ESSAYS

'An auction of fear': the Scotland in Europe referendum, 1975

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An earlier referendum in which Scotland's place in a larger political union was at stake.

In February 2014, the President of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, tossed a grenade into what had previously been a rather tepid Scottish referendum campaign. Speaking to the BBC, he warned that an independent Scotland would have to reapply for membership of the European Union, and that securing admission would be 'extremely difficult, if not impossible'. His remarks drew a thunderous response from the Scottish National Party. The Deputy First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, called it 'a preposterous assertion', while Angus MacNeil, who shadows Nick Clegg at Westminster, accused Barroso of 'playing politics' with Scotland's internal affairs (BBC News, 2014; *Herald*, 2014).

Barroso's intervention infuriated the SNP, because it challenged the very foundations of the party's strategy for independence. Since 1988, the SNP has been committed to a policy of 'Independence in Europe'. As a full and active member of the European Union, Scotland would enjoy preferential access to continental markets and a stable political environment. Europe would act both as the guarantor of Scotland's viability and as a security against isolation, reconciling the blessings of democratic self-determination with co-operation in a larger political union (Tarditi, 2010, 14-15).

Yet the SNP was not always so enthusiastically European. In 1975, when the United Kingdom held a referendum on membership of what was then the 'European Economic Community' (EEC) or 'Common Market', the SNP campaigned vigorously for withdrawal. At a time when the Conservative Party and the right-wing press were overwhelmingly pro-European, it was the SNP that led the campaign for a Scottish 'No' to Europe. While Mrs Thatcher campaigned to keep Britain in Europe, resplendent in a woolly jumper that combined all the flags of the European member states, SNP policy documents warned that the European Community could strike 'a death blow to our very existence as a nation' (Tarditi, 2010, 11-12).

For students of the independence debate, the 1975 referendum provides a useful point of reference. This was Britain's first national referendum, and it offers the only previous occasion on which a first class constitutional issue, with implications for the UK as a whole, has been put directly to the electorate. Though this was a UK-wide vote, the campaign in Scotland had its own distinct identity. There were specifically Scottish campaign organisations – notably the pro-European vehicle 'Scotland in Europe' – with their own tactics, campaign materials and election literature. The referendum debate ranged far beyond the relationship between Britain and Europe, extending to the prospects for devolution, the survival of the union and Scotland's political and economic future. As such, it anticipated many of the concerns of the current independence debate, while showing how dramatically the context for that debate has changed.

'No taxation without representation'

Like all the major parties, the SNP approached the European question with divided counsels. In private, almost half of the party's eleven MPs favoured staying in the European Community, influenced in part by Ireland's successful Presidency of the European Council. Yet the grass roots and many of the party's most charismatic figures were strongly hostile to the Community, viewing it as a bureaucratic and undemocratic agency that would relegate Scotland to 'the province of a province'. The party settled on an uneasy compromise, which rejected membership as an adjunct of the United Kingdom, but left open the possibility that Scotland might re-apply for membership as an independent state. Acting on the principle of 'no taxation without representation', it was agreed that Scotland could only countenance membership as a fully autonomous state, with its own EEC Commissioners and independent representation on European institutions.

SNP thinking was shaped as much by tactics as by ideology. In a sign of how much has changed in recent years, the most pro-European part of the United Kingdom in the 1970s was unquestionably England. Support for European integration was significantly lower in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. As the results would be declared on a national and regional basis, this raised the prospect of a very public fracture between the component parts of the UK. A split of this kind, on an issue of such political and economic magnitude, would raise serious questions about the future of the union, particularly if a 'No' vote in Scotland was over-ruled by a 'Yes to Europe' from England. Con O'Neill, the Ulsterman who ran the 'Britain in Europe' operation, wrote privately that a positive result in Scotland was 'almost more important than anywhere else' (1). For the SNP, by contrast, the referendum offered a golden opportunity to delegitimise the union on an issue of first rate constitutional significance.

With this in mind, the SNP – like Plaid Cymru in Wales and Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland – threw itself energetically into the campaign for a Scottish 'No'. It did not, of course, fight the battle alone. There were prominent anti-Europeans in the Labour Party, the trade union movement and even the Conservative Party, while the more hard-line Presbyterian churches also campaigned against membership. In an intriguing cross-party operation, Margo MacDonald of the SNP, Jim Sillars of the Labour Party and the maverick Conservative Sir Teddy Taylor toured the West of Scotland together, trying to build support for withdrawal. Yet with the Labour government formally recommending membership, the SNP was able to establish itself as the main campaigning vehicle against Scottish membership, colonising what it took to be the centre-ground of Scottish public opinion. Figures like Winnie Ewing, Margo MacDonald and the party leader, William Wolfe, campaigned enthusiastically around the country, while local branches embarked on mass leafleting and canvassing operations. In Strathclyde alone, the local party claimed to have distributed 800,000 leaflets in the party's 'biggest campaign on any one issue' (*Scotsman* 27.5.1975, 7).

The SNP was formally neutral on the principle of membership, pending negoti-ations on Scotland's terms; but it was inevitably those most hostile to the Community who took the leading roles in the campaign. Consequently, much of the party's rhetoric implied opposition to Scottish membership on any terms. William Wolfe warned that involvement in the Community would plunge Scotland into 'a political dark age of remote control and undemocratic government' (*Scotsman* 22.5.1975, 13). Donald Stewart, who led the SNP's parliamentary group, insisted that the EEC 'represents everything our party has fought against: centralisation,

undemocratic procedures, power politics, and a fetish for abolishing cultural differences' (*Scotsman* 2.6.1975, 5). There were dire warnings about the future of 'Scotland's oil', with predictions that Brussels would seize the North Sea oil fields and use them for its own purposes. At the very least, it was feared, European competition rules would prevent Scotland from using the revenues in the way that it desired, for example as a financial arsenal for a proposed Scottish Development Agency. Winnie Ewing warned that a vote to stay in the Common Market would be tantamount to a 'death warrant', destroying Scotland's 'hopes of long-term economic prosperity' (*Scotsman* 9.5.1975, 6).

For a nationalist movement, which had come into existence to release Scotland from a larger political union, there were obvious reasons to be wary of the emerging European entity. In Scotland, as in Northern Ireland, concerns about sovereignty consequently loomed much larger than was the case south of the border. MacDonald told voters that sovereignty, or the right of Scots to determine their own destiny, was the 'main issue' of the campaign (*Scotsman* 22.5.1975, 13). The SNP president, Dr Robert McIntyre, agreed: Scots, he proclaimed, should vote to withdraw, 'not only because of economics, but because all human communities must be able to make their own decisions about their own future' (*Scotsman* 29.5.1975, 7).

'Tantamount to national suicide'

Alongside its more emotive appeals to democracy and self-determination, the SNP insisted that an oil-rich Scotland would be more prosperous outside the EEC. As a pro-European editorial in *The Scotsman* wryly observed, the SNP 'mounted this steed at the outset, saddled it with oil predictions and Norwegian comparisons, and rode it grimly all the way through' the campaign (*Scotsman* 5.6.1975, 1).

By contrast, pro-European material was gloomy even by Scottish standards. The seventies was a decade of recurring economic crises, marked by power cuts, anxiety over food supplies and escalating problems with the currency. In this context, many thought the shelter of the European Community the only alternative to political and economic collapse. Nicholas Fairbairn, the Conservative MP for Kinross and West Perthshire, warned that a 'No' vote would send Britain's international creditors into a tailspin; the result would be 'the closing of schools and hospitals and the stopping of roads, railways and mines' (*Scotsman* 4.6.1975, 8). Speaking at Edinburgh University, Ted Heath warned of rationing and food shortages if Britain turned its back on the Community (*Scottish Daily News* 23.5.1975, 5). The *Glasgow Herald* took

up the grisly theme, arguing that withdrawal from the Common Market 'would be tantamount to national suicide' (*Glasgow Herald* 24.1.1975, 6).

That line drew strong support from Scottish business. Though the Scottish economy was less reliant on Europe than the English, access to the Common Market was a significant draw for American and Japanese investment. Of 1,600 companies polled by the Scottish Council for Development and Industry, almost three quarters thought withdrawal either 'disadvantageous' or 'very disadvantageous'. Less than 6 per cent favoured withdrawal (*Scotsman* 14.5.1975, 10). Some of Scotland's most prominent employers campaigned openly for British membership. The chairman of Grampian Holdings urged a 'Yes' vote at the annual shareholders' meeting, while the Association of Jute Spinners and Manufacturers claimed that 1,000 jobs were at risk from an exit. The Scottish headquarters of IBM posted pro-European material on employee noticeboards, while many other firms leafleted their customers and employees. As in 2014, the SNP tended to dismiss hostile business interventions as 'blackmail', the work of a 'British propaganda machine' in thrall to 'the discredited London establishment' (*Scotsman* 23.5.1975, 6; 24.5.1975, 5; 27.5.1975, 7).

Pro-Europeans emphasised the political, as well as economic, risks of withdrawal. At a time when democracy itself seemed to be in crisis, there was particular concern about communist penetration. With the Soviet Union in the ascendant and the United States apparently retreating into isolationism, *The Scotsman* warned that this was 'no time to think of withdrawing from a community of democratic countries' (*Scotsman* 17.5.1975, 8). Scottish Conservatives, in particular, tended to view the Community principally as a Cold War alliance. George Younger, chairman of the Scottish Conservative Party and Shadow Secretary of State for Defence, insisted that NATO could only compete with the Soviet Union if it had 'a firm economic base'. The 'Common Market debate should be not only about jobs or the price of butter, but about Britain's strength and security in an unsettled world' (*Scotsman* 30.5.1975, 7).

Pro-Europeans did make some attempt at a more positive case. This focused chiefly on the opportunities for investment and regional aid, a position principally associated with George Thompson. Formerly a Labour MP for Dundee, Thompson had left Parliament to become one of Britain's first European Commissioners, with particular responsibility for regional policy. Throughout the campaign, he stressed both the opportunities for European funding and Scotland's potential as an *entrepot* between Europe and the Atlantic (Thompson, 1975). More fancifully, the newly-elec-

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ted Conservative MP for Edinburgh Pentlands, Malcolm Rifkind, suggested that the European Court might relocate to Edinburgh, or that the new European Regional Fund could be administered from Scotland (*Scotsman* 2.6.1975, 9).

'An auction of fear'

Despite these optimistic flourishes, the Scottish campaign was significantly more negative than in other parts of the United Kingdom. *The Scotsman* likened the debate to 'an auction of fear, a competition to make your flesh creep'. With one side envisaging economic collapse and political subversion, while the other predicted the suppression of Scottish identity and the theft of Scotland's oil, it is no surprise that the public showed little enthusiasm for either cause. Dave Troon, who wrote a light-hearted campaign diary for *The Scotsman*, was struck by the apathy and ignorance he encountered on his travels around the country. It was quite possible, he discovered, to 'cross from East to West across Scotland's ample waist or money belt, without seeing a sign or hearing a word about what we are told is the greatest issue the people of Britain have ever been called upon to resolve' (*Scotsman*, 27.5.1975, 9).

Nonetheless, the referendum produced a decisive result – and one that had seemed unlikely at the start of the year. Between the beginning of the campaign in February and the end of voting on 5 June, a 16 point Scottish lead for withdrawal was trans-formed into an almost 17 point lead for continued membership. On a turnout of 61.7 per cent – only marginally below the UK average – Scots voted by 58.4 per cent to 41.6 per cent to stay in the Common Market. Only Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles voted for withdrawal. For 'Scotland in Europe', this was a remarkable victory – and one that had been achieved under unusually difficult conditions. Not only had they started from an especially weak position in the polls; they had also received less assistance from the mainstream parties than in almost any other part of the UK (2).

In the short term, the result was a significant blow to the SNP. The referendum had come after a period of spectacular electoral success, yet it dealt the party its first significant defeat. With the exception of Northern Ireland, Scotland was widely considered to be the most euro-sceptic part of the UK, and it had been expected to vote for withdrawal. Defeat challenged the SNP's claim to articulate the authentic will of the Scottish people. Just as importantly, it also suggested that the political gulf between Scotland and England was not as wide as the SNP had believed.

In the medium term, however, the decision to stay in the EEC probably worked to the advantage of the SNP. In the decade after the referendum, it not only built fruitful relationships with other national groupings in the Community; it also grew more conscious of the opportunities for minority nationalities within the protective framework of the Common Market. Over time, the SNP began to look to the EEC as an alternative context for Scottish nationalism, providing the benefits of a larger political union without the domination of a single powerful neighbour. By the late 1980s, this had manifested itself in a refurbished case for independence, offering a new vision of Scotland playing a leading role on the European stage.

The referendum debate also drove devolution up the political agenda. Pro-Europeans were anxious to show that government need not become more distant within a continental political union, and that powers formerly exercised by the state could be devolved downwards to the localities, as well as upwards to the European Commission. Devolution was already a growing issue because of the electoral success of the SNP, but the referendum debate increased interest in states, like West Germany, which combined European membership with strong federal institutions. As George Thompson put it:

> the recognition that certain key decisions are best taken at European rather than national level flows from the same kind of thinking which sees that many decisions are better taken at levels below the national level. It is the same approach – questioning the over-concentration of decision-making at national level. (Thompson, 1974, 8)

Contrasts and comparisons

In 1975, as in 2014, Scotland's place in Europe and its future within the United Kingdom were closely related issues. Just as the strains on the union affected the SNP's European thought in 1975, so the party's independence strategy now nestles within an explicitly European framework. Much, of course, has changed in the meantime. Since 1975, the SNP has transformed itself from a predominantly anti-European party to one that refuses even to countenance life outside the EU. The idea that Scotland should reapply for membership as an independent state was once the SNP's own policy; today it is dismissed as 'preposterous'.

The two referendum campaigns bear a certain family resemblance. In both cases, those who wish to remain in a larger political union – whether the Common Market or the United Kingdom – have run predominantly negative campaigns, warning of

the economic and political consequences of separation. The future of the currency, the impact on NATO, and the danger of isolation from the wider world have been identified in both referendum debates as particular areas of concern. In 1975, as in 2014, the SNP dismissed such claims as 'bullying' or 'propaganda', while presenting the entity they proposed to leave in rather 'sinister and predatory' terms (*Scotsman* 13.5.1975, 8).

Yet the differences are more striking than the continuities – in a manner that works to the advantage of the nationalists. The 1975 campaign focused to a much greater extent on 'bread and butter' issues, such as jobs, living standards and national security. At a time when inflation was running at 25 per cent, when the currency seemed to lurch from one crisis to another, and when there were recurring anxieties about Britain's capacity to maintain its food supply, there was only a limited market for more emotive appeals to sovereignty and national identity. The key question for voters in 1975 was not whether they felt Scottish, British or even European, but whether they could keep the lights on without the security of European institutions.

In 2014, the political mood is distinctly less apocalyptic. The recession which began in 2008 is often described as the worst since the 1930s, but it has not (yet) produced the existential concerns that framed the 1975 debate. Britain has not experienced black-outs, shortages or double-digit inflation, and political anxieties focus more on the conduct of parliamentarians than on the survival of democratic government. For this reason, the financial crisis has not sparked the same concerns about the viability of Britain's political institutions or its ability to keep the lights on. This has had an important influence on public debate – whether on Scotland's place in the United Kingdom or on British membership of the European Union. At a time when energy supplies, security and the viability of the state are largely taken for granted, emotive appeals to 'Scottishness', 'democracy' and 'sovereignty' can gain considerably more purchase. Apocalyptic warnings about energy shortages, trade wars or currency crises resonate less powerfully with an electorate that takes the functionality of the state as a given.

In 1975, the SNP's campaign to withdraw Scotland from a larger political union suffered a heavy defeat, despite leading in the polls for much of the campaign. Nearly forty years later, the starting positions are reversed; in 2014, it is the supporters of a larger union who began with a healthy poll lead, which the SNP has sought to erode. Whether Scotland will again defy the polls remains to be seen; but if it votes for independence, it will do so on the promise of a secure future within the

European single market. Ironically, an SNP victory in 2014 would owe a considerable debt to its failure in the referendum of 1975.

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Notes

1. Con O'Neil to Donald Hardie, Britain in Europe Papers, Parliamentary Archive, BIE 1/79, 3 June 1975.
2. Donald Hardie, who ran the 'Scotland in Europe' campaign, complained that only 37 of the 71 Scottish Conservative Associations actively engaged in the referendum, a poor return from what was then the most pro-European of the main parties. Donald Hardie to Con O'Neill, Britain in Europe Papers, Parliamentary Archive, BIE 1/79, 5 June 1975.