

More urgently than a process of devolution, the UK needs to address the social and economic concerns articulated in Scotland

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*Following the 'No' vote in Scotland's independence referendum, UK politicians have been urgently debating further devolution. **Jonathan White** argues that we need to recognise the central motivations of the pro-independence campaign in Scotland, which was largely of a political nature. It is not clear that these intensely political concerns can be addressed by devolutionary means, he writes.*



Following the Scottish vote against independence, a flotilla of constitutional proposals has already set sail from London. Not only Scotland but England, Wales and Northern Ireland, plus assorted regions here and there, look set to be drawn into a series of skirmishes over the devolution of power: who votes where, who decides what. The engagements could last for [some years](#).

To those who see the surge in support for Scottish independence as expressing a desire for local administration, the response will seem natural enough. Large numbers of Scots apparently wanted decisions taken closer to home, in Edinburgh rather than Westminster. No one can govern Scotland better than the Scottish people themselves – Alex Salmond [said it](#) himself.

But what if the independence movement was inspired by dissent of a political kind? It has been widely noted that the surge in support for the 'Yes' campaign corresponded to its emergence as an [anti-austerity movement](#). Preserving the remnants of a welfare state against the spending cuts endorsed by all the major UK parties was a goal that mobilised widely. Securing the principle of public healthcare and education, making a stand against ever-increasing social inequality, and diverting public resources from military expenditure to welfare support, were [central motivations](#) for many of those campaigning and voting for independence.

That the movement took regionalist form hardly means it can be reduced to regionalist feeling. The SNP, to be sure, is a declaredly nationalist party – separation from the UK it regards as an end in itself. But the jump in support for its campaign arguably depended on a political rather than regionalist message. It flowed from a generalised suspicion that a certain image of the good society, broadly based on the welfare state, was no longer attainable across the UK as a whole. Under such conditions, a vote for independence naturally comes to seem the best bet for shielding certain values from extinction and for notching up a victory against a despised political programme. When the parties of Westminster are widely thought to be alike, dissent takes the form of opposing Westminster itself.

It is not clear that these intensely political concerns can be addressed by devolutionary means. Clearly the political and constitutional are entwined – more local powers can offer relief when a centralised state is wedded to certain policies, and a venue in which to experiment with alternatives. Moreover, as we have seen, [constitutional debates](#) can usefully give vent to political concerns and can be an impressive stimulus to popular engagement, initiating habits of participation that future movements can tap. But this falls short of an argument for devolution as an outcome.

Changing the territorial distribution of powers can easily result in changing the identity of those administering the policies without changing the policies themselves. Worse, a process of redistributing authority in this way risks skewing the meaning of the independence movement, fixing it as a dispute over 'who decides' rather than a movement for a different kind of society. It cements the issue as an identity question, and directs UK public debate to a stream of [identity questions](#) that threaten to obscure the political grievances that form a significant motivation for separatist feeling.

More urgently than a process of devolution, the UK needs a powerful opposition able to channel the social and economic concerns articulated in Scotland. The vitality of political parties, and of the movements they draw on, matters more than the location of the forums they sit in.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit:

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