

It remains open whether the September 2014 referendum will prove 'historic' in any meaningful way for most Scots

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*The referendum on Scottish independence is due to be held in September, however there is still speculation about the way the yes and no campaigns will evolve in the final months. In this article, **James Mitchell** argues that the extent to which the debate widens beyond the narrow terms it currently inhabits will affect levels of public engagement and ultimately turnout.*



September 18 2014 will be an 'historic date' for Scotland. On that, if little else, there is a consensus. Since May 2011 when the SNP won an overall majority in Holyrood, much political debate has been conducted with an eye on the referendum. But this should not be exaggerated. The referendum debate was deemed alien and unrelated to everyday concerns of key public servants charged with delivering public services in various parts of Scotland. Managing shrinking budgets and addressing Scotland's deep rooted social and economic problems make much media commentary and, sad to admit, academic preoccupations seem alien to those at the front line delivering public services. It is a fair assumption that this applies to the wider public. Politicians, Parliament, the press and media have been stuck in debates that have repetitively gone over the same ground on the currency, EU membership and the state of Scotland's fiscal position post-independence. Broadly the same claims and counter-claims heard over the last twenty years excite only partisans and those new to the debate.

The coming year will see public policy and politics debated through a referendum lens to an even greater degree. The extent to which the debate widens beyond the narrow terms evident in most media coverage will affect levels of public engagement and ultimately turnout. If this is a debate about which flag flies over public buildings or whether Scotland has automatic membership of the EU in the event of a YES vote, then we can anticipate a (quite rational) low turnout. The more it becomes a debate about the different kinds of society and economy, the higher the likely turnout. The latter is not to be confused with whether individual Scots are '£500 better or worse off' of survey-research-designed-agenda-setting. Nor should it be confused with calls for 'Scandinavian social democracy' that are limited to slogans.



Credit: Dave McLear

A distinguishing feature of Scottish politics in the twentieth century was the focus on winning resources/money from central government. The 'Scottish lobby', for lack of a better term, was supremely successful but created a debilitating grievance culture. The referendum debate, as much as the result itself, has the potential to take this to a new level or to shift the focus onto a more mature debate. But don't hold your breath. It remains open whether September 2014 will prove 'historic' in any meaningful way for most Scots.

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