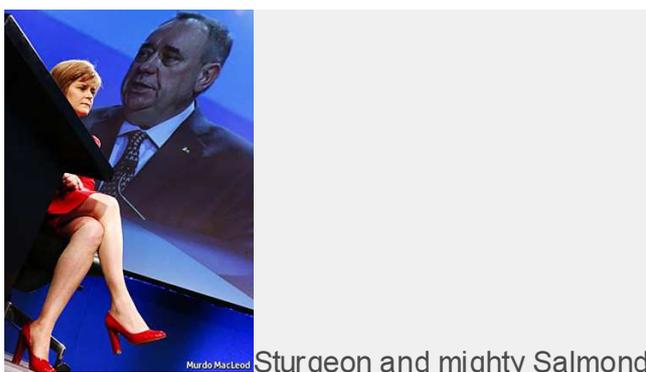
One concern is a perplexingly wide spread among the pollsters. YouGov, which has the Yes campaign on 41% and Panelbase, which has it on 46%, have been consistently 5-7 points apart. Another is the effect of what is likely to be the highest turnout in any recent British election, including many disaffected Scots who have not voted recently or at all. Such people, concentrated in hardscrabble places such as Shettleston, are most likely to vote Yes. **And if the Yes campaign gains momentum—as it might, for example, if the Commonwealth games beginning in Glasgow on July 23rd go well—so may many more.**

So a Yes vote remains possible. And even a narrow unionist victory would be troublesome. It would fail to defuse an issue that has haunted Scotland's politics, bruised its relations with England and caused embarrassment for Britain abroad.

Thatcher's children

The campaign to devolve power to Scotland has deep roots. In 1912 Herbert Asquith, the Liberal prime minister, unveiled his dream of "Home Rule for all", in which autonomy for Ireland would be followed by a similar arrangement north of Carlisle.

Yet the notion of Scottish independence would then have seemed absurd. Scots were champion empire-builders. Won at the bayonet-point of the kilted Highlanders, the empire was to a great degree managed by Scots, including, between 1885 and 1939, a third of Britain's colonial governors-general. The founder of this newspaper, James Wilson, a hatmaker from Hawick sent to rebuild the financial system of India after the 1857 mutiny, who died in Calcutta, was just such a Scot. Glasgow was known as the "second city of the Empire". Proffering home rule to this scenic British province was the equivalent in politics of what Walter Scott had done for Scottish culture by reinventing the kilt a century before. Both were efforts to bolster its distinctive identity within Britain.



Sturgeon and mighty Salmond

The retreat from empire was the enabling condition for modern Scottish nationalism. It is no coincidence that it emerged as a political creed in the 1960s, as Harold Macmillan's wind of change was blowing Britons home from abroad. And it has been hugely reinforced by the erosion of British institutions—including the army, which lost the last of its Highland infantry regiments in 2006—and identity that has followed.

Asked to elect a single nationality, 39% of Scots said they were British in 1970; by 2013 that had fallen to 23%.

What is it to be exclusively Scottish? Sometimes it is to hate the English—a leitmotif of **Scottish nationalism dating back at least to 1320, when a bunch of Scottish**

nobles declared, in a letter to the pope, that “as long as but a hundred of us remain alive, never will we on any conditions be brought under English rule.”

That sentiment has been encouraged by a popular rethinking of Scottish history—again, in the 1960s—to emphasise the cruel treatment of Highlanders in the 18th and 19th centuries by the English (and, though it is less mentioned, their fellow Scots). Thus the best-selling histories of John Prebble, one of which, “Culloden”, on the last battle of the 1745 Jacobite uprising, inspired a stark film by Peter Watkins (both men were English).

Resentment of England lurks in the backdrop of Scottish nationalism. But in the foreground is not broadsword and targe but socialist dogma.

Just as Scotland enjoyed the fruits of empire disproportionately, so it suffered the misery of deindustrialisation. As its steel mills and shipyards declined, militant unions and firebrands launched a struggle to save them, and Scottish politics swung left. This polarisation was not unique to Scotland; the same thing was happening in northern England and Wales. Yet it combined with the rise in Scottish identity to form a new nationalist story: that Scotland is different from England because it is more left-wing—and only independence can deliver the social democracy Scots want.

Those who subscribe to this theory, spawned in the 1960s and 1970s by Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, two nationalist ideologues, tend also to believe in a Marxist caricature of the British state. They consider it in hoc to the outworn rituals and exigencies of empire, to which even the once promising British Labour movement has been suborned. This theory took no account of the high immigration and cultural liberation which were already reshaping British society. **Yet, being convenient to the nationalists, it has endured. In a recent essay, one of Scotland’s best novelists, Irvine Welsh, decried the “UK imperialist state”.**

The curse of oil

This is the broad context for Scotland’s nationalist surge, but it has also been fuelled by three related local factors. The first is the demise of Tory Scotland. At the 1955 election the Tories won more than half the seats in Scotland; in 1970 they became, under Edward Heath, the first party to win in Westminster but not Scotland. But it was above all Margaret Thatcher who sank her party north of the border, providing a bigger fillip to the nationalist cause than William Wallace and Mel Gibson combined.

Between 1979 and 1981 Scotland lost a fifth of its workforce. Again, the old industrial cities of north and central England suffered similarly. But many Scots believed they had been singled out—often noting that Thatcher’s most unpopular policy, the poll tax, was introduced in Scotland first. This was because Scotland was otherwise due an alternative tax rise, which the Tories wanted to forestall; yet there was something about Thatcher’s style that enraged the Scots. Perhaps it was partly a class thing, mulls Gregg McClymont, a Scottish Labour MP and Oxford historian: Thatcher’s lower-middle-class, Methodist values and regional roots made her more obviously English, as opposed to British, than her aristocratic Tory forebears.

The myth of vituperative, job-destroying, Scots-hating Tories took hold and, especially when the Conservatives are ruling in Westminster, in Scottish minds they and the English can seem synonymous. Now is such a time. At the 2010 general election the Tories won only one Scottish seat, which hugs the border, yet they govern Britain. Hence the Tory-hating graffiti daubed around Glasgow.



The second impulse was the discovery, in the late 1960s, of big oilfields under the North Sea. It gave the nationalists more to be angry about—and an argument for why Scotland would be better off alone. In 1967 the SNP got a foothold in Westminster at a by-election in Hamilton. By 1974 it had eleven MPs—largely down to the success of the slogan: “It’s Scotland’s oil”.

In 1979—a mere 67 years after Asquith’s modest proposal—this advance led to Scotland’s first referendum on devolution. Asked whether they wanted a Scottish parliament, 52% of voters said they did—but on a turnout sufficiently low for Westminster to ignore them. That disdain rankled, however, and by the mid-1990s, when Tony Blair took over the Labour Party, the pressure for devolution was intense. **At a second referendum, in 1997, over 74% of Scots voted for a parliament, which was duly formed, under the leadership of a Labour minister, Donald Dewar.**

This manoeuvre was thought to have spiked the separatists’ guns. But, on the contrary, devolution has been the third factor in their rise. It handed the SNP a chance to shine, which the party has seized with gusto, principally at the expense of Labour. Its advantage is partly political. New Labour’s interventionist foreign policy and embrace of the market went down badly in Scotland: “We never left Labour, Labour left us,” is a favourite refrain of the many apostates from Labour in the SNP. But a bigger reason for Labour’s struggles is the poor quality of its raw material.

Only a score of Scottish MPs came home from Westminster, of whom only Dewar was of the front-rank. A year later he slipped on an Edinburgh street and died. His demise was followed by that of Robin Cook, a former Labour foreign secretary, who would have made a vigorous Better Together leader. This mix of split resources and early deaths has ensured that Labour’s operation in Scotland is a B-team at best. That might not have mattered if the SNP was not so sick. But in Mr Salmond and his deputy

Nicola Sturgeon it has very effective leaders. The result was the SNP's stunning victory in Scotland's 2011 election and, in turn, the coming third referendum.

Richer, fairer, dreamier

The Yes side's case is threefold. Independent, Scotland would be more democratic, because no longer in thrall to the Tory-voting English; more equal, because free to forge the social democracy Scots crave; and richer. All three claims are contestable.

On the first, northern English voters are in the same boat; and people in remote parts of Scotland fear the SNP's centralising tendency is a threat to the local government that works best there. On the second, strip away the socialist rhetoric and Scottish and English voters are actually pretty similar. The SNP's most popular policy is a distinctly unprogressive freeze in council tax. And though their governments have boosted public spending—for example by keeping university free at the point of use, unlike in England—they have failed to use their limited powers to raise taxes. The impression is of a party promising Scandinavian-style public services supported by taxation closer to American levels. That is fantasy, not socialism.

Fleshed out in a 667-page document, the Yes campaign's promise to make Scotland richer is partly premised on the notion that, after the example of Scandinavian countries, a nation of 5m could seize new economic opportunities. This, at least, is not nonsense. A paradox of globalisation is that connectivity can become more important than scale, boosting the sorts of niche industries, in IT and high-end engineering, in which Sweden, for example, excels. A more powerful Scottish government could encourage this sort of thing. Yet the main economic argument owes more to Norway: it is a giant bet on the North Sea oil industry (see article).

Mr Salmond, a former oil economist, predicts it will generate roughly £7 billion a year in tax revenues for the foreseeable future. The independent Office for Budget Responsibility thinks it will generate around £3 billion in 2016-17, and progressively less. By the time the new government had covered its outsized public spending—Scots get 15% more per head than the British average—that would leave little for the Norwegian-style oil fund Mr Salmond promises.

The unionist campaign is devoted to refuting this and other separatist claims. On the security of Scottish pensions, the effect of losing naval contracts on Glasgow's two remaining shipyards and, above all, the question of whether independent Scots could retain the pound (see article), Better Together argues that independence would be costlier and riskier than the Yes side claims. This is powerful stuff. While around half of Scots are decidedly unionist or separatist, the rest could be swayed by economic arguments: a well-publicised poll suggests they would vote for whichever side, Yes or No, could make them £500 a year better off. Yet Better Together's arguments have not proved clinching.

Belatedly, the unionists have tried to offer a more positive case. Their best line is that not only Scotland but Britain would be damaged by Scottish secession: its army, spy agencies, foreign office and global status would be undermined. Yet to increasingly insular Scots, this is uninteresting.

At a debate at Strathclyde University, your correspondent watched a high-level unionist panel, including George Robertson, a Labour peer and former NATO secretary-general, being savaged by a less distinguished Yes team, before a rather hostile

audience of well-heeled alumnae. Lord Robertson said NATO would not accept as a member a country opposed to nuclear arms, as the SNP is. Many in the audience dismissed this with groans. Referring to the 2007 jihadist attack in Glasgow, he said this was no time to abandon the British security arrangements to which Scots have contributed so much. And many guffawed. It is not only poor Scots who show a diminished interest in their place in the world.

What is missing from the unionist side is a more positive vision for Britain. In an age of humdrum politicians, that is also absent from Westminster. **It is not only Scots who are unhappy with the status quo; they are just the only Britons considering forming a new country because of it. The polls suggest they will not. But that is not how it feels right now on the streets of Glasgow.**