

Is it really all just about economics? Issues of nationhood and welfare

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This is the third in a set of briefings outlining initial results from the 2013 Scottish Social Attitudes survey. In the first of these entitled, 'The Score at Half-Time: Trends in Support for Independence' we argued that so far as voters are concerned, the economy remained the most influential issue in shaping their attitudes towards independence. Indeed, if anything that now seemed to be even more clearly the case than before.

But is that all that matters to voters? Are they simply just concerned about the economic consequences of their decision? After all, this is far from the only issue being discussed in the campaign. Much attention has, for example, been given to the question of the likely terms and conditions of an independent Scotland's membership of the European Union. The SNP's wish to see the removal of nuclear weapons from Scottish soil while still being a member of NATO has been an important talking point too. Meanwhile, on the one hand it has been argued that independent Scotland would be a more equal society that was more generous in its provision of welfare and public services, while on the other it has been argued that pooling risks and resources across the whole of the UK is the better way of creating a more socially just society.

In this briefing we examine attitudes towards two sets of these debates about the likely shape of an independent Scotland. First we consider some of those issues about which an independent state has to make a decision and a devolved one usually cannot do so – issues of nationhood ranging from who should be the country's Head of State, what should be its currency and what international alliances it should seek to form. How far are people's stances on these issues shaping their willingness to vote Yes or No? Second, we examine some of the arguments about equality and welfare. Do Scots feel that they should use their own taxes to pay for their own welfare, or do they seek to share their revenues and risks with the rest of the UK? And does the claim that Scotland has a more egalitarian, social democratic impulse have an appeal for voters in the independence debate?

Issues of Nationhood

In the 2013 SSA we asked a wide range of questions about those issues that are more or less the preserve of independent states to decide. That began with perhaps the most basic question, that of citizenship, and in particular whether British citizens living in Scotland should be able to keep their existing British citizenship while laying claim to their new Scottish status as well. This proves not to be an issue on which there is a consensus. While almost half (47%) feel that people should be able to keep their British passport and have a Scottish one too, a third (32%) believe that people ought to have to choose between having a British and a Scottish passport. Meanwhile, 17% believe that people should only be able to lay claim to a Scottish passport.

As an independent country, Scotland would also have to decide who should have the right to enter the country as migrants. Both the current and previous Scottish Governments have expressed the view that Scotland has a greater requirement for migrants than does the UK as a whole. However, previous SSA surveys have suggested that there is potentially a degree of public concern about increased levels of migration into Scotland. For example, the 2010 survey found that 46% agreed (and only 33% disagreed) that Scotland would begin to lose its identity 'if more people from Eastern Europe came to live in Scotland', while 50% said the same about more Muslims coming to Scotland. That mood has not changed substantially. Now 47% express concern about the possible impact of more migrants from Eastern Europe, while 49% say the same about more Muslims.

One of the features of the current Scottish Government's vision for an independent Scotland is that it should continue to share a number of institutions with the rest of the United Kingdom. That approach seems to chime with the views of most people in Scotland. Thus, 62% believe that an independent Scotland should 'definitely' or 'probably' continue to share a monarch with England, while only 33% would like to see an independent Scotland have its own President. Equally 61% would like to see the BBC continue to be available to viewers in the same way that it is now, while another 25% would like the BBC to be available alongside Scotland's 'own independent public television service'. Only 11% would like the BBC to be replaced by such a service. Meanwhile, no less than 79% would like an independent Scotland to continue to use the pound, while just 11% would like it to have its own currency and only 7% to adopt the euro. As to whether this is what would happen, however, there is a fair degree of scepticism. Only 57% think that an independent Scotland would end up using the pound, while 21% reckon it would find itself using the euro and 16% its own currency.

Apart from continuing to share some institutions with the rest of the UK, the current Scottish Government would also like an independent Scotland to retain its membership of the European Union. However, like the rest of the UK, Scotland is now a more Eurosceptic country than it once was. As table 1 shows, as recently as 2003 only 40% of people in Scotland wanted Britain either to leave the EU or at least to reduce its powers. Now that proportion stands at 60%. Even so, as many as 68% feel that an independent Scotland should either 'definitely' or 'probably' be a member of the European Union, an acceptance perhaps that whatever the apparent downsides of the EU in the public's eyes, Scotland has little option than to seek to be a member.

Table 1. Attitudes towards Britain's Membership of the European Union, 1999-2013

Do you think Britain's long-term policy should be...	1999	2000	2003	2004	2005	2013
	%	%	%	%	%	%
To leave the European Union	10	11	11	13	14	20
To stay in the EU and try to reduce the EU's powers	36	37	29	31	36	40
To leave things as they are	21	21	24	27	21	25
To stay in the EU and try to increase the EU's powers	14	13	19	12	13	8
To work for the formation of a single European government	9	9	8	7	5	3
<i>Sample Size</i>	<i>1482</i>	<i>1663</i>	<i>1508</i>	<i>1637</i>	<i>1549</i>	<i>1497</i>

One area, however, where the current Scottish Government seeks to end many of its ties with the rest of the UK is defence. As well as seeking the removal of nuclear weapons, it also envisages an independent Scotland having its own armed forces. Neither stance is, though, overwhelmingly popular. Only 27% believe that an independent Scotland should have its own army, navy and air force, while as many as 67% believe it should combine its armed forces with the rest of the UK. Meanwhile opinion is almost evenly divided on the issue of nuclear weapons. On the one hand, 37% are 'strongly' or 'somewhat' in favour of Britain having its own nuclear weapons, while 46% are opposed. On the other hand, 41% agree that, 'if Scotland becomes an independent country, Britain's nuclear weapons submarines should continue to be based in Scotland', slightly more than the 37% who disagree.

Do Issues of Nationhood Matter?

It would seem that while the current Scottish Government's stance on some of these issues of nationhood are quite popular, others are less so. But how far are these issues mattering to voters when it comes to whether they should vote Yes or No. Judged at least by the degree to which Yes and No voters have different views on these subjects, the answer often appears to be, 'Not a lot'.

Indeed, in some cases, voters on the two sides of the debate are more or less in agreement with each other. While 67% of those who 'will' or are 'most likely' to vote Yes, 67% think that an independent Scotland should definitely or probably be a member of the EU, so also do 70% of Yes voters. This suggests that so far as winning referendum votes at least is concerned, the degree of prominence that this subject has received has been somewhat misplaced. Equally, although 47% of No supporters agree that the arrival of more migrants

from Eastern Europe could pose a threat to Scotland's identity, so also do 48% of Yes supporters.

Yes supporters (70% in favour) are somewhat less keen than No supporters on keeping the pound (85%). But what is remarkable is that scepticism about whether Scotland would in fact be able to continue to use the pound is common amongst Yes supporters as well as though on the No side. Thus while 33% of No supporters would like to keep the pound but are doubtful that an independent Scotland would be able to do so, so also are 23% of Yes supporters. That means that while 39% of those No supporters who would like to keep the pound are doubtful that that is what would happen, so also are 33% of Yes supporters who would like to keep the pound. It seems that here too the prominence that the issue has received in the campaign is at variance with the degree to which it divides voters on the ground.

The differences between the two sets of supporters are not that wide on the issue of nuclear weapons either. While more Yes supporters (58%) than No ones (40%) oppose Britain having nuclear weapons, the gap is not a large one. It is even slightly narrower when it comes to whether an independent Scotland should allow Britain's nuclear weapons capability to remain north of the border. While 46% of No voters agree with this proposition, so also do 36% of those inclined to vote Yes.

In fact, statistical modelling (not shown) suggests that perhaps only two of these issues of nationhood are playing much of a role at all in enabling people to make up their minds (once we take into account all of the other views and attitudes of Yes and No voters, including not least perceptions of the economic consequences of independence). The first is whether or not the BBC should continue to be available in Scotland. Although only 21% of Yes supporters believe that the BBC should be replaced by Scotland's own public service broadcaster, this does help mark them out from the 7% of No supporters who take that view. Perhaps for some Yes voters independence offers the prospect of creating a broadcaster that is more in tune with what they regard as Scotland's distinctive culture. Meanwhile, whereas on balance slightly more Yes supporters (51%) would like an independent Scotland to have its own President than would like it to continue to share a monarchy with England (44%), most No voters (73%) would like the current monarchy to be retained.

Risk and Resources

One of the arguments commonly put forward by the No side in the campaign is that it is better if responsibility for paying welfare benefits such as unemployment benefit and the old age pension is shared across the UK as a whole. Their argument is one of both pragmatism and principle. They argue that such benefits are more likely to be secure if they are funded out of the tax revenues of the whole of the UK. At the same time they suggest that because they share a common bond with the rest of the UK there is every reason why people in Ipswich should be as concerned about the plight of the unemployed in Inverness. Meanwhile on the other side of the argument it is suggested that Scotland has been short changed by, for example, having to share the revenues of North Sea Oil with the rest of the UK.

But where do voters stand on these debates? To ascertain the answer to that question the 2013 SSA asked voters four questions, two about whether tax revenues collected in Scotland should be retained in Scotland or shared with the rest of the UK, and two about how welfare benefits should be funded. They read as follows:

*Regardless of what happens at present, how do you think the money raised by the income tax paid by people in Scotland **should** be used? Should it be used to help pay for public services across the UK as a whole, or should it be used to help pay for services in Scotland only?*

*How do you think the money raised through taxes on North Sea Oil in Scottish waters **should** be used? Should it be used to help pay for public services across the UK as a whole, or should it be used to help pay for services in Scotland only?*

What about the cost of paying benefits to people in Scotland who lose their job through no fault of their own? Regardless of what happens at present, should the money to pay this come from the taxes collected across the UK as a whole, or from those collected in Scotland only?

And what about the cost of paying the government old age pension to people in Scotland? Should the money to pay this come from the taxes collected across the UK as a whole, or from those collected in Scotland only?

Table 2. Attitudes towards Pooling Revenues and Risks

	Scotland only	UK as a whole
	%	%
Income Tax Revenues	48	47
North Sea Oil Revenues	44	50
Unemployment benefit	36	58
Old Age Pension	34	61
<i>Sample size: 1497</i>		

As Table 2 shows, opinion in Scotland is divided on this issue, though there is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a somewhat greater willingness to share the risks of paying welfare benefits than to pool the tax revenues that are collected in Scotland. Even so, it might be thought surprising that the long standing nationalist claim that, 'It's Scotland's Oil' does not have more resonance amongst the public. More important, however, is the fact that as Table 3 shows, opinion on this issue divides Yes and No supporters quite sharply. In each case a clear majority of Yes supporters think that revenues and risks should be gathered and borne within Scotland, while a majority of No supporters take the opposite view.

Table 3. Attitudes towards Polling Risks and Revenues by Referendum Vote Intention

	Yes voters		No voters	
	Scotland only	UK as a whole	Scotland only	UK as a whole
	%	%	%	%
Income Tax Revenues	77	20	32	63
North Sea Oil Revenues	81	17	24	71
Unemployment benefit	71	25	18	78
Old Age Pension	67	25	15	81

Sample sizes: Yes voters: 444; No voters; 804.

Evidently, here is an issue that is central to the debate in voters' minds. Indeed, our statistical modelling (not shown) suggests that attitudes towards whether the costs of paying welfare benefits should be shared across the UK as a whole or borne solely within Scotland is second only to people's views of whether the economy of an independent Scotland would be better or worse in enabling us to distinguish between Yes and No supporters. But of course far from demonstrating that the referendum is about more than economics in voters' eyes, arguably the apparent importance of this aspect of the debate about welfare could well be thought to reinforce the impression that questions of finance are indeed to the fore in voters' minds.

A More Equal Scotland?

But what of the argument, commonly articulated on the Yes side, that Scotland has a more egalitarian, social democratic impulse than England and thus as an independent country would foster a more equal society, including a fairer system of welfare. The alleged unfairness of the current UK government's policy of reducing the housing benefit of those in social housing who are deemed to have a spare bedroom is often cited an example of the kind of harsh welfare policy that a Scottish Government would avoid.

Some forms of welfare are indeed relatively popular with people in Scotland. Thus no less than 67% would like to see the government spend more than now on benefits for disabled people who cannot work, while 57% say the same about spending on benefits for retired people. However, some are not. Just 21% would like to see more spending on benefits for unemployed people, while 43% would actually like to see it reduced. Moreover, public opinion in Scotland has not been immune from the wider trend evident across the UK as a whole towards a less sympathetic view towards at least some aspects of welfare.

Thus, for example, as Table 4 shows, at 52% the proportion who now thinks that unemployment benefit is too high is greater than it has been at any time since the advent of devolution.

Table 4. Attitudes towards Benefits for Unemployed People, 1999-2013

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2006	2009	2010	2013
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Benefits for unemployed people are too low and cause hardship	36	43	45	41	41	33	31	30	26
Benefits for unemployed people are too high and discourage them from finding jobs	33	28	26	31	32	39	42	43	52
(Neither)	22	17	16	12	16	18	17	15	15
<i>Sample Size</i>	<i>1482</i>	<i>1663</i>	<i>1605</i>	<i>1665</i>	<i>1508</i>	<i>1594</i>	<i>1482</i>	<i>1495</i>	<i>1497</i>

Equally, as Table 5 shows, during the latter years of the last UK Labour government, the appetite amongst the Scottish public for more taxation and spending diminished, and so far at least has not been substantially reversed, despite the current programmes of cuts to government spending. Just 42% would now like to see government spending increase, compared with 60% just over a decade ago.

Table 5. Attitudes towards Taxation and Spending, 1999-2013.

Suppose the government had to choose between the three options on this card. Which do you think it should choose?

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2006	2009	2010	2013
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits	3	4	3	3	3	5	6	5	7	6
Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now	38	39	30	32	34	35	45	53	49	48
Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits	55	54	63	60	58	56	41	37	40	42
<i>Sample Size</i>	1482	1663	1605	1665	1508	1637	1594	1482	1495	1497

Still, even if public opinion in Scotland is not necessarily as favourable now towards more government spending and welfare as it has been previously, perhaps those who are inclined to vote Yes do distinctively hold to that view, and forms one of the key motivations why they are inclined to vote Yes. In practice, however, as Table 6 shows, Yes supporters are only a little more likely to adopt a 'social democratic' stance on these issues than those who are inclined to vote No.

Table 6. Attitudes towards Welfare and Government Spending by Referendum Vote Intention

% favour/agree	Yes voters	No voters
More spending on people with disabilities	68	58
More spending on retired people	63	53
More spending on unemployed	28	16
Benefits for unemployed are too low	32	23
Increase taxes and spend more on health etc.	47	40
<i>Sample Size</i>	444	804

As a result, it perhaps comes as little surprise to learn that when we undertake statistical modelling (not shown) to ascertain whether any of these attitudes appear to be playing any distinctive role in sorting voters into the Yes and No camps, none of those included in Table 6 prove to matter at all. Indeed the only instance where attitudes towards welfare and government spending apparently plays any kind of role is that those who 'strongly disagree' with another statement included in the 2013 survey, that is whether 'large numbers of people these days falsely claim benefits' are rather more likely to vote Yes. However the overall impact of this pattern is very small - just 7% of all Scots actually take that view.

Conclusion

It appears that many of the issues that have received considerable attention in the referendum debate do not appear to be playing much if any role in determining whether voters are likely to vote Yes or No. This certainly seems to be true of much of the debate about Europe, currency and welfare spending, and perhaps even indeed that about nuclear weapons too. The one debate that we have identified does seem to matter apparent from the economics of independence is whether or not people feel the costs of paying welfare should be shared across the UK as a whole or kept to Scotland in particular. That of course might be because voters take different views about their obligations to the unemployed in Ipswich. But it could just as well be because they disagree about the best way of securing the financial future of the unemployed in Inverness. It seems to be difficult to escape questions of economics in the referendum debate.

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