‘THE UK’S STRENGTH IS THAT EVERYBODY’S IN’: SCOTTISH-AMERICAN REACTIONS TO THE 2014 INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM

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Abstract

To explore US perspectives on the 2014 Independence Referendum, we assessed media coverage of the campaign and newspaper editorials, pairing these commentaries with interviews of Scottish-Americans conducted in the month immediately following the vote. Many in the United States perceived the referendum to be a model of participatory democracy, and recognized the complex issues that faced Scottish voters. In common with those in Scotland, economic concerns were primary, but added to these was an assessment of the USA’s military relationship with the UK. We conclude by suggesting that American awareness of current Scottish politics was enhanced by the referendum campaign and discussions of it within the diaspora community.

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

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Introduction

A year ago in *Scottish Affairs*, we concluded that:

> 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 (Hague and Mackie, 2014: 387).

What follows is an effort to gauge initial Scottish-American reactions to the ‘no’ vote of September 2014. Through reviewing mainstream US newspaper commentaries, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with Scottish-Americans conducted (by Mackie) in the four weeks following the referendum, we maintain that the overwhelming opinion Stateside was that the referendum campaign was a highly successful exercise in participatory democracy and that the ‘no’ vote was largely welcomed. American observers and commentators, like their Scottish counterparts, recognized both the complexity of the issues and, despite the ‘no’ vote, that the question of Scottish independence has not been conclusively resolved.

The Referendum Nears

The media trend which we identified prior to summer 2014, namely that ‘UK-based commentators air their opinions in major [US] newspapers, whereas US journalists have little to say’ (Hague and Mackie, 2014: 387), persisted as the September 18 referendum neared. Major Scottish commentators such as Neal Ascherson (2014), Gordon Brown (2014), and two prominent expatriates, historian Niall Ferguson (2014) and actor Alan Cumming (2014), made their differing opinions clear in *The New York Times*. Yet, it was a pre-referendum intervention by American economist and Nobel Laureate Paul Krugman (2014a, 2014b) that proved influential among the Scottish-Americans with whom we talked. A week before the referendum, Krugman (2014a) warned Scotland’s electorate to ‘be afraid, be very afraid. The risks of going it alone are huge’, and said that ‘I find it mind-boggling that Scotland would consider going down this path after all that has happened in the last few years. If Scottish voters really believe that it’s safe to become a country without a currency, they have been badly misled’. The Editorial Board of *The New York Times* (2014a) echoed Krugman’s warning, and he followed...
his initial article with a contribution to the newspaper’s online blog which reiterated his position that an independent Scotland without an independent currency would be disastrous, concluding, ‘I’ve read quite a lot of the independence literature, and it shows no appreciation for the dangers involved’ (Krugman, 2014b).

Renowned Scotland-born Harvard University historian Niall Ferguson (2014) urged a ‘nae’ vote and, seemingly startled that ‘even Paul Krugman and I agree’, maintained that secession is ‘a terrible idea’. Ferguson appealed to the spirit of Enlightenment philosopher David Hume and to Scotland’s cosmopolitanism, remarking that ‘petty nationalism is just un-Scottish’.

Into The New York Times op-ed fray stepped actor, and now US citizen, Alan Cumming (2014) who had travelled to Scotland to participate in the ‘yes’ campaign. ‘This is not about hating the English’, outlined Cumming, ‘it is about democracy and self-determination . . . Westminster’s leaders, like the rest of the world, may have only just cottoned on, but independence is a step we Scots have been contemplating carefully for a long time. After 16 years of devolution, we don’t need training wheels any more. We can go it alone’. One wonders who Krugman, Ferguson, Cumming and Brown were hoping to convince, given that Scots in the United States who retained UK citizenship, such as ourselves, were not eligible to vote in the referendum.

The referendum also drew comments from North America’s political leaders. On the political right, Canada’s Prime Minister Stephen Harper drew on his country’s history with Quebecois separatism to firmly support the status quo: ‘from a Canadian perspective . . . a strong and united UK is an overwhelmingly positive force in the world’ (quoted in Campion-Smith, 2014). Harper’s position drew support from The Toronto Globe and Mail (2014) whose editorial board expressed its ‘hope that undecided Scots listen to him’. In the United States, further to the political left, Barack Obama, Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton all echoed Harper. In typically diplomatic comments that were understood by many to be tacit support for a ‘no’ vote, Obama said that although the decision was ‘up to the people of Scotland . . . we obviously have a deep interest in making sure that one of the closest allies we will ever have remains a strong, robust, united and effective partner’ (quoted in Cowell, 2014). Hillary Clinton told The Guardian that she would ‘hate to have you [the UK] lose Scotland’ and that voting ‘yes’ would be ‘a loss for both sides’ (quoted in Brooks, 2014); Bill Clinton, flatteringly suggested that ‘Scots are already legendary for their independence of mind’, and subsequently offered advice, in the ‘spirit of friendship’, to vote ‘no’ (quoted in Rawlinson, 2014).
The Reaction to the Referendum

In his *New York Times* intervention just days before the referendum, Niall Ferguson (2014) claimed that ‘to the millions of Americans whose surnames testify to their Scottish or Scotch-Irish ancestry, the idea that Scotland might be about to become an independent country is baffling’. Yet, the Scottish-Americans with whom we spoke, rather than being baffled, offered detailed assessments of how Scotland would manage financially if it became independent, weighed up the relative revenues from oil, whisky and tourism against the perceived increased costs of social programmes, and generally saw the referendum, as it was understood in Scotland, as a complex debate over political and economic issues. Also as in Scotland, opinions were divided.

In the four weeks immediately following the referendum, one of us (Mackie) conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with seven Americans of Scottish descent who were active in local St. Andrew’s, Caledonian or clan societies. These individuals were drawn from across the United States, specifically California, Georgia, Massachusetts, Montana, New York, Texas and Virginia, and we had no prior knowledge of their views regarding Scottish independence. Ultimately, when asked if they would have voted for or against the proposition that Scotland should become an independent country, five of the seven claimed that they would have voted ‘no’. Of the two respondents who supported ‘yes’, one was determinedly in favour, while the other would have done so if compelled, explaining that she never voted in US elections believing that it changed nothing. However, all the respondents were united in praising the high voter participation. Describing the turnout as ‘phenomenal’ the interviewee from Texas compared it favourably to voter turnout in the US remarking, ‘You know all kinds of people were taking an interest and getting involved, and that was neat to see’. Such sentiments echoed those of the US media. *New York Times* correspondent Katrin Bennhold, who had covered the run up to the referendum (Bennhold, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d) marvelled that in contrast to so many other elections, where turnouts hover at sixty percent or lower, ‘a generation in Scotland was inspired and politicized’ (Bennhold, 2014e). The Editorial page of *The New York Times* (2014b), applauding the ‘no’ vote as ‘the right one’, echoed numerous media outlets in ‘celebrat[ing] that so impassioned a debate took place in so peaceful and democratic a manner’. Other commentators (e.g. Waters, 2014; Friedman, 2014) praised the democratic process and asked what the referendum process in Scotland meant for secessionist movements and politics elsewhere.
The Scottish-Americans with whom we spoke had become more interested and informed about what was going on in Scotland over the course of 2014. Most had followed the debate either through conversations with expatriate Scots living in the US, other Scottish-Americans, or friends and relatives interested in Scottish heritage. In fact, the Montana interviewee happened to be visiting Scotland as the campaign climaxed and followed it avidly. In addition, all the respondents had read traditional media, both UK and US sources, and social media, including Facebook. Discussing the traditional media, one interview explained that, ‘American coverage of the debate started off not quite understanding the debate, seeing Scotland as a quaint country of tartan, haggis and cabers. As time went on [it] became more sympathetic to the “no” side as there was a lot of attention given to the markets, economics and defence’ (New York). Another interviewee was critical of the general standard of the debate on Facebook and commented, ‘There is a lot of Americans who wrap themselves up in the Saltire and quote Mel Gibson from Braveheart and don’t have a clue that was 900 years ago. And so that kinda thing angered me but I did see some reasonable arguments why they should not vote for independence and there were a few people who thought that they should vote for it’ (California).

Given their involvement in St. Andrew’s Societies, Caledonian Clubs and clan associations, many subscribed to heritage magazines which typically took a strictly impartial editorial view on independence. Additionally, many such Societies were scrupulous in observing their charitable status within the US tax code and therefore did not permit any political debate. Indeed, two office bearers at one society refused to be interviewed for this study citing concerns over their association’s impartiality. One respondent, who was the webmaster of his clan association stated that he had deleted posts of a political nature, explaining, ‘I just deleted all the political stuff. I mean, like, say if it had been a well written argument for or against I think I would have left it on. That’s fine. But it wasn’t, it was, “It is about time we got our freedom”. That makes no sense to me, especially from someone who doesn’t know their history whatsoever’ (California). Another respondent reported that referendum was debated informally by the members of her local St Andrew’s Society and that she, when asked to make a toast ‘To Scotland’ at the society’s Burns’ Supper, had written ‘a little something, not indicating “yes”, not indicating “no”, but just praying for the right choice to made’ (Virginia).

It was clear that our interviewees understood that the referendum was about whether Scotland ‘should become an independent country’, and all explained their rationales for supporting independence or union in a manner that went beyond reducing the debate to the Braveheart-inspired notions of...
Scottish-American Reactions to the Referendum

‘Freedom!’ One respondent, for example, told us that media coverage had helped him understand the real issues facing Scotland. As a supporter of a ‘no’ vote, he believed that discussion about Scottish nationalism within the Scottish-American diaspora was often at the level of, ‘[A] sort of quasi patriotic Americanism... “we broke free from England and I have Scottish blood from my third great-grandfather’s cousin’s nephew’s sister [so] Scotland should breakaway from England because it is what we did... we shouldn’t be under someone else’s rule”’ (Massachusetts).

The respondent from Montana did, however, liken the current debate in Scotland to American independence. Asked why she supported independence she explained, ‘Being an American! [laughs]. We did it, we did it 200 years ago and it doesn’t mean that everything was rosy. But if there is a choice between self-government or not, I will choose self-government’. She then went on to explain, ‘The American Revolution started over economic issues, who could tax whom and for what purpose and I saw a desire for economic self-government from “yes” side’. In contradiction, another respondent repudiated the analogy to American independence, ‘In 1776 we had a revolution that did not happen in Canada or Australia, and there is no basis that Scotland should become independent because the Americans did’ (Georgia).

Although none of the respondents claimed to have followed the debate in great detail, most displayed a good knowledge of the breadth of the issues and were conversant with the matters that were of concern to contemporary Scots, such as currency, oil reserves, defence issues, the National Health Service, and the future of the welfare state. In discussing whether welfare and public services would be better or worse off within the UK or an independent Scotland, two respondents considered that Scotland and England had diverged politically. One commented that Scotland was a more liberal country than England and had been ‘under the thumb of Westminster’ (Georgia). Another considered that Scotland is ‘more Socialistic than Tory England’ with different social policy priorities and went on to explain, ‘the narrative was that we’ve never liked this marriage; there are historical antagonisms, Westminster is a distant landlord making it desirable to leave now’. (New York). One respondent maintained that ‘the UK’s strength is that everybody’s in’ and that it can take care of retirement and medical expenses, but he was concerned that the debate contained a lot of, ‘leftist propaganda, like we hear over here, and it rang with that same bell and I tend to be not on that side’ (California). Another respondent revealed more trenchant views and reported that he had been ‘troubled by the leftist agenda’ of the ‘yes’ campaign, considering that Scots were ‘rather well served’ by the welfare state, and questioned whether ‘generous welfare payments could continue’ in an independent Scotland.
In contrast, the respondent from Montana, who was in favour of publically funded health care in the US, considered that an independent Scotland would be able to use sufficient oil reserves to fund public services.

In the main, the reasons for supporting a ‘no’ vote tended to be practical. One respondent, citing the influence of Krugman’s (2014a) commentary, was concerned about which currency an independent Scotland would adopt and how that would affect monetary policy: ‘I read that [Krugman, 2014a] and went, like, whoa! Just ask Spain, just ask Greece, they cannot control monetary policy because they are beholden to Germany. You get in to a situation that you need to change interest rates and play around with interest rates you become beholden to another county and subservient. That triggered it for me’ (Massachusetts). Acknowledging that there might be some short-term economic consequences for an independent Scotland, the respondent from Montana said it was ‘balderdash’ that an independent Scotland would be denied the use of Sterling. In explaining that she was exasperated by the fear-mongering of some ‘no’ voters who claimed that they would need a passport to visit their ‘Mum in Berwick’, she maintained that an independent fiscal policy was an important consideration: ‘What throwing the tea in the harbor in the United States did was to say, “This is what is not trivial, this is what is serious”. Taxation is serious, your “Mum in Berwick” is not serious’ (Montana).

The weight of shared UK history, particularly during World War II, mattered most to our Georgia interviewee who supported the union, and to the Texas respondent who explained, ‘The Act of Union finally opened the doors for Scotland... I think you have to say that for the last three centuries plus, there have been a lot of benefits of being an integral part of the former Empire. You have to ask yourself if you want to throw all that away’ (Texas).

Having discussed the implications of the independence vote for Scotland and the rest of the UK, the respondents were asked to consider the implications of Scottish independence for the US. While none of the respondents considered that there would be any implications for the US economy, there was some discussion of diplomatic and military relationships. The Montana interviewee considered that the US had friendly diplomatic relations with ‘hundreds’ of countries and that an independent Scotland would be no exception, while the New York respondent believed that a post-secession rUK would have retained its seat on the U.N. Security Council. Another respondent considered that an independent Scotland would be invited to join NATO and would have a seat on the U.N. (Texas). For a few respondents the future of defence co-operation between the US and the UK was a matter of concern and referred to the strong and dependable military alliance between the two countries. In the words of one respondent, ‘If I had
to rank it, I would say that defence was closer to the top of US concerns; the US has never had a greater ally than the UK, so anything that would have instability in defence would have had a trickle effect in the US’ (Massachusetts). Such sentiment echoed that of Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Thomas Friedman (2014) who wrote, ‘I’m glad a majority of Scots rejected independence. Had they not, it would have clipped the wing of America’s most important wingman in the world: Britain’.

Conclusion

On a misty 18 September morning at 5.45am local time, one of us (Hague) made his way through Chicago’s near-deserted streets to the studios of WGN-TV, the television affiliate of the Chicago Tribune newspaper. Hague was appearing live on the morning news programme to discuss what was, at the time, the on-going voting in Scotland’s independence referendum. Engaging in convivial early morning banter with the hosts, Hague outlined the debates and polls and commented that ‘This time tomorrow the United Kingdom may not be united anymore’. Hague subsequently appeared on a live lunchtime radio broadcast, delivered an afternoon public lecture at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, and finally spoke on an evening news show at a second Chicago television station. The various producers with whom Hague spoke invited him to return to broadcast studios the following day, but only if Scotland voted ‘yes’ to secede. At 12.18am Chicago time, the moment when the referendum result was decided, Hague contacted WGN-TV to say that he would not be in studio the following morning.

The failure to pass a ‘yes’ vote had ended the referendum story for Chicago’s media, yet for our interviewees, as is the case in Scotland, many felt that the issue was not settled. Indeed, this is perhaps one of the most important legacies of the 2014 referendum for Scottish-Americans, namely that the campaign and associated debate increased awareness of contemporary Scottish politics, and many subsequently followed the May 2015 General Election. Our Georgia respondent, for example, was immediately concerned about the ‘waffling’ on promises made to Scotland following the referendum result; the interviewee from Massachusetts remains concerned about the SNP’s opposition to the presence of nuclear missiles in Scottish waters. Reviewing the referendum’s exit polls, the ‘yes’-supporting interviewee from Virginia felt that older Scots had ‘bottled’ the decision, but contended that in twenty or thirty year’s time the result would be different with a new generation voting ‘yes’. On the other hand, interviewees
from Massachusetts and Georgia who had supported the ‘no’ campaign considered that independence was a step too far, and that Scotland should receive more devolution to reflect an American-style federal system.

Yet, despite this increased awareness of current political issues in Scotland, the parallel of Scottish secession equating to America’s eighteenth-century revolution retains currency for many, and it was through this lens that comedian Jon Stewart counselled First Minister Nicola Sturgeon on her appearance on The Daily Show on 8 June 2015: ‘You’ve got a little bit of a Jones for getting out of this whole United Kingdom. We went through a very similar process. Let me talk you through it... Let me tell you what they hate: they hate when you throw their stuff into the water... and if you ever think about trying to unload some of that sweet, sweet North Atlantic tea, you will always have a friend in America’.

References


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