

Referendum Debate Riposte

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Keywords

Scottish referendum, debate, independence

Referendum debate

The nub of Garry Coutts' argument in favour of a 'No' vote is that the Independence Referendum is a distraction from 'real' politics. An alternative reading might be that, rather than being a sideshow, the Referendum has provided a focus for a revitalised politics, an outburst of participative democracy. In that sense it is not an obsession on the part of the political class, as Garry suggests, but a challenge to the caucus politics that has dominated political life for the last couple of decades. For me, and thousands like me, politics has become interesting and relevant again. A couple of weeks ago, I went along to a Referendum event in Muirhouse. Two of the speakers, former senior figures in the Labour and trades union movements were appearing on their first public platform since the Iraq War scunnered them with 'real' politics. The Independence Referendum has reconnected them. Moreover, the fact that voter turnout of around 80% is anticipated might suggest that this debate has caught the imagination of the Scottish people in a way that 'business as usual' politics has singularly failed to do. And the reason it has done so is not that people are obsessed with constitutional niceties but because they begin to imagine what an independent Scotland might be able to do to tackle some of the key issues facing our country. The constitutional issue is not peripheral to tackling issues such as inequality, but central to it.

Garry goes on to make three points in support of a 'No' vote:

- the nationalist campaign presents a false prospectus of what we can expect in an independent Scotland;
- there are no reasons why we can't address the major political issues we face within the current constitutional settlement;
- constitutional debates like this allow us to hide from the tough, sometimes unpalatable choices we need to make in governing our country.

I will respond briefly to each:

- 1) Garry argues that the independence campaign (which is far broader than might be implied by his use of the term nationalist) masks underlying political differences among its various adherents. Of course it does; there will be an inevitable realignment of political allegiances after independence. Michael Fry and Tommy Sheridan will be able to tout their competing visions of a possible Scotland to the electorate. There will likely be a shaking down of the different political factions

within the SNP and we may even see a reinvigorated Labour Party that reconnects with social democratic values. Politics ought to be about contested beliefs and visions. It is not healthy for a supposedly mature democracy to kick such issues into the long grass of Westminster politics.

- 2) Garry makes a case that the Scottish Parliament currently has powers to legislate for specifically Scottish policies and that these will be extended with the enactment in 2016 of the 2012 Scotland Act. He cites examples of such policies passed since Devolution, going on to raise the question of selectivism versus universalism in the delivery of public services. While it may pander to a narrowly conceived pragmatism or populism, the Labour Party's conversion to selectivism is problematic. The Jimmy Reid Foundation provides a compelling demolition of their case, concluding:

That this right-wing political philosophy is now redefined as a left-wing philosophy is one of the most corrosive pieces of political drift we have seen in Scotland. Reducing services to the rich is universally recognised as one of the most certain ways to reduce services to the poor - the empirical evidence against the claim that universalism benefits the rich is reinforced again and again throughout this report (Danson et al., 2012, p15)

Moving on to the 2012 Act, it does indeed afford further circumscribed powers to vary the rate of income tax; however, income tax accounts for only around 20% of total tax revenues. The reality is that currently Scotland has access to around 3% of overall taxation. The 2012 Act would increase this to around 8%. These are hardly extensive new powers. Moreover, affording powers over income tax alone, without access to other fiscal powers is an elephant trap that no politician worth their salt will fall into, as Garry himself acknowledges in relation to the current tax-varying powers available to the Scottish Parliament. Raising income tax is not popular, nor is it a particularly effective lever on the economy. Other sops in the 2012 Act such as the regulation of airguns and speed limits are hardly going to impact on the real issues facing Scotland. But such arguments aside, it is already widely recognised that the 2012 Act is dead in the water. The Referendum campaign has already elicited assurances of additional powers from Unionist parties, unless, of course, Labour's idea of new powers is the 2012 Act ...

- 3) Garry's third point is a plea that we 'try to get back to a political normality'. The problem with this statement is twofold. Firstly, I would argue that the Referendum is happening because people are deeply unhappy with 'political normality'. But, secondly, there is no 'political normality' to go back to. The effects of a 'No' vote on September 18th are not neutral; there is a strange absence of this wider political reality in Garry's case, perhaps because the portents of what that reality might look like are worrying for anyone with any progressive vision for Scotland. Since I wrote my original piece we have witnessed a Government reshuffle at Westminster, which has hardened right-wing anti-European sentiment. This further shift to the right sets the agenda of politics in rUK, or specifically, England. Even where he so inclined, Ed Milliband cannot offer a more progressive alternative due to the need to pander to middle England. Polls indicate that Labour will struggle to

win power in Westminster. We are faced with a continuation of Conservative Government, possibly with UKIP as coalition partners. So, whatever way politics go in England, the future is further austerity cuts with more families and children forced to rely on food banks. And, as public service workers know, the cuts are only just beginning! No income tax varying powers will do anything to alter that reality.

My final point is to contest Garry's rather pessimistic assessment of the Referendum as being a tragic waste of human spirit. My own view is that it has witnessed an outpouring of such spirit. I am reminded of Yeats' words 'All changed, changed utterly'. Whatever way the vote goes on September 18th the genie that has been unleashed by this campaign is not going back into its bottle; there is no return to politics as usual.

End Notes

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References

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