

Second Scottish referendum: is independence now inevitable?

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Following Nicola Sturgeon's announcement that she will seek authority for a Scottish referendum, [Paul Cairney](#) offers an overview of how the story may develop. With Brexit having drastically changed the independence argument, he explains how this new context could be used to support both those for and against leaving the UK.



We don't know much about the second referendum on Scottish independence, but we can be guided by three basic insights: first, most people make up their mind fairly quickly and [may not be swayed too much by the campaign](#), but there are enough undecided voters to tip the result:

Second, the campaign will come down to who can tell the best story (to stir the emotions, perhaps with a convincing hero and moral) rather than simply [command the facts](#). Third, Brexit has changed the independence story dramatically, but it could support either Yes/ No campaign.

The rest is mostly gut-driven speculation: I think Yes – those for independence – will win, partly because it has a new way to present its case, and a better campaigner to do so, while (as ridiculous as this sounds) No – those against independence – may look like it is banging on about the same old arguments, and it's less clear who will do it.

Let's start with an updated summary of why Brexit is good for Yes

1. It reinforces a well-established argument for constitutional change: we voted for X but got Y because we are outnumbered by voters in England. Voting Remain but getting Leave is the [latest version](#) of voting Labour or SNP in Scotland but getting a Conservative UK government.
2. It reinforces the same argument about the effect of that 'democratic deficit': 'London'/'Westminster' is forcing us to accept policies we did not choose. Voting Leave is the latest version of the 'bedroom tax' (and, for older readers, the 'poll tax').
3. It helps challenge the idea that the Scottish independence aim is nationalist and parochial. Suddenly, independence is the cosmopolitan choice if we are rejecting a 'Little England' mentality.
4. Some people who voted to stay in the UK and EU will [prefer the EU to the UK](#) (and think an independence vote is the best way to achieve it), or perhaps feel let down by the claim that a No vote in 2014 was to stay in the UK and EU.

Historically, the main response to 1 & 2 came from the Conservative Party, offering concessions in areas such as [spending](#), levels of representation in Westminster, and in Scotland's status in [UK-devolved relations](#). Recently, UKIP has been more critical of Scotland's privileged position in the UK, and even the Conservative party [qualifies its support of Scotland's place in the Union](#).

Labour's more recent response has been more interesting, and not what I expected. I figured Scottish Labour would encourage the equivalent of a free vote of its members. Instead, it has [rejected indyref2](#) in favour of a 'federal' solution and two anti-referendum strategies: to describe indyref2 as yet another divisive and destabilising event like Brexit and the election of Trump; and to challenge the idea that Scottish independence is the cosmopolitan choice. [Sadiq Khan seemed to](#) link Scottish nationalism strongly with the divisiveness of Trump and Leave campaigns, prompting some debate about how far he went to equate it with [bigotry and racism](#).

This strategy was [generally received badly](#) among people already committed to Yes. It's too early to gauge its

durability or long-term effect on the voters thinking about switching, but we already know that the SNP campaigned in indyref1 with a message – for example, ‘[to make life better for the people who live here](#)’ – that contrasts heavily with the anti-immigrant rhetoric in some parts of the Leave campaign. Indeed, I’d expect it to reinforce a pro-immigration (or, rather, a very *pro-EU citizen*) message to provide a deliberate contrast to parts of the Brexit campaign, making it relatively difficult for Labour to maintain an if-you-vote-Yes-you-share-the-same-aim-as-bigots argument (which didn’t work well during the Brexit debate anyway).

Let’s continue with an updated summary of why Brexit is good for No

1. The No campaign was based on the economic harms of independence, and key symbols (like oil price volatility) have reinforced the message.
2. We still don’t know what currency an independent Scotland would use.
3. The Yes vote meant all things to all people, with no sense of what would be realistic.
4. Brexit shows you that a transition to independence would be far tougher than advertised.

Point 4 is still unfolding. We’ve already seen that the £350m-for-the-NHS argument was misleading, we have witnessed a reduction in the value of the pound, and have seen some hard talking from likely EU negotiators that might be emulated in Scotland-UK discussions ([UK hard-talking was a key theme of indyref1](#)). Yet, the effects of such developments are still open to debate (see for example [the sterling issue](#)).

More importantly, it’s hard to know how to relate these events to Scotland: on the one hand, Yes needs a disastrous Brexit to show that it is powerless to ward off disaster. Ideally, it would wait long enough to argue that (a) Brexit is starting to ‘bite’, (b) the UK Government is stifling Scotland in its negotiations of future devolved powers, but not so long that (c) it disrupts [the \(not guaranteed\) continuation of its EU membership](#). This time [may not arrive](#), and the date is not in the SNP’s gift. On the other, No needs a partly-disastrous Brexit to show that separation is painful.

Who will have the best story?

If recent events have taught us anything, it’s that people are driven strongly by emotion, and might put ‘[feelings over facts](#)’. I still think that the result itself will come down to [who tells the Yes/No stories and how well they do it](#), and that Yes has a far better hero (Nicola Sturgeon)/villain (Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson, Theresa May?) story now than in 2014. At the same time, No has the same old boring story of economic disaster and can no longer rely on those leaflets with [Salmond’s face on a pound coin](#). Who will become the face of No (I reckon it will be Davidson), and how can they repackage the same arguments (who knows)?

Note: a version of this article was [originally published](#) on Paul’s personal blog and is reposted here with thanks. It is a shortened version of [previous posts](#), designed for a talk at the Dundee Arts Café on 14 March.

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