

Scotland, Independence and Brexit

Michael Keating

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Michael Keating is Professor of Politics at the University of Aberdeen. His book, *State and Nation in the United Kingdom: The Fragmented Union*, will be published by Oxford University Press in the Spring of 2021.

In 2014 the people of Scotland voted in a referendum to reject independence by a margin of 55 per cent to 45 per cent. This followed an agreement between the Scottish Government (controlled by the Scottish National Party) and the UK Government allowing Scotland to make its own decision. After an intense campaign, support for independence rose from around 30 to 35 per cent, where it had been for some years, to a historic high. Following the vote, the UK Government declared that the referendum was a once-in-a-generation event and that the matter was closed. Yet, while the No side retreated into a defensive unionism, the Yes side, in spite of losing, behaved as though they had won. Support for independence remained at the historic high, while the SNP won every subsequent election in Scotland – the General Elections of 2015, 2017 and 2019, the Scottish elections of 2016 and the European elections of 2019. According to the polls, they are likely to win the forthcoming Scottish elections in May 2021. Since the middle of 2020 polls have shown support for independence in the low 50s. What can explain the continuing appeal of nationalism?

One factor is the effect of the 2014 referendum itself, which proved a critical juncture, bringing the working class voters of industrial and post-industrial Scotland into the independence camp and support for the SNP. At the same time, the SNP displaced the Labour Party as the vehicle for social democracy and opposition to austerity.

A second factor is Brexit. In the European Union referendum of 2016, England and Wales voted narrowly to leave (52 per cent). Scotland voted by a larger majority (62 per cent) to remain. The SNP Government in Edinburgh took this as a justification for another independence referendum, having promised in their 2016 election manifesto that taking Scotland out of the EU against its will would provide the material change of circumstances that would legitimate revisiting the question so soon. This move initially backfired. Almost thirty per cent of SNP voters and independence supporters had actually voted to leave and many of these passed over to the Conservatives in the 2017 General Election. While Brexit may have provided a grievance to build the case for independence, it actually made independence more difficult. With Scotland in the EU and the rest of the United Kingdom outside, there would be a hard border between the two. Scotland does four times as much trade with the rest of the UK as it does with the EU. The UK Government refused permission for another referendum and brushed aside proposals for Scotland to have a special status, remaining in the EU single market – although they were later forced to concede that to Northern Ireland.

By 2020, the balance of forces had changed yet again. The Scottish Conservative Party, which had mostly opposed Brexit, lined up behind the leadership in London and now supported it. This cost them the support of many Remain voters and the gains they had made in 2017 were partly reversed. At the same time, they doubled down on opposition to a second independence referendum. This combination of hard unionism and Brexit is worth about a quarter of the Scottish vote, which makes the Conservatives the second party in Scotland but it also places a ceiling on that support. A critical number of Remain supporters, by contrast, moved in the opposite direction, and opted for independence. There is consequently a larger overlap between Yes to independence and No to Brexit. This favours the SNP. The Labour Party, meanwhile, is squeezed on both dimensions and has fallen behind. Scottish politics has thus realigned around the two constitutional issues of independence and Europe.

Another factor has been the Covid crisis. Responsibility for this is divided. The UK Government is responsible for most of the economic measures and for financing furlough schemes and welfare benefits. Unlike the Scottish Government, it has borrowing powers, which it has exercised on a massive scale. The Scottish Government has responsibility for health, including public health measures. Beyond the strict division of competences, however, the Scottish Government has taken ownership of the response to Brexit, setting the rules about lock-down measures and most of the test and tracing measures. The same has happened in Wales. The basic policies followed across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have not differed greatly and many of the same mistakes have been made. The messaging, however, has been very different. The Scottish First Minister has been seen as more assured and trustworthy and has taken a generally stricter line on lock-down measures. After an initial period of close cooperation, there have been some well-publicised differences among the four nations and complaints that London has not taken the other nations into account. This served to increase an existing tendency to invest greater trust in the Scottish than in the UK Government. Whether that effect will persist remains to be seen.

The Covid crisis has allowed both governments to play down the constitutional issue but it is ever-present below the surface of Scottish politics. There is a division within the SNP between those who want to plough ahead with a referendum and those who insist on following the legal, constitutional path, which requires the agreement of London. That reflects a longstanding division between what used to be called ‘fundamentalists’ and ‘gradualists’. If the pro-independence forces (which include the SNP and the Greens) retain their majority in the Scottish Parliament next May, a decision will have to be taken. They will again ask for referendum and the Conservative UK Government has said that they will refuse. There is little appetite in Scotland to follow Catalonia into an unauthorized referendum. The UK Government would be unlikely to follow the Spanish state and physically try to prevent it and to lock up its leaders. They could, instead, just ignore it.

What would happen after that, nobody knows. Much might depend on reactions in England. There is a surprising level of indifference in England to the idea of Scotland or Northern Ireland breaking away. A significant minority would even welcome it. Surveys have shown that, if the price of keeping Scotland and Northern Ireland in the UK is abandoning Brexit, or even a softer Brexit, then Brexit voters in England would rather than Scotland and Northern Ireland did break away. Brexit reflects a certain English nationalism and surveys have shown that voters who see themselves as English rather than British are much more likely to support Brexit. The secession of Northern Ireland to join the Republic of Ireland is already recognized in the Good Friday Agreement, which provides for a referendum on the matter.

The secession of Scotland is another matter. No UK Prime Minister or Government could survive that and it would be regarded as a national humiliation.

Although there is now a majority in Scotland for independence, it is a slim one and the old obstacles remain. There is no reason to think that Scotland could not join the EU but it would still place a border between itself and England. The hard Brexit being pursued by the current UK Government would make that border even harder. There is still an open question as to what currency Scotland would adopt. The Euro is an obvious choice but it is still tarnished by the memories of the Euro crisis. The pro-independence movement is divided between a social democratic tendency, which looks to the high-tax/ higher welfare Nordic states and a pro-business element which looks to New Zealand.

In the longer run, support for the union has been ebbing as unionism has sought to come to terms with the United Kingdom's place in the world; Brexit has exacerbated this difficulty. Unionism also struggles to articulate just what the union is for. Now that the old symbols of empire and monarchy and the memory of the two world wars have faded, unionists have fallen back on instrumental arguments about the economy and welfare. Yet, within the European Union, states no longer have to be big in order to access large markets, as Ireland has shown. Nor is a large population necessary to support a welfare state, as the Nordic countries demonstrate. Successive governments have sought to reinvent 'Britishness' as an overarching national identity but under the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s and since 2010, this has been accompanied by a rolling back of the state that provided a vehicle for common identity. Britishness is then reduced to platitudes about democracy and liberty, as though these were virtues peculiar to the United Kingdom.

Yet, while unionism may have lost the argument in Scotland, nationalism has not yet won. The prospectus for an independent Scotland still leaves many unanswered questions. There is still a lot to play for.