

Political, constitutional journalism is now very interesting (honestly)

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One way to report devolution (Steve Bell, The Guardian)

I can't think of a more interesting period for political, constitutional journalism in the UK than right now. Four issues make this a time of major, fundamental debate.* And the same four stories are a huge challenge to the ability of political journalism to report them well.

For the moment put aside all the stuff I usually talk about, like social media, networked journalism, and digital literacy and look at this:

1. A coalition government in Westminster
2. A nationalist government in Scotland with an independence poll just a couple of years away
3. An opposition with a new leader and a leadership problem that is trying to redefine itself while acting as a government in waiting

4. An economic crisis that is undermining all political assumptions, including Britain's position in a continental alliance that is cracking apart

Tell me when was the last time there was this much material for political journalism?

For today, let's take the smallest country mentioned above: Scotland.

It's an odd one. (No, the issue, not the country). Apart from the SNP the Tories have the most to gain from an independent Scotland as it would deny Labour a winning proportion of their MPs. Yet they are fighting for the Union.

Labour are a party of democracy yet find themselves arguing against more power for the people who live 'north of the border'. I agree with [Anthony Painter](#) that a social democratic party like Labour should actually be backing the "Devo Max" option.

But as [Steve Richards](#) has pointed out, referenda are never about the question on the ballot paper, which is why they are such crude tools. This one could turn into quite a different debate by the time 2014 comes around – just a year away from the next UK General Election.

I suspect it will also be a drain on the energies of all politicians. Just when Ed Miliband needs his Scottish troops they will be distracted by devolution. Just when David Cameron is trying to define our position regarding Europe, he is having to attend to what he sees as the disaster of ending the Union. This kind of sapping battle has a real impact on practical politics.

As it happens I suspect that Salmond should and will get his way with a third option on the ballot in some form. I can't understand why it has to be a straight 'yes' or 'no'. Even if the unlikely happened and there was a vote for independence, I suspect it would be Independence-lite with money, monarchy, defence and various other socio-economic aspects of life remaining closely linked to the Westminster government.

It's certainly going to make politics even more complex and momentous over the next few years. All this and good old-fashioned grass-roots stories like HS2 too!

* As Paul Evans' comment below reminds me – I haven't even included Lords Reform – which is supposed to be Nick Clegg's Big Issue – or voting reform, though I think we can assume that is now dead.

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