# The argument in support of Scottish independence

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## Abstract

In this contribution to the debate I trace distinctive strands in a Scottish approach to social welfare. I make a case that manifestations of a Scottish approach are, however, susceptible to the vagaries of political decisions and directions emanating from Westminster. I go on to argue that, regardless of any political will to assert a Scottish model of social welfare, the ability to do so is fatally compromised within the current political settlement (and indeed within any proposed settlement involving less than independence) by the lack of access to the economic levers required to see through the implications of progressive social policies. This is the academic gist of my case. But there is also another side to it, one that aspires to a better future for Scotland's children, for their parents and for their communities; a future based upon hope rather than fear.

## Keywords

Scottish referendum, debate, independence

### Referendum Debate

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### A Scottish tradition of social welfare

Making a case for a distinctive Scottish tradition in Scottish social welfare can prompt contestable claims of Scottish exceptionalism, of a land of milk and honey. Caveats notwithstanding, there are particular historical strands of thought that have shaped how social welfare has developed in Scotland. Differences with England can perhaps be distinguished around a greater sense of collectivism and a predisposition in Scotland towards broadly educational and community-based, rather than individualised, responses to social problems (Smith, 2013).

Scottish approaches to social welfare can be traced back to the Reformation (Checkland, 1980). Scotland inherited from the Reformation a set of political and moral preferences, which might be described as 'secular presbyterianism' or communitarianism. Structures within the reformed church, while socially authoritarian (and at times along the way, manifestly, narrow and sectarian) were also predicated upon a 'militant democracy' and were, in many ways, strikingly egalitarian. A school was established in each parish and an educational ideal became rooted in Scottish life. The parish was also responsible for providing social welfare functions in respect of the sick, orphans and those who had fallen on hard times. Thus, both education and social welfare can trace common roots within a Scottish tradition.

The Act of Union of 1707 made provision for the continuation of separate Scottish educational and legal systems, as well as maintaining the Church of Scotland as the established church. This arrangement kept the pillars of social welfare provision intact within the new political settlement. And while the political centre of gravity moved to London following political union, a vibrant civic culture continued to develop in Scotland. This was manifest in the particular expression of the Scottish Enlightenment, which identified sentiments of human sociability, benevolence and mutual obligation at the heart of the human condition. A further strand of Enlightenment thinking stressed a contextual morality whereby social problems could be understood only in their wider social context.

An illuminating example of a Scottish response to the social problems that resulted from industrialisation and urbanisation can be identified in the particular features of the industrial feeding (or ragged) schools, which sprang up across Scotland from the 1840s. Seed describes a system that sought to meet the needs of the whole child in their family and community setting, which 'sought to avoid the processes of stigmatization, arguing that service provision should be based on recognition of children's rights' (Seed, 1973 p.321). Specifically, every child was deemed to have a right to food, clothing and education, either from its parents or from the public.

In many respects, the ragged schools philosophy adumbrated subsequent developments, echoing, particularly, in the 1964 Kilbrandon Report, which was instrumental in the framing of the Social Work (Scotland) Act, 1968. Drawing on evidence from the developing social sciences, the Kilbrandon Committee concluded that it was not helpful to separate young people who offend from those offended against; in both cases something had gone wrong in the child's upbringing, reflecting unmet needs for protection, control, education and care, which should be the concern and responsibility of the whole society.

Kilbrandon's remedy for this shortfall in the upbringing process was 'social education', education in its widest sense, which involved working in partnership with parents to strengthen 'those natural influences for good which will assist the child's development into a mature and useful member of society' (para 17). The committee stressed family and community responsibility and early, voluntary, rather than compulsory, intervention.

It would seem that Kilbrandon set out to establish a distinctively Scottish approach to social welfare. Parliamentary papers from the time indicate that he deliberately eschewed

an Anglo- American model, which saw social problems as a symptom of poor character or a consequence of psychological or familial dysfunction and responses located at the level of the individual, detached from social and wider community context. Instead, his Committee sought inspiration from Scandinavia and developed a social education paradigm based around principles of best interests, needs rather than deeds, and shared and collective responsibility. A failure in upbringing was seen as a collective failure.

The subsequent 1968 Act placed a broad, all-encompassing duty on local authorities to 'promote social welfare' (section 12), which is still in force today. Kilbrandon's ideas reflected a wider discourse in respect of welfare. As Lindsay Paterson argues:

Links among 'physical, mental and emotional well-being' also underpinned the child-centred ideas that grew to dominate educational policy by the 1960s, reaching their apogee in the relatively successful and popular Scottish system of comprehensive secondary schools - a policy entirely based on the premise that educational success and failure cannot be understood only in educational terms, but must be related to the social and economic circumstances faced by children (2000, unpaginated).

But it is not just at a policy level that we see evidence of distinctive Scottish thinking. The psychoanalyst Jock Sutherland, a central figure in human relations psychology recognized that we, as individuals are sustained only through social relatedness, while the philosopher John McMurray was making a similar case, arguing that 'We come to be who we are as personal individuals only in personal relationship. The positive form of that relationship which goes by many names: love, friendship, fellowship, communion and community, …' (Costello, 2002, pp.326-327).

Contrast this with Margaret Thatcher's view expressed to *Woman's Own* Magazine in 1987, that there was no such thing as society, a statement and a worldview that is antithetical to a Scottish tradition. There is a real tension here that goes beyond policy directions and begins to highlight very different ways of understanding the world.

Some of the edge was taken off the worst elements of Thatcherism by civil servants at the then Scottish Office. Kilbrandon's philosophy has been remarkably resilient. At a policy level we have Curriculum for Excellence and GIRFEC, the Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011 and the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, all of which give a particular Scottish identity to children's policy while, more generally, the Christie Commission (2011) is increasingly spoken of as providing a Scottish model for the future delivery of public services. These major policy planks indicate that we are moving in a very different direction to England, regardless of political change.

### So what is the problem?
A supporter of the current political settlement might point to these distinct historical and current policy directions and assert that they provide evidence of a country able to follow its own path within the Union. So what is the problem …?

I suggest that this ability to go our own way is severely curtailed as the following examples indicate. In the case of the Ragged schools the distinctive Scottish approach based around voluntary day attendance only prevailed until the Westminster government introduced

legislation providing for the certification of industrial schools (enabling them to receive financial grants and the use of compulsory powers to compel children to attend) after which pressure was exerted to force the schools into becoming residential institutions (Seed, 1973). This led to the emergence in Scotland of a hospital model and the introduction of a divide between offender and child in need that was rightly identified as erroneous within the Scottish system. Colour

Another example concerns the erosion of Kilbrandon's philosophy. Kilbrandon was in the vanguard of progressive child care, being based upon principles that more than 20 years later became mainstreamed within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). But, in a UK context, the progressive, child-centred philosophy set in place by Kilbrandon was compromised by legal decisions retained at a UK level. A specific example of this was the criminalisation viz. the children by Children's Hearings, contrary to Kilbrandon's intentions, as a result of UK legislation, of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974. Moreover, the routine use of adult criminal proceedings for young people under 18 failed to recognize the status of young people in this age group as 'children' under UNCRC and Scots Law. Internationally the UK is out on a limb, described by the UNCRC in 1995 as 'uncooperative and arrogant' and in 2002 as falling below what should be expected from a 'great country'.

But there is another reason why the status quo does not hold and it is to do with how mature democracies behave. There is no doubt that Willie Ross, the Secretary of State for Scotland at the time of Kilbrandon, wanted something distinctively Scottish. However, under a Westminster system such attempts to establish distinct national policies happen almost for the wrong reasons: to be different to and better than England. It is the 90-minute nationalist syndrome, indicative of a mindset that defines Scotland only in relation to England. At another level, the image of Scottish Office civil servants furrowing away to take the edge off unpopular and culturally dissonant policies during the Thatcher years tells its own tale. This is not grown up government and it is not sustainable; it is a cap-in-hand approach that is always vulnerable to Westminster revoking its indulgence.

A final reason why Scotland cannot rely on its seeming capacity to plough its own furrow lies in the observation that, politically, directions taken by the main parties at Westminster are followed in Scotland. Ironically, post devolution, Jack McConnell, as First Minister, hitched his wagon to Westminster's New Labour project. It was a project that sought to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime but which omitted the second bit of the equation. A populist tendency was particularly evident in the field of youth justice. McConnell's administration focused much of its attention on questions of youth crime, introducing measures such as an unnecessary increase in the number of beds in secure accommodation and the introduction of electronic tagging. A new field of youth justice developed, in many respects recreating the distinction between youth offending and care and protection against which Kilbrandon had argued. Under McConnell and his Justice Secretary Cathy Jamieson, Scotland witnessed: the routine prosecution of 16-17 year olds, approximately 7-10,000 adult convictions annually; nine percent of the population convicted by the age of 19; the highest 'child' custody figures for a generation and over 70% of 16-20 year olds released from custody reconvicted within two years. All of this took place against a backdrop of academic knowledge, which is compelling in its

message that prosecution has no beneficial effect in preventing re-offending and that early criminalisation is one of the best predictors of sustained criminality (see McAra and McVie, 2010). Bill Jordan (2010) argues that the failure of New Labour was ultimately a moral failure.

There has been an undoubted change of direction under the SNP Government that came to power in 2007, of not needing to take its lead from London. Since then we have witnessed a sharp fall in prosecutions and use of custody for under 18s and more under 18s retained in the Children's Hearings system.

## Making Scotland the best place for children to grow up

The current Scottish Government's oft-quoted aspiration is to make Scotland 'the best place for children and young people to grow up'. This may be a catchy phrase but it does not tell the whole story. For many children, Scotland is already probably as good a country as it gets to grow up in. For my own children and for their friends, brought up in economically comfortable, emotionally secure circumstances, I struggle to think how their experience of growing up could have been much better; they are the epitome of successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. As a parent I am obviously satisfied and proud of that fact. But I also harbour a niggling unease. My children occupy a particular, privileged stratum of society; they have become middle class. There is a growing gap between them and many of the peers who started primary school with them, those who were not dealt such a good hand by life. This long-term trend has seen this gap grow steadily under UK governments of whatever political persuasion. The UK is among the most unequal countries in the world, the fourth most unequal among those the OECD would count as wealthy. Westminster policies show no sign of even wishing to narrow that gap. We are saddled with austerity policies emanating from Westminster, which determine that in one of the most prosperous countries in the world, families are forced to queue at food banks.

The effects of increasing inequality are pernicious and are implicated in just about every health and social problem that might be of concern (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009).

Against this backdrop there is only so far current policies based upon sticking plasters of early intervention, improving attainment in schools or more effective inter-professional working can take us. To do anything effective to tackle the scourge of inequality requires that a Scottish Government has access to economic levers. According to the Jimmy Reid Foundation 'Poverty is a failure of economics and must be fixed economically'. The same paper goes on to say … 'that we have chosen not to do so (to tackle poverty) despite having the ability means that poverty is a political issue that requires the right choices by our policy makers and businesses, and our communities, to be made, right now' (2013, p.1). There is no indication that Westminster government, of whatever persuasion has the political will or wherewithal, to question the austerity agenda and thus even begin to tackle poverty and inequality.

There is something else going on at a UK level just now. Dismissive attitudes towards the poor are reflected in similar attitudes towards those caring for them. What is happening in respect of social care and social work in the UK is worrying. One need only look to the

thuggish point-scoring of David Cameron and Ed Balls in response to the death of Baby Peter Connolly to see the disdain in which the social work profession is held there. Recent reviews of social work education in England (Narey, 2014) reflect a foreclosing anti-intellectual prospectus.

Scotland needs a reinvigorated approach to social work and social care. Mature inclusive democracies need, among other things, a mature social work profession. The Referendum offers an opportunity to imagine a different kind of social work and social care. Richard Holloway, in the 2009 Association of Directors of Social Work Lecture, notes that: 'The Social Work Act of 1968 was revolutionary not only in its impact, but in its thinking. We need in our day to do more of that kind of thinking, thinking that challenges not only ruling elites, but ruling ideas'. We have the opportunity, in the run-up to the Referendum, to engage in thinking that challenges and transforms ruling ideas.

Independence affords the opportunity to shape new political institutions and a new political culture, to allow the kind of Scottish values I have identified above to become more clearly embedded in our political fabric. Jimmy Reid (1972) claimed that adherence to prevailing values 'alienates some from humanity. It partially dehumanises some people, makes them insensitive, ruthless in their handling of fellow human beings, self-centred and grasping.'

I want children in Scotland to grow up in a world that does not de-humanise. I want children to grow up believing that it is abhorrent that we host weapons of mass destruction on the Clyde. I want children to grow up troubled by the UK's warmongering interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. I want children to grow up in a society that is not intensely relaxed with the existence of the filthy rich in our midst. And I want Scottish children to grow up as citizens of Europe and the world. Those of us who have argued for Scottish independence have long endured accusations of narrow nationalism. One does not have to look far to see that the real narrow nationalism exists within an English political culture which is hamstrung by the need to pander to the upsurge in UKIP support.

To realise these hopes for Scotland's children requires that they and we adults who have waited somewhat longer for this day, are sufficiently confident that, to draw on Hamish Henderson's words, they never heed what the hoodies of the 'No' campaign croak for doom and that they (and we) vote 'Yes' on September 18.

# End Notes

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