

Brexit and Indyref2

Charlie Jeffery | 22 March 2017

So it's now official. Shortly after David Cameron emerged victorious from the 2015 UK General Election committed to a referendum on EU membership, Nicola Sturgeon made clear that a UK vote to leave the EU against Scotland's will would be seen as the kind of 'material change' that could justify a second referendum on Scottish independence.

Sturgeon's statement on a second referendum on 13 March 2017 merely confirmed the umbilical relationship of Brexit and the question of Scottish independence that had been gestating since Cameron returned to Downing Street.

But of course he didn't stay there for long. Instead it is Theresa May who runs the risk of being the Prime Minister who lost the Union. Will she?

It is difficult to answer that given that Sturgeon and May have only just begun to jockey for position on the timing and terms of a second independence referendum. But we can already anticipate some of the factors that will shape the debate.

Shifting Allegiances

One is that referendums disrupt inherited political allegiances. We know from polling evidence that the Brexit referendum has impacted on indyref preferences, with some Remain-supporting No voters shifting to Yes and some Leave-supporting Yes voters shifting to No. That churn looks more or less balanced for now – but it also suggests there are groups of people now 'available' to be persuaded to act differently in a future indyref than in the last one.

So what arguments will be deployed to persuade them? We can be sure that the Yes side will have noted what worked in the Brexit referendum. The Leave campaign was not exactly strong on carefully calibrated cost-benefit analysis. It went for the gut: 'Let's take back control'. Its case focused on legitimacy, what *felt* right and wrong, not what could be demonstrated by reasoned argument or, heaven forbid, 'expertise'.

So expect more of a Scottish version of 'taking back control' and less of the attempt to map out all the details of what independence might mean that we saw in the 2014 independence White Paper. All those details were hooks for challenge: What currency? How big would oil revenues be? How would EU membership be secured? Already we can see hints of a different approach: a willingness to concede that the economic challenges of independence would be difficult, or that full EU membership for Scotland might need to be a medium-term goal.

Expect an approach which says '*we* don't have all the answers, things will be uncertain, but that *we* in Scotland should be the ones finding answers and dealing with uncertainty, not *them* in Westminster and Whitehall'.

What about the No side? There are lessons there too from the Brexit referendum, not least that a 'Project Fear' didn't work well against arguments aimed at gut feeling. A reincarnation of Better

Together as a single pro-union campaign looks implausible given what has happened to Labour since. So the pro-union campaign will likely be fragmented. And Theresa May looks singularly ill-suited to convey (or confect) the sense of empathy with Scotland that David Cameron did better than any other UK-level politician in 2014.

A 'Super-Vow'?

So what's left? The obvious answer is a supercharged 'Vow' which would beef up the Scottish Parliament beyond its current level of powers. Significantly, that is an option the Scottish Government itself proposed in its December 2016 paper *Scotland's Place in Europe*: full repatriation of powers from the EU to the Scottish Parliament; additional powers in areas like immigration; and a right to act externally in the exercise of those powers. This would be a Scotland in the UK, but with scope to shape a distinctive relationship with the EU.

Whether such a 'Super-Vow' would be made looks doubtful. The ideas in *Scotland's Place in Europe* appear to have been rejected without discussion, even though they suggest a possible framework for a deal. The reason may well lie in hard electoral strategy. Theresa May's response to Brexit seems focused on assuaging the concerns of voters in England whose gut feelings about the EU and concerns about immigration are matched only by their sense that Scotland already gets too good a deal within the UK.

These are voters who have threatened to peel off from their allegiance to the Conservative Party to support UKIP. If they can be held in the Conservative tent then – given the disarray Labour is in – a long period of Conservative government beckons. That strategy could well be successful. It may just mean that the Conservatives end up governing a smaller country.

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