

# Autarchy in Scotland

Is the only choice “YES” or “NO” for a new nation?

Alexander (for Retort)

2015

In September 2014, the people of Scotland voted on an independence referendum question, “Should Scotland be an independent country?” Following an intense campaign, the “No” side won with 55 percent voting against independence with a turnout of 85 percent.

Alexander writes from Glasgow with an assessment.

Nobody in their right mind welcomes, or encourages, the entry into the world of another nation-state, unless (as is often the case, alas) the new non-entity seems the only way to shake free of another, more dismal or ruthless form of oppression—Empire, Homeland, United Kingdom.

The past two years have seen a sustained campaign to break the fiction of the “United Kingdom” apart, or at least to begin that process, by creating a rival fiction called “Scotland.” Many of the rituals of Scottishness—tartan, Burns night, haggis dinners—are a nineteenth-century invention, and the official Party of Scottish Nationalism is the full inheritor of this flummery, combining the promise of a future of endless Highland Regiment tattoos with a rate of corporation tax low enough to put a smile on Rupert Murdoch’s death mask.

This is the level on which the debate about an independent Scotland has been enacted and reported in the UK mainstream. There has been talk of a continuing constitutional crisis, even after a flurry of last-minute panic promises and threats from Westminster, the seat of British government, contrived to steer 55 percent of voters into the No camp—“Scotland votes resoundingly for dependence,” as no newspaper quite had the courage to put it.

Committees will report on Scottish powers over income tax and “job seekers allowance” (read: the dole). Britain’s Labour and Conservative Parties, each with their own stake in the constitutional status quo, will ensure that the time of political soul-searching peters out in an eternity of conventions.

There is, however, another side to the story. Two other sides, in fact. The first has to do with the peculiar reality underlying the fiction, “Scotland,” and the depth of its involvement in the project of British Empire. The second, the old mole working in the earth, under the bland aggregate of the No vote’s 45 percent, is the energy of refusal and remaking of politics that has gathered, to everyone’s astonishment, under the independence banner.

First things first. England and Scotland have shared a monarch since 1603. Their two parliaments became one in 1707, and decided to call the new realm Great Britain. In the aftermath of the defeat of the Jacobite rebellion forty years later, Scotland became the full junior partner in Great Britain’s imperial expansion, and took a share of the spoils.

In a ploy typical of nationalism’s intelligentsia everywhere, the current ideologues of Scotland gloss over the bloodiest border in the history of the island, the geological boundary separating Highland from Lowland Scotland. The profitable partnership between the Lowland bourgeoisie and the English imperialists, which enlisted the defeated Highland regiments in its sanguinary colonial business, is now over, because the Empire is over. And, crucially, the end of Empire coincided with the discovery of vast oil deposits in Scottish waters.

The politics of oil, and of Scotland’s resources generally, have been salient in the debates surrounding independence. That Scotland, which from the 1980s on, saw a chance of building an oil-boom welfare state along Norwegian

lines, and then saw that chance confiscated or sabotaged by Westminster, is certainly one key to recent Scottish nationalism.

Other dimensions to the politics of United Kingdom dominance have been largely passed over in silence. One would have thought that in debating the pros and cons of a break-up of Britain, the “Irish question” would have been bound to figure centrally as a point of reference with its terrible, exemplary history of home-rule balloting, secession, invasion, civil war, partition, and religious strife. It has proved too painful a comparison to contemplate.

Similarly, the question of the new or old state’s atomic arsenal. The zones of sacrifice created by nuclear states since the first atom bomb was exploded at Alamogordo, New Mexico, are concentrated in their colonial and aboriginal spaces—Oceania, Algeria, Kazakhstan, Woomera, Rajasthan, and Nevada.

No surprise, therefore, that the British missile fleet is based not in England, but on its Celtic fringe, a mere 25 miles from downtown Glasgow and about 40 miles from half the population of Scotland. In assessing the dangers in 2000 of a major accident at the Clyde Naval Base in Faslane, Scotland, home to the UK’s nuclear weapons system, the UK Ministry of Defence concluded that the resulting “societal contamination” meant that “the risks are close to the tolerability criterion level.” Close to, but not beyond it, apparently.

As the days ticked by toward the independence vote in September, it was hard to extract oneself from the general atmosphere of panic. There really did seem a chance of the Union ending.

Since the No vote, we have seen not only the cynical superficiality of the English response—if we were forced to promise these Scots more “devolution” to keep them from leaving, then let’s immediately fuel the phony demand for “English votes for English laws”—but also the arrival, and endurance, of a new political landscape north of the border.

The Labour Party will probably lose electoral hold of its traditional working-class Scottish base. The Scot Nationalists may gain from Labour’s implosion in the short term, but what matters is the intensity and persistence of a new autonomist movement far to the left of both. Predictably, Scottish anarchists were split between a tactical desire to assist in precipitating a full-blown crisis of the British nation-state, and a refusal in principle to play any part in electoral politics.

James Kelman, Scotland’s finest novelist, articulated the case for staying clear of the ballot box altogether: “A vote YES or NO is a vote for the political system that allows it. If there was any possibility that the apparatus could effect a change in the system, then the British State would dismantle it immediately.”

Nevertheless, the British State will find it difficult to stifle the popular debate sparked by the referendum. On November 22, in the aftermath of the No vote, Glasgow’s Clyde Auditorium hosted an all-day Radical Independence Conference, facing directly the questions of land ownership, energy policy, and nuclear weaponry. It put the Scottish movement in the context of European crisis.

Three thousand people bought tickets, and many more were turned away—equivalent to 30,000 in London. The figures who have emerged during the campaign are virtually unknown in Scotland, never mind south of the border. Their voices crystallize Scottish anger, and speak to a range of political futures that “politics as usual” goes on trying to silence.

They are defining the terms of a new realism. What happens next is, for once, truly hard to predict.



Alexander (for Retort)  
Autarchy in Scotland  
Is the only choice "YES" or "NO" for a new nation?  
2015

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/393-spring-2015/autarchy-in-scotland>  
Fifth Estate #393, Spring 2015

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/393-spring-2015/autarchy-in-scotland)**