

UNDERSTANDING **SCOTLAND** AND ITS FUTURES

GUURE
GAAK



DAVID
MCCRONE

EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

No society is quite like any other, but there is sufficient comparability between Scotland and Euskadi, Catalunya and Quebec, for example, for us to want to compare one with another. Nevertheless, there are historical events and processes which are specific to each, and which form the basis of our understandings today.

How, then, are we to understand Scotland? The key lies in the fact that it entered a political-constitutional union with England in 1707. For a country which had fought for and jealously defended its independence from England since it was formed in the first millennium, this might seem a contradiction. Following the Union of Crowns in 1603, when the king of Scots, James VI, became king of England as James I, the two kingdoms were in loose alliance. The Treaty of Union just over one century later, in 1707, effectively abolished both Scotland and England as self-governing states, replacing them with 'Great Britain'. The Union gave Scotland access to English markets and overseas territories (notably in North America where England had established colonies in the 17th century), while England secured a less troublesome northern neighbour which had historically allied itself with France from the 12th century. The 1707 Union can be considered 'a marriage of convenience' (a *'mariage de raison'*) in which Scotland gave up its parliament but retained control over civil society and institutions, notably its separate legal system, its dominant religion (presbyterian Protestantism), and control over local administration (notably education). By this method, Scotland ceded control over 'high politics' (taxation, foreign affairs) but retained autonomy with regard to 'low politics' and local affairs. Scots retained Scottish nationality and became effectively British citizens also. In other words, they had dual identities.

What changed? With democracy and universal suffrage from the 19th century, the United Kingdom (which incorporated Wales and Ireland, along with Scotland and England) became a more centralist and unitary state with a single legislature dominated in

La victoria de SNP tenía poco que ver con un acceso de apoyo a la independencia (que quedó en el 30%), ni tampoco con un sentimiento repentino entre los escoceses de que eran escoceses y no británicos

population terms by England as the largest territorial component of the state. Nevertheless, Scotland had administrative devolution over its daily governance, and in that respect was self-governing but lacked direct political control. Thus, the UK was a unitary state with a single legislature, but was in effect a multinational state. That anomaly did not become important until the second half of the 20th century when voters in Scotland and England began to diverge in their support for UK political parties. Thus, from 1955, while England voted for the centre-right Conservative party, Scotland increasingly did not. In the first instance, it remained loyal to the centre-left Labour party, and since the mid-1970s, the vote for the Scottish National Party increased. England was much larger than Scotland (currently 50m to 5m). This state of affairs meant that increasingly Scotland got a UK government it did not elect: it suffered from a democratic deficit.

What brought about this divergence between Scotland and England? In truth, the two countries had always been different in terms of civil institutions, a situation which was glossed over as long as they voted in roughly equal proportions for the same political parties, Conservatives and Labour. The discovery of oil in the North Sea changed the economic and political calculus. Much of the oil would have been in Scottish waters if Scotland had been independent (just as Norway owned the oil in its sectors of the North Sea), but the oil revenues flowed into the exchequer of the British state because Scotland was governed from Westminster in London. The Scottish National Party (SNP), which had been founded in the 1920s, became a significant political player in the 1970s with its claim that it was 'Scotland's Oil'. Arguing that Scotland should re-

La mayoría de los escoceses pensaron que los nacionalistas eran los más capaces de levantarse y luchar por Escocia y ofrecer un gobierno competente en el parlamento

gain its pre-1707 independence because the original treaty was a contract and not the result of conquest, the SNP began to compete with the Labour party for the crucial centre-left ground of Scottish politics. The centre-right Conservatives, increasingly seen as an 'English' party, especially under Mrs Thatcher, went into steep electoral decline in Scotland, from 50% of the popular vote in 1955, to 17% in 1997. On nine occasions since 1945, Scotland got a UK government it did not vote for, representing 30 years, or 48% of the period between 1945 and 2010. In contrast, England got a (Labour) government it did not vote for on only 3 occasions, or 10% of the same period.

It was this 'democratic deficit', together with the rising nationalist challenge, which encouraged the 'unionist' parties, Labour and the smaller Liberal-Democrats, to look at 'devolution' in the 1970s, whereby Scotland would have an 'assembly' with control over domestic matters such as education, health and law and order. In 1979, there was a referendum in Scotland (and one in Wales) which saw 52% vote 'yes' to a devolved assembly (but only 20% in Wales). However, the vote did not pass because opponents of devolution demanded that 40% of those registered to vote had to vote 'yes', and the proposal fell, with the election of Mrs Thatcher's Conservatives also in 1979. It was not until 1997 when Labour formed a government at Westminster that a second referendum was held, this time with a 'yes' vote (for a law-making parliament) with a 3 to 1 majority. The Scottish parliament was created in 1999, elected by proportional representation (additional member system), with control over domestic affairs.

There have been four elections since 1999, the first two returning Labour/Liberal-Democrat coalition governments. In 2007, the SNP became the largest party with one more member than Labour, and formed a minority government in the Scottish parliament. In 2011, the SNP formed an overall majority, with 45% of the popular vote, with Labour on one-third. Neither the Conservatives (with 14%) nor the Liberal-Democrats (whose share of the vote halved to just 8%) made any challenge. The SNP victory had little to do with a surge in support for independence (which stood at 30%), nor with a sudden feeling among Scots that they were

Scottish and not British. Rather, the nationalists were thought by most Scots to be best able to stand up for Scotland and to offer competent government at the Scottish parliament. Led by Alex Salmond, the party was regarded by many who did not support independence as providing effective government.

When it was elected in 2011, the SNP declared that it would seek a referendum on independence for Scotland. Because constitutional matters are not devolved to the Scottish parliament, Mr Salmond had to negotiate with the UK government, since 2010 a coalition between Conservatives and Liberal-Democrats, for the right to hold a referendum. Initially indicating that there was Scottish preference for a multi-option referendum including substantially greater devolved powers, this was rejected by the UK government as giving Mr Salmond a fall-back position in the event of a 'no' vote. Nevertheless, it is held that Scotland has the right to secede from the UK, in part because the British state had been formed by a treaty of Union in 1707. There is no question of Scotland not having the right to secede as a distinctive nation. The price Mr Salmond had to pay for the transfer of the right to hold a Scottish referendum (in 2014) was that it would be a yes/no vote on independence. Why should this matter? Around one-third of Scots say they support independence, but roughly the same proportion wish the Scottish parliament to have much greater control, notably over taxation and welfare, with only foreign affairs and defence being retained by Westminster. This is known as 'devolution-max' (or independence-lite). From the outset of the Scottish parliament over 60% of public opinion have stated their wish to see a more powerful parliament than the one created in 1999. Support for a more powerful parliament comes from Nationalists, but also from supporters of the Labour party and the Liberal-Democrats. Only Conservative supporters are content with the current status quo.

In terms of current Scottish public opinion, around one-third support independence, one-third devolution-max, one-quarter the devolved status quo, and less than one person in 10 abolishing the Scottish parliament in favour of government from Westminster (the *status quo ante* 1999). It would appear, then, that on a simply yes/no vote on independence that Scots would not vote in favour. However, such a vote does not take account of the spectrum of Scottish opinion about self-government. The real question is how those in favour of devolution-max are likely to vote in a yes/no to independence. If, for example, they sacrifice their belief in a more powerful parliament to vote 'no',

Un tercio de las personas está a favor de la independencia, un tercio a favor de a favor de devolution-max, una cuarta parte a favor del statu quo de traspasos y transferencias, y menos de una persona de cada 10 a favor de abolir el parlamento escocés en pro del gobierno desde Westminster

then the vote is lost. If, on the other hand, even a significant proportion vote yes (even 1 in 4, or 1 in 3) then there is a real possibility of a 'yes' vote.

At present, the 'no' campaign covers Labour, Liberal-Democrat and Conservative parties, but it is an uneasy alliance. The Conservatives are least likely to want any change in the powers of the Scottish parliament (having fought hard against any form of devolution in the first place), but they are now a small and fairly insignificant party in Scotland (getting only 1 in 7 votes in 2011). The real problem is for Labour which now describes itself as a 'unionist' party, which ostensibly is opposed to major extension of powers, but which is divided between those who support devolution-max, and those supporting the status quo. Labour is also uncomfortable in sharing a campaign platform with the Conservatives, and some of its supporters are arguing for a separate 'Labour' campaign. The 'yes' campaign, on the other hand, is largely dominated by the SNP, with support from the smaller Green party which currently has two members of the Scottish parliament.

The 'no' camp has arguably run a negative campaign to date, pointing up the risks and anomalies of independence: which currency Scotland should have (ruling out retaining sterling as Mr Salmond seems to want); retaining the Queen as head of state (which Scots seem to want, though support for the monarchy is lower in Scotland than in England); and above all, having to leave the EU, and re-apply for membership. The latter point has been a problem for the 'no' campaign because the UK Conservative-led government has subsequently indicated its desire to have a referendum on British membership of the EU, in order to appease its 'Eurosceptic' tendency among Conservative MPs. One could even imagine a situation where Scotland - having voted yes - is required to leave the EU, but the rest of the UK (rUK) then votes to leave the EU also. Given that an independent Scotland would control most of the North Sea waters which contain oil, plus most of the fishing stocks in

the EU, it might seem foolish to banish Scotland from the European Union. But, then again, Scotland would more resemble Norway which is not an EU member, has substantial oil (and one of the most powerful sovereign funds in the world), and control of fishing in its waters. One imagines that in such a situation, *realpolitik* would prevail in the European Commission, and Scotland would be allowed entry. There is, of course, the question of the impact on other nations within the EU. Would, for example, a Spanish government accept the *fait accompli* of Scottish membership of the EU, knowing that Euzkadi and Catalunya might wish a similar arrangement, especially if it requires ceding the right of secession to these Iberian nations?

The 'yes' campaign will not formally begin until 30th November 2013, the national day of St Andrew, Scotland's patron. Until then, the nationalists have had to fight a rearguard, and defensive, action. Their claim would be that a short and sharp campaign (if one can consider a nine month campaign to be 'short') would have greater effect. Their fear is that the 'no' campaign has been able to sow the seeds of uncertainty and doubt well in advance, and in effect to set the agenda. The SNP seem to base their assessment on the campaign for the 2011 Scottish parliament election which began with Labour in the lead, and then falling away badly under attack from the nationalists. History, however, tends not to repeat itself in politics, but Mr Salmond is a formidable campaigner. He is also likely to be helped by a Conservative-led government at Westminster which has embarked on a programme of deep cuts in public expenditure in the interests of 'austerity'. Persuading Scots, who are social democrats rather than conservatives, to stay with the British state under such circumstances would seem a rather difficult task. To have poorer and privatised public services as the price for being 'British' would not seem much of a persuasion to vote 'no' to independence.

In any case, even if there was a 'no' vote in September 2014, it is unlikely that the demand for greater self-government would disappear. Vague, and contradictory, promises to devolve more powers in that event would not persuade many Scots, especially as the unionists have introduced some minor modifications to the Scotland Act such that the parliament has control over licences for air-guns and over stamp duty which is charged on house sales. To many Scots, whether they support independence or not, this sounds like giving away as little as possible while being able to claim that you are doing something.

There are deeper issues here. At the time of writing in the summer of 2013, it would seem that the 'Scottish question' has shifted from asking *why* Scotland should be independent, to - *why not?* In other words, there has been an imperceptible shift in the terms of the debate which implies that independence (or at least greater self-government) is the 'natural' condition. Remember that the United Kingdom was created just over 300 years ago as a *mariage de raison*, and that it went on to run an empire on which the sun was said never to set (east to west). With hindsight, one might conclude that the British state was a creature of its time, and a successful one at that. In any case, it has already divested itself of an empire (willingly or unwillingly), as well as acceding to the secession of most of Ireland in 1921. It has grown accustomed to reading the writing on the wall, and in any case, although there are crucial vested interests in retaining Scotland in the union (oil, fishing, natural resources), it knows it cannot keep the Scots British against their will.

So what are the likely options? In 2014, Scotland might vote for independence. We might ask, of course, what sort of independence, because if it retains sterling as currency, the same monarch as head of state, nuclear weapons on its territory, open borders with England, and so on, what does that amount to? Is that really 'independence'? Or perhaps, we might argue, all that is on offer in the modern world is 'interdependence', greater control over one's affairs rather than absolute control, for no state however large and powerful is able to wield total control. Autarky is not an option, although opponents of independence seem quite keen to argue up autarky because it is neither plausible nor desirable in the modern world. We might argue, then, that Scotland faces three options: independence (within the current meaning of the term, but retaining a form of social union like the Scandinavian states), devolution-max whereby Scots control taxa-

tion and welfare, returning to Westminster only what the British state is due in taxes (the Basque model), or some half-way house of confederalism whereby there are loose links between the nations and territories of the UK such that they remain within the umbrella of the British state. Having said that, it is likely that this would not be sustainable if Scots were forced to retain nuclear weapons on its soil, and to pay for the luxury of having them.

The British political class is sometimes credited with more imagination and foresight than it has. Most of Ireland departed the British state because no half-way house (known as 'home rule') was on offer in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, or at least it was defeated by Conservatives and Liberal Unionists. Scottish (and Welsh) devolution was granted by Westminster through gritted teeth, as we say, recognising the inevitability of the outcomes. An empire was dismantled because the writing was on the wall, and thereafter history was rewritten such that power was given up willingly and with reasonably good grace. That is rewriting history rather than how events actually unfolded. The first law of politics is that giving up power and resources is not done willingly.

The British state was created at the beginning of the 18th century out of a patrician bargain between England and Scotland, in which the people had no say. It turned out to be a reasonable bargain for the Scots who managed to turn it to considerable economic and political advantage for the next 200 years, and allowed them to become the second country in the world, after England, to industrialise and become part of a most powerful and progressive global force. That was then, and this is now. The world is a much changed place, and Scotland is in the process of rediscovering its roots, in order to forge a new future - and a new route - into the 21st century as a small and progressive nation.



ANDREA ABALIA MARIJUAN, 1984. Artista bilbaína y doctora en Arte por la Universidad del País Vasco que desarrolla su trayectoria artística paralelamente a la investigación, con "Lo siniestro femenino" como principal línea de reflexión creativa y teórica. Ha participado en variadas exposiciones colectivas a nivel local como Getxoarte, Ibilarte o la reciente exposición "Alter Ego" en la sede de las Juntas Generales de Bizkaia en 2013. A nivel internacional destaca su estancia de creación en Berlín en 2009 con algunas exposiciones colectivas como Gastspiel en la Galería Exhibeo. Próximamente continuará su carrera artística e investigadora en Nueva York.

