

Vote No to the Constitutional Sideshow

Garry Coutts

Abstract

The whole independence debate is a monumental sideshow. A waste of valuable time that could be spent on the key challenges facing our country. A waste of energy that should have been used to find solutions to the major problems of society. A huge waste of talent that has been diverted on to inconsequential matters of constitution rather than public policy and, worst of all, a tragic waste of human spirit.

Keywords

Scottish referendum, debate, independence

Referendum Debate

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Why are we not focusing on the major issues of the day? Finding opportunities for full, well-rewarded employment for our young people. Looking to support our seniors so they can live independent fulfilled lives in their own communities. Supporting the whole population to reach their full potential in life. These are only three of the priorities we should be focusing on and yet they are relegated to the footnotes of current politics in Scotland.

I have previously described the independence debate and the consequences of a yes vote as a mere diversion from real politics and as the debate grinds on I am more and more certain this is the case. As Scotland's political class has become increasingly fixated with the whole independence question, it might seem rather flippant to dismiss our national obsession in these terms. However, I genuinely believe that we have diverted into a referendum cul-de-sac and face the prospect of continuing to be stuck here for years to come unless we get a decisive no vote in September.

At a time when we need to have serious discussions about a whole raft of public policy issues we are viewing everything through the lens of the independence referendum. This is distorting our perspective and preventing us taking a wide view of the immediate future or, more worryingly, the longer term. Politicians and activists on both sides of the debate are so wrapped up in September's vote they are not looking beyond the impact on the referendum of anything they say or do. This is making our political discourse parochial, stilted and quite unsuited to developing policy to meet the challenges we face in such a rapidly changing and uncertain world.

Sadly, I think it was always inevitable that this was what was going to happen as soon as it was clear we were going to have a referendum. It's not the politicians' fault. Having elected a majority SNP government, we can't be surprised that separatism is their number one objective. There is a wee clue in their name. And at the same time we can't blame those who passionately believe in co-operation across the communities of Britain for fiercely opposing them.

I will do all I can to achieve a no vote for three reasons;

- the nationalist campaign presents a false prospectus of what we can expect in an independent Scotland;
- there are no reasons why we can't address the major political issues we face within the current constitutional settlement;
- constitutional debates like this allow us to hide from the tough, sometimes unpalatable choices we need to make in governing our country.

Firstly, the yes camp tactics have been obvious and logical from the outset. They want to present a compelling vision of a brave new world that can emerge from a yes vote. However, different yes campaigners can each present a different version of the future. These are often conflicting or downright contradictory versions but will inevitably appeal

to different sections of the electorate. But none of them is anything other than chimera; mere illusory supposition. The SNP Government's White Paper was, I think, an honest attempt to set out their particular vision. But it has been widely criticised. And amongst its fiercest critics are other yes supporters. They point out this is just the SNP's view of the future and the reality will not necessarily look anything at all like the White Paper. And they are right. The future will inevitably be shaped by subsequent elections post-independence and by the governments we choose. It will certainly not look like the present government 'here's one we made earlier' version.

And if we look at the different scenarios that are being presented by the factions in the yes campaign we can see that many nationalists are inevitably going to be desperately disappointed by whatever version of a Scotland emerges if they win. We can't have both Tommy Sheridan's socialist idyll and Michael Fry's free market utopian versions of Scotland. We can't keep the pound and have a new currency. We can't become a republic and keep the Queen. We can't be in NATO and out of it. We can't leave the EU and remain within it. We can't have a decentralised state and one that ensures consistency of service provision across the whole country. We can't have Nordic levels of public services and a low tax economy, etc., etc.

Undoubtedly, these are all issues that could be sorted out in the aftermath of a yes vote. But they will be just as difficult, messy and divisive to resolve in an independent Scotland as they are in the context of the UK. There is certainly no 'settled will of the Scottish people' on any of these issues. But, as a new nation we won't have the luxury of just keeping them in the long grass as we can within the UK; we would have to come to a position on them. So after a yes vote we can expect years if not decades of truculent debate over the minutiae of these constitutional matters. This will be just as, if not more, exhausting and time-consuming as the present yes/no debate. Not a prospect I relish.

Of course, all of this pain might be worth it if we needed independence to allow us to focus on some of the big social issues. But this is simply not true. My second point is that most of the things that cause concern on a day-to-day basis are already devolved to the Scottish parliament, including health, social work, education, housing and transport. We can make policy decisions, prioritise expenditure, target resources and make choices on all of these things now. We don't need more powers to do so. We have shown in the introduction of free personal care, removing tolls from bridges, abolishing prescription charges, removing car parking fees from hospitals and extending concessionary travel on buses etc., that we can make distinctive policy in Scotland.

Personally, I am not sure we have always made the right choices. The policies listed above (introduced by Labour, Liberal and SNP governments) have given more benefit to better-off citizens rather than to the worst-off. Our poorest citizens never paid for prescriptions or personal care in the past so by making them free to the better-off these policies have actually widened the inequality gap. It is also my experience that it is the more affluent that make most use of concessionary transport. These resources could have been targeted at people in greater need but they were choices that were proposed, scrutinised, debated, voted upon and decided by Scots politicians in Holyrood. It was not Westminster that foisted them upon us.

I think it is worth pondering why we have made these choices instead of alternatives that might have gone some way to reducing inequalities. If, as many claim, we aspire to a fairer and more equal society why have we used our resources in this way as opposed to more egalitarian alternatives? In the case of free personal care it was the impact of rising care costs on the value of the inheritance families were expecting to enjoy that was the main driver. This was not going to impact too much on families in Easterhouse or Wester Hailes but for those whose parents were living in Whitecraigs or Morningside it was becoming a burning issue. Parliament duly passed the legislation that gave considerable relief to these better-off individuals.

Abolishing prescription charges was a bit more complex. The cost of administering the scheme was disproportionate to the income it brought in. There was also evidence that some people who were on modest incomes and required complex medications for long-term conditions or cancer could face very high costs, meaning they might choose not to take all of their medication to save money. It was easy to introduce and had popular appeal but nevertheless was another policy that widened, rather than narrowed the inequalities gap.

It is difficult to make policy that targets resources on the poorest in society. They are a minority. Voter turnout is lowest in deprived communities and most pressure for policy responses comes from areas that are more affluent. This has always been the case and is what makes the delivery of progressive policy so difficult. It is not the fault of politicians. They are, after all, held to account by the electorate and do, by and large, reflect that electorate in their decision making. Uncomfortable as it may be to those of us of a social-liberal/left disposition, we do not live in a radical society.

There is nothing to suggest that in an independent Scotland this will be any different and I fear we are deluding ourselves if we think otherwise. And this brings me to my third point. We will still have to make choices. Those choices will be dictated by what the electorate will accept. Social attitude studies have shown for years that despite voting trends, there is very little difference between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom when it comes to things like immigration, welfare, nuclear weapons or the NHS. And if we have not been able to make more progressive choices in our devolved parliament why should we expect things to be different following independence?

Of course, to date we have only made choices about expenditure within the block grant. This limits debate at Holyrood to being about how to cut the cake not how big the cake should be. Pro-independence supporters continually point to this weakness and use it to argue that we need full independence to allow us to make bolder policy decisions in Scotland.

This argument conveniently ignores the fact that Holyrood has more powers just now, namely the 2012 Scotland Act which we could be using but have delayed implementing until after the referendum. It effectively gives Holyrood the power to set our own income tax rate. This is a huge advance on the all but useless 3% tax-varying power that existed until now and that no party in Holyrood even contemplated using. It brings Holyrood back to having to discuss the size of government expenditure. It allows us, politicians and electorate, choice on tax and spend which has for too long been absent in our politics.

If we want to spend more on early years, criminal justice, health or older adult services we will be able to raise tax to fund it. If, however, we would prefer to have more of our income in our pockets to choose how we spend it personally, we can cut tax and services accordingly; good old big government/little government debates that people can engage in rather than the sterile haggling over the distribution of a fixed resource we have now.

If, for example, you are concerned that England's health policy will reduce the amount they spend on the NHS, adversely impacting on the block grant, you can rest easy. If we choose to forego a tax cut we will be able to continue funding the NHS in Scotland as we do now. The scare stories being propagated that policy south of the border means an inevitable slide towards a private health care system are far from the mark and could easily be laughed off if it were not for the fact they are being repeated so often (and often by people who should know better).

Polls show few people understand the extent of the powers in the 2012 Act and some are being persuaded to consider voting yes as they believe it is only by so doing they can protect our public services. I believe they would take a different view if they appreciated what powers were already available.

It will be interesting to see if, when we have to face up to making these choices, we all rush to the ballot box to support political parties advocating higher taxation and improved levels of service, or if we keep our hands on our wallets and purses. We will no longer be able to blame our neighbours in the south if we see a decline in the public finances or standards of service provision.

There are, of course, other elements of the taxation system that the 2012 Act does not cover, and nationalists argue that it is only with all of these in our hands that we can really make a difference to Scottish public policy. But my case is that with the choices we can make now and with the increased powers of the 2012 Act as well as any new powers we can negotiate after the referendum is out of the way, we have a pretty full box of tools to make improvements. Failing to make full use of them or even acknowledging we have them does no one in Scotland any good.

Many critics of the present devolution settlement point to the fact that welfare benefits remain under Westminster control. The bedroom tax and universal credit are both cited as examples of policies that we would not have introduced in Scotland. While no one can say what policies we would have pursued (particularly if we had to fund them by raising taxes directly) critics fail to recognise there is much we could be doing in this area. As we have seen, Westminster was happy to make regulations allowing the Scottish Government to negate the impact of the bedroom tax. While this year it had to fund the cost from its fixed budget, in future years will be able to fund it through taxation if it so chooses.

While many have rightly criticised universal credit and particularly the inhuman assessment process and sanctions that are apparently so arbitrarily applied, there are some things we need to examine more closely.

There is a massive amount of evidence that employment (either paid or voluntary) is of enormous positive benefit. Part of the problem with the present system is that there are

simply not enough quality jobs for people and particularly jobs that take account of people's ability if they have any limiting condition.

I have seen the most remarkable transformation in people's lives where they have been helped into work by supported employment schemes. Initiatives like the Shirley project in the Highlands are world-leading in this area of work. People who have experienced long-term unemployment or with a learning disability, mental ill-health or physical disability if properly assessed and supported in a way to help them meet their goals, can gain a huge amount in terms of self-esteem, confidence, health and wellbeing as well as make a positive contribution to the economy. While we may want to distance ourselves from the workfare schemes that are the bottom line for the reforms being rolled out from Westminster, there is no reason we can't enhance these schemes in Scotland. Central and local government, NDPBs, voluntary sector organisations as well as the private sector can all offer a range of opportunities for people who need some support. We can do a lot more than we are doing at the moment and we need no more powers from Westminster to do it. We just need to prioritise them.

For many, no matter how well they might be supported, work will not be a possibility. But instead of complaining about the limits that are imposed by the welfare system let's look at how we can enhance their lives through targeting support and access to services on our most vulnerable groups. We can do this by raising tax or targeting existing resources, if we so choose.

There is so much that is good in the Scottish public policy landscape just now; the Early Years Collaborative, the Patient Safety Programme, health and social care integration and the wider public sector reform agenda. These and dozens of other examples show where we choose to work together we can develop innovative programmes that make a real difference to our population. But they are not easy programmes. Many of our front-line staff struggle to cope with their day-to-day workload while also contributing to the development of new initiatives and approaches. Even when they can clearly see the logic and advantage of new ways of working they often struggle to find the capacity to implement them. If we want to ensure their success we have to prioritise them.

I am hugely confident about Scotland's future. We have the opportunity within the devolved powers we have (as well as those we can negotiate) to make distinctive policy choices that suit our particular geography and population. I think we have much success to build upon and the creativity and imagination to do so successfully. And that is what makes me so frustrated about the whole independence debate.

People who should be shoulder to shoulder in creating the policies for the future are at loggerheads. A culture of blame and recrimination is being fomented. A generation of political leaders are focusing on a narrow constitutional issue rather than on big social problems of the day and we are ignoring opportunities for progress in order to pick the bones of our constitutional differences.

We must get over this and try to get back to a political normality where the key issues are paramount. There are no simple answers and the political debate is likely to be as passionate as anything we are seeing now but by focusing on the choices we can make that

will impact on the lives of Scots, we will be far more likely to sustain political engagement than by wrangling over the constitution.

A yes vote (or a very narrow no vote) will consign us to going endlessly round and round the constitutional hamster wheel. That is why I am campaigning for a decisive no in September.

We can make positive and radical choices in the future. But let's be clear: if we don't it is because we have chosen not to, not because we don't have the powers or were prevented from doing so by Westminster.

End Notes

Garry Coutts has been involved in public life for over 30 years holding positions on a number of NDPBs in both the health and social care sectors. He was also an elected councillor in both Highland and Edinburgh. He is writing in a personal capacity.