Making politics educational: the experience of the Scottish referendum on independence

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Abstract

In 2014 the issue of constitutional change in the UK brought about by an agreement between the UK and Scottish Government, for a referendum on Scottish independence, created the motivation for widespread political engagement with the formal political process. Scottish citizens – including newly enfranchised 16 and 17 year olds – were debating, discussing and disagreeing about opting out of one of the world's richest countries. This was an unusual situation and one that nearly happened despite a hostile corporate, political and mainstream media response to the demand for independence. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this movement for change was the result of narrow-minded nationalism. Although the Referendum result was that Scotland should remain in the UK the process also produced widespread politicization of ordinary people. The cultural politics of communities had engaged with the political culture of the state and the dialectic between the two generated educational experiences and opened up new political possibilities.

Keywords: Scottish referendum, independence, politicization, counter-hegemonic change

Haciendo Educación Política: la Experiencia del Referéndum sobre la Independencia de Escocia

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Resumen

Durante el 2014 la propuesta de cambio constitucional en el Reino Unido, surgida por un acuerdo entre los gobiernos de Londres y de Edimburgo para la realización de un referéndum sobre la independencia de Escocia, motivó e hizo aumentar el compromiso político. Los ciudadanos de Escocia – incluyendo con derecho a voto a las personas 16 y 17 años de edad - estuvieron debatiendo, discutiendo y divergiendo sobre la necesidad de salir voluntariamente o no, de uno de los países más ricos del mundo. Una situación inusual, que se dio a pesar de la respuesta hostil de los medios oficiales y políticos a la demanda de independencia. Siendo un error calificar este movimiento de cambio como el resultado de un nacionalismo cerrado. Aunque el resultado del referéndum fue que Escocia permaneciera en el Reino Unido, el proceso también produjo la politización generalizada de la gente corriente. La cultura política de la comunidad se había comprometido con la cultura política del estado, de la dialéctica entre ambas se ha generado una experiencia educativa que ha abierto nuevas posibilidades políticas.

Palabras clave: referéndum escocés, independencia, politización, cambio contra-hegemónico

Two days after the referendum vote on independence, on September 18th 2014, an unusual scene occurred in Glasgow's George Square, a central point in Scotland's largest city which had been a rallying place for pro-independence campaigners. The result of the vote was a majority of 55% for staying in the UK and 45% for independence. The following day, George Square was occupied by far right unionist groups who came to taunt independence campaigners, an unusual scene because the campaign itself was marked more by its civility rather than overt antagonisms. It was another incident, however, that can be seen as a defining moment in the sense of embodying the central motif of the campaign. Several days after the above incident, people began to arrive in George Square and bring with them food parcels which were being collected for the poor and homeless. This was not the normal venue for such acts of charity. The growth of food banks[1] in the UK has accelerated under the UK government's welfare and austerity policies. What seemed so poignant about the food bank donations was that it symbolised a visible and public act of coming together. If we understand politics as meaning how we collectively decide on the distribution of goods and resources in society these donations were more than mere gestures of charity. The need to act collectively, both in and outside mainstream political parties, is a legacy of the referendum process which, in the long-term, may have much greater implications than the referendum outcome itself. It is the reassertion of politics in people's lives which is the focus of this article because this is the important story that is unfolding and has widespread implications.

The Referendum in Context

In October 2010 the UK Government agreed that the Scottish Government, led by the Scottish National Party (SNP), could host a referendum on independence on the condition that there was a single unambiguous question with a yes or no answer. The question put was "Should Scotland be an independent country?" The initial position of the Scottish Government was that there should be another ballot option which is referred to as "devolution max" (or 'devo max'), that is, the maximum amount of devolved control to the Scottish Government as possible but remaining within the UK union.

"Devo max" is popularly understood as a further stepping stone on the road to independence through control over all internal matters to do with Scotland along with maintaining the Crown, the UK currency and aspects of international trade and security arrangements (but excluding nuclear missiles on Scottish land). In negotiations on the proposed referendum question with the UK Government the "devo max" option was traded for the Scottish Government having the right to set the date of the vote and to include 16 and 17 year olds as first time voters. The two-year run in to the referendum created the possibility of plenty of opportunities for debate and discussion across the nation. This time period was critical to the educative nature of the campaign.

We have to go further back in modern history to make sense of this situation and why the UK Government agreed to the referendum. The UK comprises England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland and their constitutional relationship has been shaped by internal political dynamics, within the different constituent parts, from the 1970s onwards. For example, in Northern Ireland the history of the troubles and military conflicts, which had grown markedly in the 1970s, resulted in a form of devolved government based on power sharing between the warring communities. On the other hand, a Welsh National Assembly was set up in the late 1990s with limited legislative powers than was either the case in Northern Ireland or Scotland. In Wales the demand for a degree of 'home rule' had a strong cultural dimension rather than popular support for economic and political autonomy. The case for devolution in Scotland had been a recurring theme in Scottish modern political history and in the 1990s a broad coalition of political and civic groups campaigned for a new Scottish constitutional settlement. The backing of the main political force in Scotland, during this period the Scottish Labour Party, along with Labour in power in the UK Parliament, assured legislation for a devolved institution. In 1997, the Scottish referendum on devolution backed the establishment of a new Parliament with 75% majority in favour (see Crowther, Martin and Shaw 2003) The SNP had, however, only tacitly supported this campaign because its priority was something greater – Scottish independence.

As things turned out the SNP became the main political beneficiaries of devolution. New Labour in Scotland, which formed the first and subsequent

coalition governments with the Scottish Liberal Democrats, massively underwhelmed the electorate with lacklustre performances. In Scottish Parliamentary elections the Labour vote shrunk, from 34% in 1999 to 26% in 2011. In local elections the same pattern of decline was witnessed (see Davidson 2014). As Labour's political fortunes waned the SNP's rose. This was particularly the case after the Iraq war in 2004 and Labour's increasing adherence to neoliberal policies in the UK. In 2007 the Scottish national elections resulted in the formation of a minority SNP Government; its very first time in office. Its position of support for the National Health Service and free medical prescriptions, its opposition to tuition fees for higher education, along with its resistance to water privatisation as well as upholding the principle of free care for the elderly, enabled the SNP to position itself as the defender of social democratic values, previously the policy turf of the Labour Party.

Although the SNP's *raison d'être* was independence, it had also developed a credible range of social and economic policies which provided it with electoral support. Along with its broadly social democratic social policy, however, the SNP developed a more neoliberal business friendly economic policy, such as support for cutting corporation tax. Also indicative of this approach was the active support given by the SNP leader to the American millionaire, Donald Trump, despite the fact that he was riding roughshod over local communities with new golf course schemes that local communities had rejected. Nevertheless, in 2011 the SNP achieved an outright electoral victory – an outcome which under the proportional system of representation had been regarded as impossible to achieve - by winning 69 parliamentary seats out of 129 in the Scottish Parliament. Most of its success was achieved at the expense of the Labour Party which haemorrhaged seats in their former industrial heartlands. The political scene was set for the SNP to pursue what had been central to its political existence: independence from the UK.

Whilst support for the SNP had grown in Scottish politics the electorate still voted mainly for Labour in UK national elections. The appetite for devolution was clear; the appetite for Scottish independence was less obvious, with opinion polls indicating that only around 30% of the electorate found it appealing. However an official referendum on constitutional change

did require the agreement of the UK government. This was forthcoming primarily because the Westminster government calculated the referendum would be an act of political self-immolation by the SNP. According to Davidson, the UK Prime Minister's motive was simple enough:

> He wanted to see the decisive defeat of the independence option, if not for all time, then at least for the foreseeable future, whilst simultaneously denying Salmond [The SNP leader] the easy victory of Devo Max. The risks involved seemed small – polls consistently showed minority support for independence…" (2014, p3)

To add spice to the situation, electoral defeat on the issue would undermine the SNP in the future – denied its core purpose its options would be to return to the political wilderness from whence it came in the 1930s or to jettison independence. However the plan did not work out like this; today the apparent victors of the referendum campaign (e.g. Labour Party) have the appearance of losers as their support in Scotland spirals downwards. On the other hand, the main political parties for independence (the SNP, The Scottish Greens and the Scottish Socialist Party) are witnessing a surge in party membership levels and electoral support.

Something has happened in Scottish society which is potentially much more significant than the referendum result. The electorate have been actively politicised in a totally unforeseen way and it is this legacy of the campaign that is the focus of this article.

Over the campaign period there were numerous points of difference between the opponents and proponents of independence, which were the focus of deliberation, disagreement, discussion, debate and reflection. To simplify the fault lines at stake, and to provide insight into the differences between the opposing factions, it is useful to look at what independence meant for them. It is important to address this because the meaning of independence, and the related issue of nationalism, was central to the credibility of the different arguments made by both camps. Furthermore, for a wider audience beyond the UK, interested in social justice, the politics of nationalism has negative connotations, particularly in the light of contemporary political history in Europe and Africa, in that it conjures up barbaric acts of ethnic cleansing and 'blood and soil' versions of nationalism

that have more to do with social injustice than social justice. So the meanings of nationalism in the campaign needs to be clarified and assessed.

Nationalisms and the Independence Referendum

There were at least two versions of nationalism in the independence referendum, depending on what we mean by this term (see Heywood 2012). If nationalism is taken to mean the principle of the nation being valued as the central unit of political organisation of a country, or territory, there were two versions of nationalism: the UK and the Scottish versions. Although they differed significantly, what they had in common was characteristic of nationalism as an alignment between the state and its territories which suppresses internal distinctions within its borders, for example, differences of social class. However, like most important concepts nationalism is contested and there are other meanings which have their roots in anti-colonial and postcolonial history, which fuse national self-determination with radical claims for social and political liberation. If we understand nationalism in these terms then there was another version on offer. This third version of nationalism emphasised commitment to the politics of self-determination, articulated by more radical Yes supporters, particularly through the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC); a view which also appealed to a wide variety of campaigners in a broad coalition of radical grassroots movements for independence.

In the following sections these versions of nationalism are outlined and what they were seeking independence from are highlighted.

UK Nationalism

The UK version of nationalism was understood in terms of a 'family' of nations that had grown together over the centuries; there might be differences within the family but the answer was not divorce through Scottish independence. The 1707 Act of Union, between the crowns of England and Scotland, had not only brought an end to wars between the two countries it also enabled both to prosper for over 300 years. The Act of Union was a political arrangement which permitted the civic institutions of

Scotland and the Scottish church a large degree of autonomy and freedom from central state control (Paterson, 2003). Hence the UK had evolved into the 'natural' territorial and political unit in contrast, for example, with how relations to Europe and the European Union had developed. Advocating the maintenance of this 'natural' political unit did not entail any sense of essentialism or exceptionalism often associated with nationalism. It was simply the accepted 'common sense' (in the Gramscian sense of the universalization of a particular set of interests, see Gramsci, 1980), that the UK was normal and that anything which questioned it – Scottish independence – was narrowly and regressively nationalistic in contrast. As Foley and Remand remark, "Nationalism is a product of the UK fringes, Westminster politics, by an implicit contrast, is either neutral in respect to nationhood, or somehow 'internationalist'" (2014, p. 39).

Discursive constructs which are invisible are also extremely powerful influences on thinking and acting. The erasure of UK nationalism from the referendum debate skewed the case against Scottish nationalism as being self-interested and narrowly focussed, whereas the Unionist position was not. By appearing to be 'non-nationalistic', or even internationalist, the Unionist position could assume the moral high ground of having wider concerns without needing to justify itself. What was remarkable about this was, in parallel to opposing Scottish independence, the UK Conservative Party also made commitments to a referendum on leaving Europe to limit incursions into its electoral support from the right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). It was therefore simultaneously arguing against Scottish independence whilst making arguments for a referendum on withdrawal from the European Union with particular emphasis on reducing migration to the UK (see Hassan 2013). Undermining UK sovereignty (The European Union) or UK borders (Scottish independence) was therefore reducing the capacity of the state to act in the best interests of all UK citizens. The implicit claim of the state's neutrality in relation to its role in supporting all its citizens meant UK nationalism did not need debating; it was the default starting position that was simply given and above discussion.

The fact that the Unionist position was never labelled pejoratively as nationalistic, whereas arguments for independence were branded that way, was also aided by the broad front of their campaign. The Conservatives,

Labour and Liberal Democrats kept a remarkably united front on this issue until after the result: they then fell out immediately. At the same time, the leadership of the campaign group was firmly Scottish rather than English, Labour Party rather than Conservative or Liberal. Directing the *Better Together* (Unionist) campaign was a former Scottish Labour Party Chancellor of the Exchequer, along with the leader of the Scottish Labour Party, with minor supporting roles from the leaders of the Scottish Liberal Democrats and Scottish Conservative Party. One advantage of the Labour Party leading the campaign was that the party had an electoral base in Scotland and had some (even if in decline) credibility to argue on issues of social justice in the UK context. This would help reinforce the claim that Scottish nationalism was narrowly self-interested whereas the Unionist camp was concerned with equity across the UK.

SNP's Civic Nationalism

The Associate Director of the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Constitutional Change, Nicola McEwen (2014), argues that there were three main themes in the SNP version of national independence: firstly, the democratic case for arguing that Scotland should be governed by the government it elects. The fact that a UK Conservative coalition government was in power in the UK, but Scotland had elected only one Conservative Member of Parliament, underlines the point. Secondly, there was an economic argument: controlling all the economic levers would enable the Scottish government to take the best decisions for Scotland. Thirdly, the SNP argued that independence would enable the government to make fairer decisions more in tune with Scottish values. What is surprising, but highly significant, is that the SNP played down any sense of a particular need for independence based on ethnicity or cultural distinctiveness.

The SNP's version of 'civic nationalism' argued that as long as a person lived in Scotland and fulfilled a residency requirement they were entitled to vote on Scotland's future; residency was a proxy for active commitment to Scotland, more so than birth right or ancestry. Thus many Scots living in other parts or the UK or abroad were ineligible to vote whereas migrants residing in Scotland were eligible. Another aspect of this civic nationalism

was in relation to migration. Instead of presenting migration as a critical problem – which was the dominant discourse in UK politics - the SNP's position was to present it as part of the solution to future, sustainable, economic growth by encouraging the talented and educated to come and live in Scotland. Support for migration would be a counterweight to the demographics of an ageing and declining Scottish population. The qualifications bar on entry did not mean a completely open migration policy. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasising that whilst this promotion of migration to Scotland was indicative of its civic nationalism the UK Government was taking the opposite, hostile, response to migrants from Europe and elsewhere.

What independence meant, through the SNP's lens of civic nationalism, was less than clear. Macwhirter (2013) has characterised it as 'independence within the UK'. The SNP's preference was to keep in the sterling zone which was controlled by the Bank of England based in London rather than Edinburgh; to retain the Crown as the Head of State thus maintaining a system of allegiance albeit as subjects rather than citizens of the state; in relation to security it wanted to continue membership of NATO (a nuclear alliance) whilst removing nuclear weapons from Scotland; and on the European Union it preferred to remain in – or if necessary, rejoin it. Of course all of these preferences amounted to interdependence, rather than independence, with the former requiring agreement with other interested parties which were not necessarily going to acquiesce (e.g. all the main UK political parties made it clear that they would not allow an independent Scottish Government to share sterling). In addition, the SNP stressed the importance of the social union with the rest of the UK, through family and friendship connections, that would continue despite constitutional change and new borders. The paradox of this was that emptying independence of substantive meaning might make it attractive (because it would seem painless and not such a big change) as well as pointless (the goal might not be worth the risks entailed).

Radical Nationalism

The third version of nationalism was of a more radical social and political kind, which is often associated with anti-colonial history against imperial domination. Arguably, Scotland had been colonised by the English but they had also been very active partners in the colonisation of other countries and had benefitted from the spoils of the British Empire. Over 300 years of union had brought its benefits to Scots which is why it had stood the test of time. However, these had become less obvious as the social democratic fix in UK politics unravelled from the late 1970s onwards, first under successive Thatcherite governments, then through New Labour in the late 1990s and more recently through the UK Coalition Government. The dominance of neoliberal politics which promoted the virtues of inequality, whilst also withdrawing the social arm of the welfare state as poverty rose, was being promoted by governments that the Scots had rejected in UK national elections. In this context, the meaning of independence emphasised the vocabulary of self-determination because its key themes were not about the nation, or its people as such, but about values of equality, political autonomy and social justice, achieved through deep-rooted structural change in society. Self-determination had two interrelated democratic aims: firstly, to challenge control from above by transforming constitutional arrangements; and secondly, to transform patterns of relations horizontally to address poverty, inequality and social injustices in communities.

In this radical discourse, redrawing the constitutional boundaries of the nation was a means to an end; independence was not the end itself. In this vision, it is the democratic life of society that has to be revitalised if formal political institutions and procedures are going to be meaningful, and related to Scotland's social and economic problems. This is clear in RIC's post-referendum People's Vow agreed at its national conference in November 2014. This includes:

- The People's budget – mapping the alternative to austerity
- Ending fracking
- Land for all – put the country's natural resources in the hands of the people
- Equality not as an afterthought

- Democracy before profit – work with other forces across Europe and the US to stop the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership.

The main purpose of independence, from this perspective, is to resist neoliberalism by providing alternative arguments and values for policy and politics. In the current context, where the independence route for change has been closed down, the focus of community campaigning has shifted to these substantive issues. Instead of being inward looking, a hallmark of nationalism, the radical independence campaign was intent to 'light a beacon' which would influence radical movements in the rest of the UK, by demonstrating alternatives to the neoliberal orthodoxy and 'common sense' promoted by mainstream UK political parties. In this sense, the radical campaign for independence was more about the nation as a context for political hope.

To summarise, the UK version of nationalism was simply the 'back story', it seldom became the 'front story' but, if it did, it was as a benign and neutral construct. The SNP version of nationalism can be characterised as transferring more substantial powers from the UK to the Scottish Parliament so that independence involved substantial freedom from Westminster (but not entirely) at the same time seeking interdependence with other political, European and international institutions. The radical version of self-determination might be seen as transferring power from political institutions to Scottish people so that independence meant freedom from the shackles of neoliberal politics and policies along with the structures, institutions and processes that protected them.

The 'Curriculum' of the Mainstream Media

The mainstream media are important sources of ideas, information and learning although their selectivity makes them powerful tools for limiting public debate and narrowing the terms of discussion. As the campaigning journalist Monbiot points out, 'Despite the rise of social media, the established media continues to define the scope of representative politics in Britain, to shape political demands and to punish and erase those who resist'

(Monbiot 2014). During the campaign the print media and broadcast media were overwhelmingly pro-Union. In terms of print media all UK and Scottish national daily newspapers were against independence except one Scottish Sunday national paper (*The Sunday Herald*). Although there was a wide range of individual journalists, critics, academics, actors, poets, playwrights, singers and songwriters who had a public profile and were able to open up spaces for dissent in the mainstream media, the chorus of support for the Union was uniform across the popular and quality press. With this type of stranglehold on public discourse there was little likelihood of the merits of the independence position receiving credible representation.

Researchers from the University of the West of Scotland provide the only published systematic evidence of the role of the broadcast media's newsroom representation of the campaign (at the time of writing). This research is based on a content analysis of output over one year of the campaign between September 2012 and September 2013. The evidence is damning about bias in the main BBC television broadcasts during this period. Anti-independence statements and broadcasts were numerically greater and often ended on alleged economic insecurities of independence through price rises, factory closures, poorer local services and so on. Distortions also occurred in less obvious ways: presenting evidence as coming from impartial sources when they were not, along with the personalisation and demonization of the SNP leader (see Robertson 2014). Indeed, there was even an attempt by the BBC to muzzle the academic leading this research who was fortunately supported by his university. The interlocking of the dominant political elite and the mass media outlets meant that impartial treatment of claims for independence were harder to come by.

Of course there were some sympathetic and insightful accounts of the referendum issues, such as MacWhirter's (2013) three-part *Road to Referendum* series which was broadcast and even some popular programmes that were open-ended. For example, the well known UK celebrity and entrepreneur, Janet Street Porter, was broadcast as she walked across Scotland and talked to people about their views on independence. Her starting assumption was that the Scots hated the English for some baffling reason and it was this dislike that motivated them to entertain constitutional separation. To her credit she concluded that the situation was far more

complex and, surprisingly, the Scots did not hate the English. The link between 'hate the English' and the SNP's Scottish nationalism was, however, a common theme in media discourse even if it had little basis in reality. Whilst there might be some anti-Englishness in Scotland, if anything racist incidents against 'white English' had declined in recent years from a low level (Macwhirter 2013, p32)

The association of independence with anti-Englishness played to an ethnic version of nationalism and muddied the waters on the more complex issues at hand whilst, at the same time, tuning the populist discourse into making links between nationalism and politically regressive politics. All supporters of independence were guilty by association with this position, despite the fact that the SNP view on nationalism was quite different from this and there were other versions of independence available. The radical version was completely ignored or dismissed as if it did not exist.

Against all these odds the fact that 45% of the electorate voted for independence was something of an achievement. However, the SNP case was unconvincing in the end, in part because it claimed independence would enable it to serve the goal of social justice better but it failed to make a convincing case for redistribution of wealth within Scotland (it was mute on issues of progressive income tax and only made the case for redistribution in national terms), whilst at the same time offering large tax cuts for corporations. In contrast, the radical case for self-determination posed the problem of social justice in terms of structural inequalities which could only be solved through significant attempts to change society at its roots. However this case did not get a hearing inside the mainstream media – its message was primarily through social media and community level campaigns – so it failed to become part of the public discourse of the referendum.

Even had the radical version of independence been able to convey its case to a wider audience it is unlikely to have made a decisive difference to the result. The SNP strategy of advocating constitutional change, but making it seem simple, did have a sound logic to it because it was presented as manageable and painless. However, it was not enough to counteract the powerful message of *Project Fear*, which the *Better Together* campaign was called. Fear of the unknown, fear of pension cuts, fear of the problems of a

currency crisis, fear of security in a nuclear free Scotland, fear of an economy not big enough to pay its way and so on was a powerful, systematic and overwhelming message. To challenge this would require a mass level of political consciousness that practical alternatives were possible and that action had to be based on resolute political principle. In other words this needed a politicised electorate with high levels of commitment to social and political struggle.

The Result of the Campaign

The independence vote was lost but there was still a significant victory in terms of changing attitudes towards the status quo. The Yes vote grew in support from a low of around 25% in 2013 to 45% by September 2014. Equally remarkable was the shift in the motivation for rejecting independence. In 2013 of those who wanted no change, 43% held that view regardless of offers to give Scotland more devolved powers. By the time of the referendum, this figure had dropped to only 28%. In other words, 72% of those voting against independence were also voting for changes to increase legislative power to Scotland's Parliament. The status quo was no longer an option.

The leaders of the UK political parties all recognised this demand for change particularly as, two weeks prior to the vote, two opinion polls gave the independence campaign a narrow lead. This galvanised action as political 'heavyweights' (e.g. Gordon Brown, the former Prime Minister of the UK and a Scot) effectively replaced the *Better Together* leadership and made promises for Scotland's future if it stayed in the UK whilst, on the other hand, a swathe of corporate interests were mobilised to warn Scots about the inevitable price hikes facing consumers in an independent country. To reinforce support for the UK, a national advert presented a Vow, signed by the political leaders of the main UK parties, to introduce further devolution for the Scottish Parliament if Scotland stayed within the UK, and this was widely publicised.

In this flurry of 'carrots and sticks' to the Scottish electorate it is surprising that so many were still willing to leave one of the richest political nations in the world. There were other remarkable features of the process:

96% of the electorate registered to vote and 84% of these voted on the day, which was the largest turnout in a UK election since the extension of the franchise in the early 20th century. To put it in context, in the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary elections only 50.4% of the electorate voted and in 2012 Local Government elections the turnout was a dismal 39.5%. So something important had happened in the democratic process: the election outcome mattered to people and there was a meaningful choice to make.

The analysis of people's voting pattern does not have a simple message. The demographics of the vote are as follows: the over 55 age group were more likely to oppose independence, rising steeply with the over 65s, with 75% of this group taking this view. Women were slightly more predisposed to vote for the Union than men. The under-40s were more likely to support independence particularly the 25-34 year olds. There is some evidence that the majority of 16-17 year olds voted for independence, but this is by no means clear or uncontested[2]. There was also the degree to which the vote was 'classed', in the sense that working class areas of the country voting for independence and middle class areas voting against it - but the relationship was not simple or uncontradictory. The largest city in Scotland, Glasgow, was for independence (55% Yes), as was the fourth largest city Dundee (57% Yes), both of which are characterised as working class cities. However in all other areas across Scotland the Union vote won even in poor and disadvantaged areas. It also had a strong regional and rural dimension. The North East and North West of Scotland (traditional heartlands of the SNP) along with the Border region to the South and the South West rejected independence. Meanwhile the capital city Edinburgh was decisively No (61%).

If we look at the figures through a different lens, the social class complexity of the voting pattern is confirmed. If occupational classification is taken as a proxy for social class the higher managerial and professional occupational categories voted Yes 40% and No 60%. The intermediate occupational categories voted Yes 49% and No 51%, but there were significant divisions in the traditional manual working class categories. The skilled working class occupational groups were marginally pro-independence whereas lower working class manual occupations were decisively pro-Union (see Hassan, 2014, p3).

Not Independence but Widespread Politicisation

> Our concern for our private affairs is balanced by our involvement with the affairs of the city. Even people who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well informed on political matters. We do not simply regard a man who does not participate in the city's life as one who just minds his own business, but as one who is good for nothing. We all join in debate about the affairs of the city, as they deserve, or at least we participate in the decisions. We do not think that these discussions impede action. We do believe that what is damaging is to go into action in a crucial situation before the people have been fully instructed in debate. (Pericles 431/30 B.C.)

Pericles' funeral oration might be a long way from Scotland in time and space but I suspect that, had he been in Scotland, he might have seen something familiar. His comments are a remarkable reminder that the wellbeing of democracy has to be measured in terms of the degree to which public participation in the decisions and affairs of the state is regarded as normal and expected. One of the more significant factors in the referendum experience is that it has produced widespread politicisation of the electorate to a degree which was unimaginable and unforeseen. The democracy that currently exists in the UK depends a great deal on public apathy with mainstream politics, along with the warping of political discourse through a narrowly controlled media. There are now significant threats to this, which the referendum process has enhanced.

Firstly, the referendum has generated what might be termed a politicised learning society. What I mean by this is that it encouraged widespread debate, discussion and argument about the political choices open to people in a way that moved people to act, to think politically and to take an interest in the politics of the state as well as in civic and community life. It happened across all types of people and was not confined to a narrow, educated, already politically engaged class. One outcome of this has been a massive increase in party political membership. The SNP was the main political beneficiary with membership trebling to over 96,000, so that it is now the third largest political party in the UK, whereas the Scottish population is

only one tenth of the country. All the political parties which supported independence have experienced remarkable increases in membership. The youth wing of the Scottish Green Party is now bigger than the whole of the party before the referendum; the Scottish Socialist Party has also reported surges in membership. This politicisation has extended downwards to young people too. Recent evidence suggests around 25% of 16-17 year olds have joined a political party with a similar number being involved in political campaigning after the referendum (Black, 2015).

Attendance at political events has been phenomenal. The Annual Convention of the SNP in November 2014 attracted 12,000 members and, on the same weekend in Glasgow, 3,000 participants attended the RIC Annual Conference, which was fully booked at least three weeks before the event. The opposite seems to be occurring in the main political party supporting the union position – membership of the Scottish Labour Party is in deep decline although the party refuses to publicise figures. At the UK General Election in May 2015, the opinion polls predict a meltdown in Scottish Labour's electoral support (Clark and Carrell, 2015). Even if this does not happen as dramatically as expected there is no doubt that the Scottish Labour Party's membership and electoral base has suffered heavily. The Scottish Liberal Democrats and Scottish Conservative Party have small membership bases so are unlikely to experience much obvious decline because of their limited starting position.

Another indicator of engagement with the politics of the state was the response to the Smith Commission, which was set up in the wake of the referendum to formulate how the Vow proposed by the three main UK political parties for further devolved powers to Scotland would be focussed. What is interesting is that the public was invited to send in their responses along with the political parties who were represented on the commission. Over 14,000 individual replies were received. In total some 18,000 responses were generated.

Secondly, there is strong evidence of the growth of what might be termed as 'politicised autodidacts' using social media, the Internet and email amongst other digital tools to circulate information, write blogs, research different views, to acquire critical accounts of mainstream political topics, in short, to think politically. This process of self-education has a chain reaction

as people discuss and argue with their friends, families and wider contacts sometimes through personal social media sites but also in digital public spaces through blogs and online communal sites. The National Library of Scotland set out to document the referendum and has tracked over 750 publically accessible web sites which were devoted to it. A number of web sites became the focal point for independence campaigners, such as *Wings Over Scotland*, *Bella Caledonia*, *National Collective*, along with others which produced daily updates, distributed information of a polemical, opinionated nature and brought into the debate a wide range of issues for readers to comment on and write about as well as providing biting, satirical, ironic images and parodies which contributed creatively and critically to the debate.

A further example of the significance of social media is related to the traffic on Facebook referencing the referendum. In the five weeks before the vote there were over 10 million exchanges and 85% of these were generated in Scotland. Facebook research indicates that 2.05 million interactions were directly related to the Yes campaign and 1.96 million were about *Better Together* (BBC News 16th September, 2014). What is striking also about these exchanges is the degree to which personal Facebook sites and political messages are reducing the space between the personal and the political. Social media can seem to have a narcisstic dimension as users present images of themselves to friends or, it can simply be a social medium for sharing information and items of interest. During the referendum the gap between personal and political interests changed as Facebook users regularly used their own personal sites to exchange information, articles and ideas on the politics of the referendum.

Thirdly, what the referendum did was remove the hold political parties, political elites and mass media 'opinion leaders' have on politics which, in most cases, simply reinforce patterns of authority on political issues (see Jones 2014). Discussion, debate, and conversation on the issues of independence were an everyday experience during the referendum period, at work, at home, travelling, in shops, on buses, in restaurants, in personal social media messages, at the theatre, cinema and of course in pubs and almost anywhere people could meet: deliberation on the issue was widespread and engaging. Some of this activity may have generated more

heat than light but what cannot be ignored was the fact that a public culture of debating politics was underway to an extent that was inconceivable at the start of the campaign. This was true for both Yes and No positions. It needs to be stressed that, as stated earlier, the status quo was no longer an option by the time of the vote. In particular, in the final few months, which reached a crescendo in the weeks before the election, with the news that the independence campaign had a narrow lead, the level of public engagement with the referendum was intoxicating.

To document the above in December 2014 I decided to undertake an online survey of people's learning experiences during the referendum. The plan was simple. Send out an online survey to a handful of friends and students and ask them to complete and pass on if they thought it was useful. Within two days I had 350 completed replies, a few days later over a 1,000 and within a week 1355, when I closed the survey. I recount this process because the response was phenomenal and beyond my wildest expectations (the results are still being analysed so are not reported here). I believe the survey 'hit the spot' in terms of connecting to the desire of people to continue discussing the referendum experience. I had experienced that myself and had attended public meetings, after the result, where the same sense of public interest and 'loss' seemed to be experienced. The loss was not about the result of the vote as much as it was about being engaged with the political process.

Although the mainstream political parties and opinion leaders dominated the mass media spaces of the referendum campaign they could not, and cannot, dominate the everyday places in which people discuss, argue and debate with friends, with families, colleagues, at shopping checkouts, at the hairdressers, on Facebook sites, with strangers at the bus stop, on ferry crossings and so on. These unregulated spaces are resourced through ideas, information and experience often outside of the control of the political classes. In Gramscian terms, civil society is the site of hegemony in the sense of mediating ideas and experiences which construct 'common sense'. That is, a common sense which is shaped in the interests of powerful groups and serves to reinforce patterns of power, privilege and authority in society; it is socially and politically crafted, not natural or neutral. Because civil society is relatively free from state control it can be a powerful means of

exerting this consent without appearing to raise a hand to do so. Equally it can be extremely vulnerable. Free from direct regulation, the unpredictable can happen in civil society and new ideas and experiences, which challenge the politics of common sense, begin to unravel the dominant hegemony. Once unravelled it might be hard to stitch back up.

Conclusion

Returning to the defining moment where the article started, the issue of personal and collective responsibility has now entered mainstream politics in Scotland as the mass infusion of independence campaigners have reenergised the political parties which lost the vote. The act of collectively giving witnessed in George Square is today echoed in the act of collective political thinking. Of course nothing is guaranteed and there will, no doubt, be attempts to marginalise active public participation in politics. However, the initial evidence indicates that the type of political commitment and energy witnessed during the referendum is percolating into civic and community life, into social movements for change, as well as political parties. The process of politicisation is moving from the cultural politics of communities into the political culture of the Scottish state. This is in marked contrast to current trends across the politics of Europe. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (Wooldridge, 2015) there is "a gaping hole at the heart of European politics where big ideas should be" which is reflected in flight from the mainstream political groups. The UK is currently at the unenviable head of this trend. But this can no longer apply to Scotland. So where will the 'big ideas' come from? Certainly not from the elite or the corporate and political sector with their 'think tanks' that have a vested interest in controlling and limiting ideas which potentially threaten their power. In the end the big ideas can only come from 'below' as people seek to find ways to make their lives better and more meaningful; this is the place where the energy, criticality and creative ideas for change can grow and be nurtured. It requires a politicised society, with an electorate prepared to act resolutely on principle, which is the necessary foundation for counter-hegemonic change. Scotland in this respect might still prove to be the threat of a good example.

Notes

[1] Food banks as a way of supporting people in need have grown phenomenally during the period of political austerity as a community response to poverty. For further information see http://www.trusselltrust.org/

[2] One exit opinion poll suggested that 16-17 year olds had voted massively in favour of independence (71%) but only had a small sample. Another exit poll suggests a small margin in favour of the Union. See http://www.if.org.uk/archives/5655/how-did-young-people-vote-in-the-scottish-referendum

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