New Blackfriars

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Comment: *The Scottish Referendum*

On 5 May 2011, at the election for the Holyrood Parliament, 3,950,751 people were registered to vote, 50.6% of them actually did so. The Scottish National Party, with 902,915 votes, won 69 of the 129 seats. These votes included thousands, by people themselves not nationalist, impressed enough by the SNP's competence as a minority administration since 2007 to grant them more power, rather than revert to the preceding Labour regime.

This success gave the SNP government a mandate to hold a referendum, long promised, allowing Scotland to secede from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Negotiations between Holyrood and Westminster concluded in October 2011: David Cameron, on behalf of the UK, agreed to enfranchise 16 year olds, insisted on no third option on the ballot paper (maximum devolution), and on yes or no to independence (rather than to staying in the UK). Even at the time, these arrangements seemed likely to favour a yes vote. Politicians in London, if they thought about it at all, seem to have taken for granted that voters in Scotland would vote massively to stay in the Union.

Holyrood chose 18 September 2014 for the referendum: that year being the 700th anniversary of Bannockburn when the Scots maintained their independence in a famous victory over the English. Moreover, in July 2014, Glasgow was to host the Commonwealth Games, doing so with predictably glorious panache, gathering athletes from the 53 independent countries, which include Tuvalu (population 10,000).

What no longer mattered is that in May 2011 Labour polled 630, 461, the Conservatives 276, 652, and the Liberal Democrats 157, 714, besides minor parties. In other words, of the slightly more than half of the voters who actually voted, over one million voted for non-SNP candidates. Far from its being the landslide that winning 69 seats at Holyrood suggests, less than a quarter of the registered voters voted for the SNP. One in four was probably a committed nationalist; the other three supported a non- or even anti-nationalist party or couldn't care less.

On 18 September 2014 things were transformed. With an astonishing 85% of the registered voters taking part, 44.7% favoured seceding from the Union, 55.3% remained loyal: in round figures 1, 600 000 to 2 million. Assuming that those who voted SNP in 2011 mostly voted for independence in 2014, they were joined by about 700,000,

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newly registered voters, including 16 year olds, as well as Labour voters, against their party's official pro-Union policy.

While the Prime Minister was quick to say that the 'settled will' of the people of Scotland was for the Union (and was overheard saying that the Queen 'purred' when he telephoned her with the news), and others declared that Scottish independence was an issue that would not arise again for a generation (if ever), anybody out and about in the streets would know that many of the people they met must have voted to secede from the UK and had not given up their hopes.

Even in Orkney, Shetland, Dumfries and Galloway, and the Scottish Borders, where the vote was most decisive against secession, there was no overwhelming majority: on the contrary, almost a third of the voters preferred independence. Only four council areas voted for independence: Glasgow, with West Dunbartonshire and North Lanarkshire, its suburbs and satellites, including Clydebank, Cumbernauld, Coatbridge and Motherwell, with a total population of about 920,000; and, on the east side of the country, the fast self-renewing city of Dundee, with 147,000 people. Many people in the outlying areas, which rejected independence, no doubt hated the idea of more power passing to politicians from the Glasgow conurbation. While nowhere reaching a majority, voters in the west and north, including the Highlands and the Western Isles, were far more favourable to independence than people in the east and south — as if, residually, Scotland were as divided geopolitically as in 1745 at the Jacobite Rebellion.

Of course the result has been accepted democratically. There will be no riots on the streets of Glasgow or Dundee. On the other hand, the Holyrood government will be led by Nicola Sturgeon, a highly impressive politician, who has not given up the dream she has had since she joined the SNP as a 16 year old. Then, will the Westminster politicians deliver the 'devo-max' about which they made a 'vow' in the last-minute panic when one poll suggested yes to independence (and, as they at last understood, the break-up of Britain)? Who will be in power at Westminster after the election due on 7 May 2015? Would Labour delay change in Scotland on the grounds that it must go in tandem with constitutional change in the rest of the UK, which would take years? What if the Tory-promised referendum in 2017 were to take place, and the Scots voted to stay in the European Union while the English decided otherwise? It's not difficult to see circumstances in which there might soon be another referendum, with a different result.

Fergus Kerr OP

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