‘TO SEE OURSELS AS ITHERS SEE US’: REFLECTIONS ON SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE FROM THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

The United States media have given rather little attention to the question of the Scottish referendum despite important economic, political and military links between the US and the UK/Scotland. For some in the US a ‘no’ vote would be greeted with relief given these ties; for others, a ‘yes’ vote would be acclaimed as an underdog escaping England’s imperium, a narrative clearly echoing America’s own founding story. This article explores commentary in the US press and media as well as reporting evidence from on-going interviews with the Scottish diaspora in the US. It concludes that there is as complex a picture of the 2014 referendum in the United States as there is in Scotland.

Keywords: Scottish referendum; Scottish-Americans; diaspora; Scottish identity; politics.

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As British citizens, born in Scotland but currently living and working in the United States, we are both eligible to vote in UK and EU elections and UK-wide referenda (such as the 2011 Alternative Vote referendum), but neither of us will be enfranchised on the 18 September 2014 in a vote that will determine our nationality. However, like many other first generation Scottish expats in the USA we are following the debate closely as it is covered on both sides of the Atlantic, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that views are as divided among our Scottish contemporaries over here as they are back home. In following the debate stateside it is striking how little commentary there has been in American press and popular discussion, particularly in view of the political and cultural relationships between the United States and the United Kingdom. Drawing on a review of opinion pieces in the press and the findings of our own research interviewing members of the Scottish diaspora in the USA, we offer some reflections on the independence debate from an American perspective.

Economically, the USA is currently Scotland’s second biggest source of investment and Scotland’s biggest export market outside the rest of the UK. As part of the United Kingdom, the Scottish regiments of the British Army, together with naval and air force bases located in Scotland, form an active and, in some respects, vital contribution to Britain’s defence capability and in turn to that of the United Kingdom as a dependable ally of the United States. Softer cultural ties between America and Scotland are important too. In the United States, Scottish heritage is regularly celebrated at highland games, St. Andrew’s Societies, Burns Clubs, and on national Tartan Day observed annually on 6 April (see Hague, 2002a, 2002b; Sim, 2011). While there is little commentary or consideration of the 2014 referendum debate in the US, the outcome will have implications for these economic, geopolitical and cultural relations. For some a ‘no’ vote will be welcomed with relief as it will confirm the status quo of America’s principal ally at a time of global uncertainty. For others a ‘yes’ vote will be greeted with acclaim as it would conclude a historical narrative, popular in the USA, that sees Scotland, the underdog, usurping the English imperium; a narrative that clearly mirrors America’s own founding story.

To date the reaction to the referendum and debate about independence in the US media has been somewhat muted. Apart from occasional reporting on the referendum issue as a news story, there has been little commentary by American journalists, and what commentary there has been is largely contributed by British authors. The elder statesman of Scottish political commentary, Neal Ascherson, was one of the first to present a perspective on the referendum in the *New York Times*. His February 2012 op-ed column
reviewed the post-1707 Scottish political context and suggested that most Scots would prefer “‘devo-max’... leaving only foreign affairs and defense to the United Kingdom’. However, as this is not an option in the referendum, Ascherson concluded that, ‘Scots are a canny, wary people... [and] Scottish independence could turn out to be the best guarantee of a friendlier relationship between England and the ancient, obstinate little nation on its northern border’.

Two months later, and perhaps timed to coincide with the Scottish-American celebrations of Tartan Day, a column by English journalist John F. Burns, the New York Times London bureau chief, argued that Alex Salmond’s strategy for the referendum was to benefit from a sentimental “Bannockburn” bounce in 2014. This provoked a response in the New York Times from SNP Euro MP Daniel Wylie. Reflecting the SNP’s ‘civic nationalism’, Wylie suggested that Burns ‘ascribes an unwarranted significance to irrelevant 700-year-old battles and does not properly reflect the ethos of Scottish nationalism and what is at stake in the 2014 referendum on independence’. British journalist Jonathan Freedland (2014) similarly dismissed the importance of Bannockburn sentimentalism in the New York Review of Books, offering a wide-ranging discussion of the Scottish Government’s (2013) referendum publication Scotland’s Future. Rightly suggesting that the shadow cast by Margaret Thatcher’s attacks on the welfare state and trade unionism in the 1980s ‘antagonized’ Scotland’s working class and ‘grated on middle-class Scots too’, Freedland (2014: 48, 49) explains the political nuances of the referendum debate and concludes that ‘What has begun in Scotland is a rebellion against the highly centralized Westminster state’. Another Scot who has contributed to the US media through a New York Times op-ed is crime writer Denise Mina (2013). Asking, ‘Does Scotland want independence?’ Mina outlined the divisions in Scotland between those for and against independence, and lamented the lack of serious discussion within Scotland of the economic and political realities of voting ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

Amidst these pieces, the New York Times ran a March 2013 editorial which praised the phrasing of the referendum question and agreement on financing of the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ campaigns, the latter point perhaps being raised as a contrast to the often opaque sources of money that fund the US political process. The newspaper concluded by ominously imparting that ‘Looking at the financial woes of small, independent European states like Cyprus and Iceland, Scottish voters may want to think twice about going it alone’.

The concerns raised by these articles will be familiar to a Scottish readership and, at the time of writing, politicians on either side of the argument appear to have drawn the lines of the debate around the twin questions of an
independent Scotland’s continued use of Sterling and its membership of the European Union. While these economic and political issues are now subject of serious discussion, a secondary theme in the current debate is Scotland’s continued membership of NATO and the future of HM Naval Base Faslane as the home for Britain’s Trident nuclear arsenal. As former NATO Secretary General and Labour MP George Robertson (2014) argued in the Chicago Tribune and Washington Post, a vote for independence would mean that ‘the United States’ oldest and closest ally – will be on the road to disintegration’, warning that such an outcome would mean that the ‘global balance would be substantially upset’ as the West’s ‘second-biggest defense power, split[... up’]. Secession would, for Robertson, lead to a domino effect with Scottish independence triggering similar outcomes in Spain and Belgium, leading to a ‘re-Balkanization of Europe’ in which there would be ‘more strife and dissension’. ‘[T]his is no romantic “Braveheart” moment’, Robertson continued, ‘The separatists are deadly serious, well-organized and well-funded [and] Britain’s friends around the world need to pay attention. A dangerous historic event might soon be upon us – with few people outside the UK even noticing’.

Further to the political left than Robertson’s Labour roots, is one of the few articles by an American commentator. Activist and poet Pete Dolack, writing on the California-based Counterpunch political website, argued that whatever the outcome of the referendum, ‘Independence for a country that is a dependent capitalist entity is illusory’. He argued that ‘the question of Scottish independence is strictly a matter for the Scottish people... But there is formal independence, and there is actual independence in a globalized world dominated by markets that tilt heavily in favor of industrialists and financiers’. Rather than an escape from English colonialism, as Scottish independence is often understood in the United States, Dolack echoed the prevailing debate in Scotland but maintained that an independent Scotland would be beholden to the restrictive economic politics of the EU and Bank of England, the pressures of global financial markets, and the military decisions of NATO, should current proposals that an independent Scotland remain in these international organizations persevere.

While the practicalities of independence might seem rather arcane to an American audience, Alex Salmond has been assiduous in courting popular and more informed opinion here in the USA. Described as ‘Britain’s savviest politician’ in a Los Angeles Times interview (Chu, 2012), Salmond gave a keynote speech in the USA to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in September 2012. Outlining a vision of a thriving independent Scotland that would be an active member of the international community, participating
on the international stage as ‘an equal partner’, Salmond said, ‘Of course we will remain close friends of nations, such as the USA, with which we share such long-lasting ties of trade, family and friendship. The US will remain our biggest trading partner, biggest foreign investor and biggest tourism market outside of the current United Kingdom’.

Salmond’s Chicago speech coincided with the his attendance at the Ryder Cup, and other visits by the First Minister to the USA have included appearances at Scotland Week in New York, the premiere of the Disney film Brave, and appearances on the Late Late Show hosted by Scottish comedian, and now US citizen, Craig Ferguson. In one Late Late Show interview, filmed at Arbroath Abbey and broadcast in May 2012, Salmond repeated the erroneous argument that the 1776 US Declaration of Independence was modelled on the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath (see Hague, 2002a), before proceeding to explain that an independent Scotland would have the ‘firmest and strongest relationship’ with the United States.

It is difficult to understand the extent to which coverage of the referendum in the US media actually represents popular opinion on ‘Main Street, USA’ or even if they are impacting on the consciousness of those who take a pride in their Scottish ancestry. Yet, it is perhaps in the nature of debates about identity that there are those who take extreme views, both here in the United States and Scotland. Although expressing opinions that would be highly distasteful to the great majority of Americans, whether of Scottish descent or not, neo-Confederate activists, who espouse white supremacist rhetoric also contend that the 19th Century Confederate States of America comprised an ‘Anglo-Celtic’ nation which should once again attempt to secede from the United States (Hague and Sebesta, 2008). Some in these groups are actively engaged in following the Scottish referendum. Indeed, one blogger, The Catholic Knight, in a posting aimed at ‘Dixie Catholics’, describes ‘our common Celtic culture, which we inherited primarily from the Scots and Irish who settled the South’, and outlines support for Scottish independence as a step towards a global transformation:

[In order for a future Catholic Dixie to become a powerful influence on North America, Western Civilisation and all of Christendom, she must be set free. By that I mean set free religiously, culturally, economically and politically... To begin this process I want to suggest to my fellow Dixie Catholics that we start offshore, across the Atlantic Ocean, in one of the lands that gave birth to our homeland of Dixie. I’m talking about Scotland. In September of 2014, the Scottish people will vote on a referendum, which if passed, will give them peaceful...]

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secession from Great Britain and independence! We must support them on this, and encourage them to be brave and vote in favour of independence. A free and independent Scotland will not only help the Scots determine their own destiny among nations, but it will also pave the way for a free and independent Dixie. ‘If the Scots can do it, then so can the Dixians,’ they will say. The peaceful secession of Scotland from Britain will set an international precedence [sic] that will put tremendous pressure on Washington DC when the time comes for a second, and peaceful, chance at Dixie independence.

There is little if no trace of such extremism among the mainstream opinion of Americans of Scottish heritage (Mackie, 2014). Echoing Sim’s (2011) findings in Colorado and New York, when we have spoken with Scottish Americans about current political events in Scotland, few report any detailed knowledge of the independence debate or forthcoming referendum. Opinions that are given are divided between those who consider Scotland too small a country to succeed as an independent nation, and those who believe that it is Scotland’s destiny to be independent. From our conversations and interviews with Americans with ancestral connections to Scotland since the mid-1990s (e.g. Hague, 2002b; Mackie, 2014), it is clear that many would support the notion of Scottish independence and in doing so recognize parallels to the story of the foundation of America. For example, one Midwesterner interviewed at the Kansas City Highland Games in May 2013 saw the Scottish debate on independence as a ‘freedom issue’, and drew a parallel with the American Revolution: ‘I enjoy American revolutionary war history... [It is] neat to see the parallels between us declaring our independence from England and them [the Scots] trying to do the same’. Indeed, for many Americans of Scottish ancestry, Scotland’s history is viewed as one of struggle against English domination and dispossession. The most popular periods in Scottish history amongst Scottish Americans are the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Wars of Independence, including the Battle of Bannockburn (Braveheart remains popular nearly 20 years following its release), and the 1745–6 Jacobite Rebellion that culminated in the Battle of Culloden. Importantly, the Jacobite Rebellion is often viewed by Americans with Scottish ancestry as a Scottish effort to gain independence from Britain, with Bonnie Prince Charlie being championed, wrongly, as a freedom fighter against the British (rather than the son of a disposed autocratic monarch who sought to place his father on the British throne). Of course, any connection between the Jacobites and American Patriots is clearly erroneous as these groups should generally be viewed at the opposite ends of eighteenth-century political thought: the former largely
reflecting ‘Tory’ principles and the latter generally grounded in progressive Whig philosophy. When challenged on this partial view of history, another interviewee at the Kansas City games asserted that he was ‘more Scottish than the Scots’ and explained that, ‘Lots of American Scots feel that we are more Scots than the Scots over there, because we don’t have 300 years of English controlled schooling. . . . we are what the Scots would have been like if the English had not controlled the schooling’. In contrast, a regular American visitor to Scotland interviewed at the Stone Mountain Highland Games in October 2012, was following the independence debate through the Scottish news and journal articles. An active member of the Sons of the American Revolution, he lacked any sentimentality as he described being ‘Real interested in the outcome of the vote on independence’ but considered that ‘Scotland [is] not prepared to become fully independent as it doesn’t have the industrial base to support it . . . I hope it doesn’t fall flat on its face’.

Our interviews with Americans of Scottish descent lead us to suggest that many of those with whom we have spoken would find the social democratic policies of the Scottish National Party and, to a lesser extent, the Labour Party, as antithetical to what a free and independent nation should pursue. Rather, many Americans with Scottish ancestry frequently explain that it was liberal economics and the pursuit of individual freedom that drew Scots to America in the first place, and that perceived characteristics of ‘bravery’, ‘stubbornness’, ‘patriotism’, ‘hard work’, ‘independence’, and ‘thrift’, inherent in the Scots allowed them to thrive in their adopted country. Indeed, it is precisely these characteristics that are viewed as building America and which have been handed down to the current generation of Americans (Mackie, 2014).

In the United States, therefore, there is as complex a picture of the 2014 referendum as in Scotland. Online, far right neo-Confederate groups support independence while leftist bloggers question its ability to engender genuine change. In print, UK-based commentators air their opinions in major newspapers, whereas US journalists have little to say. Amongst Scottish-Americans, first-generation immigrants are divided, much like their Scotland-residing counterparts, but most are unable to vote in the referendum. For those with more distant ancestral connections to Scotland, if the referendum is at all being considered, it is the American historical narrative of freedom from colonial rule and rejection of governance from a distance that shapes perceptions of the Scottish independence issue, rather than current politics. Whatever the result of the 2014 referendum, the outcome is likely to puzzle or upset perceived notions of Scotland and the Scots, either as a dependable ally and safe haven for investment or as a nation that rejected a long-awaited opportunity to seize the prize of independence.
References


