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"A nation must think before it acts." - Robert Strausz-Hupé

SEPTEMBER 2014

THE LEGACY OF THE SCOTTISH REFERENDUM

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The Scottish referendum on 18 September 2014 was of crucial significance for Scotland, the United Kingdom, and, indeed, the world. The last comes first because, however lesser a power than in the past, the UK is still a major strategic force, not least as an important military power and a state willing and able to use that power. Indeed, the most striking aspect of the referendum was the undisguised wish on the part of anti-Western states for the breakup of the UK. Putin's Russia saw an opportunity for a major weakening of NATO – both in military terms and with reference to broader political cohesion. The naval and air bases in Scotland are of importance not just to the UK but also to NATO, notably the USA. They provide a crucial opportunity for the forward deployment of power into and beyond the North-East Atlantic, a deployment aimed against the Soviet Union during the Cold War and directed against Russia thereafter. Moreover, this military capability provides a crucial backup for NATO's northern flank, specifically Norway. It would also have been difficult to see Britain continuing as a nuclear power had the submarine base on Holy Loch been dismantled as the Scottish National Party (SNP) intended.

The impact of NATO coherence would have been highly significant, and not least at a time of concern about how best to respond to Russian expansionism and aggression. An SNP victory would have been regarded, both in Russia and in NATO, as a success for neutralism or, at the very least, a vote against any meaningful resistance to Russia. Such a vote would have encouraged neutralism elsewhere, a neutralism that would have weakened NATO and, thus, helped lead America towards neutralism.

There is also a wish on the part of China for the collapse of the UK. Following on from China's interest in Iceland has come a sense of opportunity in an independent Scotland. This was linked to the greater geopolitical significance of the Arctic, and, therefore, the approaches to the Arctic, as the ice melted. Partly due to this Chinese interest, there was great concern on the part of other powers wary of China. Indeed, I followed part of the last stage of the campaign in Japan, where government, strategic and military commentators were all greatly concerned about the breakup of the UK and its impact across the world.

At the level of the European Union (EU), the campaign underlined the risk of the disintegration of other nation states, notably Spain and Italy. The prospect for Catalan independence has receded, as, even more, has separatism within Scotland. With this, the idea of the EU as a state of the regions has become less plausible, although that will not prevent support for that concept at the level of the EU.

The size of the Yes vote was in part a product of disillusionment with existing nation states. Such a product was not simply a matter of (relative) economic failure, recession and austerity, although all played a role. There was also the

failure of the existing system, a failure that spoke to broader currents. Existing national narratives of achievement, however flawed and partial, could not capture the experience and commitment of many who were scarcely political radicals.

In the case of Scotland, there was also a reconceptualization of nationalism. From the perspective of the SNP, Scotland had been regionalized from the 1940s as Great Britain and the United Kingdom ceased to be imperial and multinational and, instead, became an English-dominated Little Britain. In the event, the referendum indicated that this reconceptualization was limited. While 1.6 million voted for independence, the Yes campaign failed to pass 45 percent of the voting figure. The high turnout – 84 percent and up to 91 percent in some areas – was unprecedented, since 1951, for a UK election at this scale. This result and turnout suggested a clear verdict, and one that is unlikely to be reviewed again for a generation.

At the same time, the campaign said a lot that was disappointing about the state of Scottish and UK politics. The SNP response to failure, as seen not least in the concession speech the morning after the vote by Alex Salmond, the Scottish First Minister, was a "we wuz robbed" approach. Salmond's campaign argument that the election was one of hope versus fear was repeatedly reiterated. Salmond argued that the Yes campaign was a "mass movement of people," one thwarted by a scare and fear of enormous proportions. The latter reflected the classic response by populist politicians when confronted by an unwilling electorate: the idea of false consciousness. In the case of the SNP, this was blamed not on the electors but on the "Westminster establishment," the "bankers', big business', and the usual list of culprits."

This was an approach that failed to give enough credit to the Scottish electorate which had a great opportunity for listening to arguments during a long debate. The mechanics of the election reflected this. The 'Yes' campaign enjoyed a significant August surge, one that led to much speculation about the independence cause breaking through. In the event, this speculation almost certainly continually underestimated the persistent strength of the 'No' side. "The silent have spoken" declared Alistair Darling, the "Better Together" leader, the morning after the vote. Darling presented the vote as one for "unity over division" and "positive change over needless separation," one that reaffirmed "our place within the Union." All of these points were well-founded, but there was also a tendency to underplay the political risks involved in the entire episode. Had the 'Yes' campaign won, then many commentators would have seen the result as a product of poor decisions by both Blair and Cameron. In the first case, the establishment of a Scottish Parliament in 1999 was a key product of Blair's determination to "repackage" national identity with sound bites such as "New Britain" and "A Young Country." Longstanding constitutional, political, and governmental practices were altered. The Scottish Parliament gained tax-varying powers and a capacity for a substantial legislative programme on domestic affairs. Considerable differences between Scotland and England swiftly opened up, notably as a result of the different cost structures put in place under legislation, notably the 2001 Graduate Endowment and Student Support Act and the 2001 Regulation of Care Act. In large part, there was a matter of political calculation by Blair, with the determination to use a Scottish Parliament in order to prevent an independence that would have denied Labour in Westminster the support of Scottish MPs. It was typical of Blair that self- and partisan-interest were sold with rhetoric.

That set up a problematic situation that Cameron sought to thwart by lancing the drive for independence by holding a referendum, which was the policy of the SNP government elected in Edinburgh in 2011. At the time, this seemed an adroit move to Unionists, but the risks were seriously underplayed. This was the case not only with Scotland, but also with the process of constitutional change that the vote has set in play. The promise, by Cameron and other national party leaders, that a vote for staying together would lead to the devolution of more power to Scotland, a possibly unnecessary promise, left the constitution unclear and threw the "English Question" into particular prominence, namely the issue of how far England, and indeed Wales and Northern Ireland, should have rights comparable to those of Scotland. This issue creates problems of further instability; at the same time that the possibility of constitutional renewal also opens up new opportunities. Cameron called for "a balanced settlement."

The roles of Blair and Cameron are also instructive. They indicate the significance of individuals and particular conjunctures and contingencies. The latter extended to particular results, with 'Yes' majorities in a few important cities and areas, notably the largest city, Glasgow, as well as Dundee, with 'No' majorities in many more, notably Edinburgh, Aberdeen and key areas such as Fife. As a result, Cameron was able to declare that 'our country of four nations' had been kept together.

The role of individuals underlines the extent to which counterfactuals are also significant. That is not the approach taken by many historians. They tend to prefer great causes, causes they generally champion, but it is necessary to understand the role of specificities and particularities. For example, the asymmetrical nature of the "four nations" is crucial, with England having eighty-six per cent of the UK population. Thus, a separate English Parliament, of "English votes for English laws" as Cameron declared on 19 September, would be disproportionately significant in the UK. It might well be the case that a Labour-dominated UK government found itself opposed by a Conservative-dominated English Parliament. This scarcely offers an easy outcome. Cameron faces much anger from Conservative backbench MPs, and this is focusing on more rights for England. Pressure from the populism of UKIP is particularly significant. UKIP has been able to take up the case of England. This raises serious problems for the UK.

Thus, the idea that the referendum vote in Scotland has solved UK political problems, notably its asymmetric Union, is misfounded. There is much uncertainty ahead, even though it is less to the fore than it was when voting started on 18 September.