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"Everybody's Scottish at the end of the day": nationalism and social justice amongst young Yes voters

Maddie Breeze, Hugo Gorringer, Lynn Jamieson and Michael Rosie

Abstract

In the wake of the diverse mobilization for Yes in the 2014 Independence Referendum and unprecedented SNP gains in the 2015 General Election, a number of commentators deployed a rhetoric of 'dangerous nationalism' by way of explanation and criticism. Such an interpretation is refuted by survey evidence and complicated by sociologies of nationalism and national identity. This short article joins these debates, and presents analysis of ten explorative interviews conducted with young Yes voters between the Referendum and the General Election. There is no simple narrative of 'nationalism' in these young people's accounts. Some explicitly distanced themselves from nationalist sentiment, emphasising a commitment to social justice as their key motivation for Yes. Others shared this primary concern but expressed it as overlapping with a national(ist) identity in complex ways. While disavowals of 'romantic' or 'narrow' nationalism occur on *both* sides of the independence debate, this study points to how more banal, and nuanced discourses of national(ist) identity underpin respondents' explanations for voting Yes.

Keywords: Nationalism, National Identity, Youth, Scottish Independence Referendum 2014, General Election 2015.

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Introduction

The last several years in Scottish politics have seen increased, often deeply hostile¹, rhetoric around an apparent surge in nationalism. In a remarkable decade, Scotland has seen SNP governments elected in 2007 and 2011, the fiercely contested and surprisingly close independence referendum of 2014, and the remarkable – and hitherto unimaginable – SNP gains in the UK general election of 2015. It is perhaps unsurprising that opponents of the SNP and of Scottish independence – two political variables which, historically, need not be closely aligned (Bond 2000) – have struggled to understand and explain these profound developments. For some leading figures in Scottish Labour, the SNP “is more like a cult than a political party” (Foulkes, 2015). For others, the proponents of independence “do not know what they are doing. They are leading us into a trap” (Brown, 2014). Indeed Scottish independence, for Gordon Brown, flew in the face of centuries of common sacrifice, social justice and solidarity in the building of the United Kingdom: “we not only won these wars together, we built the peace together, we built the health service together, we built the welfare state together, we will build the future together. And what we have built together by sacrificing and sharing, let no narrow nationalism split asunder” (Brown, 2014).

In such views ‘nationalism’, as Michael Billig argues, denotes “dangerous and powerful passions extraordinary emotions” (Billig, 1995:5). Yet Billig counsels us to look beyond the extremes and the peripheries. Nationalism provides, whilst simultaneously masking itself behind routine, the “ideological foundations” for “established nations” such as the United Kingdom: “those in established nations – at the centre of things – are led to see nationalism as the property of others, not ‘us’” (Billig, 1995:5). Thus we can read Brown’s invocations of shared sacrifice as one example of a *British* nationalism so routinized and ‘naturalised’ that it does not conceive of itself as such. ‘Nationalism’ in a Scottish context is a complex and nuanced term, and Scottish national identity and the invoking of Scottish symbols and sentiments is evident far beyond the SNP or support for independence (Bechhofer & McCrone 2012). Tom Nairn’s (1995) discussion of upper- and lowercase Scottish nationalisms is instructive here. Thus we can talk of the SNP as (upper-case) **N**ationalists but also need to be aware that (lowercase) *n*ationalism transcends that party, incorporating the greater number of Scots who support independence, continued or strengthened devolution, or who label and/or express their politics as ‘Scottish’ whilst supporting other political parties. In that sense, as McCrone (1998: ix) argued after the 1997 referendum, “we are all nationalists now”.

This picture is further complicated by a more ‘intuitive’ view of nationalism that portrays it in the hot and dangerous terms that Billig notes are so limiting: “Nationalism”, it is clear, “never spoke with a straightforwardly simple voice” (Billig, 1995:176). The pressing need to disentangle different meanings of ‘nationalism’ was recently highlighted by Eichhorn (2015) who noted that despite the strong impression of a ‘surge’ in nationalism there had been no marked shifts in the way that people in Scotland described their national identity. Whilst this interpretation may over-conflate national identity with nationalism, it does note (again) that there are no easy overlaps between ‘national sentiment’ and political belief or action. In short, many on the Yes side in the Referendum, and many

¹ The reader is spoiled for choice, but particularly fanciful and vitriolic interventions came from historian David Starkey (see Scotsman 2015) and writers C.J. Sansom (2012) and Simon Winder (2014).

who voted SNP in 2015, nevertheless regarded themselves to some degree as British. Likewise, there is no contradiction whatsoever in feeling strongly Scottish and voting No and/or supporting a unionist party.

In this article we examine how one particularly interesting sub-section of Scottish society described their Referendum vote in terms of 'nationalism'. The referendum allowed 16 and 17 year olds the opportunity to vote on a major political issue for the first time. Previous contributions to this journal – Eichhorn, 2014; Stewart et al, 2014 - have explored the importance of such electoral innovation, as well as the remarkable degree of youth engagement that it engendered in the referendum. Here we wish to report the preliminary findings of a study of 16-20 year old Yes voters between the Referendum and the General Election. Whilst we did not explicitly set out to explore the understanding of nationalism of these young people, participants raised the issue spontaneously and in ways that challenged simplistic assumptions.

Methods & Sample

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted in three Scottish cities during March and April 2015 with respondents aged between 16 and 20. All had voted Yes to Scottish independence in the 2014 referendum, and for all but one the referendum was the first time they had voted². These four young women and six young men were recruited via an online call for participants, circulated on social networking sites (Facebook and Twitter) and through the networks and key contacts of youth work organizations and political associations. The target cities were chosen for their 'Yes city' status (Dundee and Glasgow) and majority No vote (Edinburgh) respectively. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, nine took place face to face and the tenth via video-call.

The interviews provide a preliminary exploration of the relational and emotional dynamics of young people's political attitudes and participation in Scotland, after the Referendum and before the 2015 General Election. Questioning focused on respondents' involvement in the referendum and on their participation in various forms of politics before and since. Interviewees were asked how they felt at key moments during the referendum as well as about their families and friends, political debates, and agreements and disagreements. The research design incorporated a broad definition of 'politics', and allowed respondents to discuss the issues they cared about and arrive at their own understandings of what counted as 'political'.

Generating empirical material on nationalism was not a research aim, and direct questions about nationalism were not part of the interview guide. However, the research team were struck by respondents distancing themselves, spontaneously and very explicitly, from 'nationalist' politics. This galvanized a closer look at 'nationalism' in the interview transcripts. The analysis traces what Cohen (1996, 2000) and Hearn (2013) describe as the biographically unique elements of nationalism in personal identities; it prioritizes individual accounts of micro-level experiences and self-understandings. In our interviews, respondents narrate their national(ist) identities as becoming

² James, age 20, had voted in the May 2014 European elections.

politicized in a variety of ways, indeed our analysis begins with a consideration of the *de-politicization* of national identity.

NAME ³	AGE	UK PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY
Russell	16	Dundee West
Sandra	16	Dundee West
Anne	17	Edinburgh North & Leith
Tom	17	Edinburgh South West
Gregg	18	Edinburgh West
Mike	18	East Renfrewshire
Pamela	18	Edinburgh West
Brian	19	Edinburgh North & Leith
Fiona	19	Dundee East
James ⁴	20	Glasgow North

I'm not a nationalist but...

Given considerable emphasis on narrow and divisive 'hot' nationalism in media accounts, it is perhaps unsurprising that most respondents addressed this theme. For example, Tom and Brian repeatedly made it clear that voting for independence, and their politics more broadly, were driven by neither 'nationalist' sentiment nor national identity:

Tom: Yeah well I suppose first thing to say is that I'm not like a nationalist or anything like that, I'm not even Scottish so it doesn't really mean anything to me all that stuff.

Brian: For me it wasn't like, this might have been the case for some people and that's okay, but for me it wasn't a case of nationalism, like I didn't have a sense of 'oh I'm Scottish therefore I'm gonna vote Yes for Scotland'.

³ All names cited are pseudonyms.

⁴ This interview was conducted via video-call.

Similarly Russell responded explicitly to the idea that others, and specifically those who voted No, might imagine Yes voters as motivated by nationalism:

Russell: I think a lot of people on the No side think that, you know, we were all kind of raving nationalists, but actually we were just trying to democratically change the way that our country is run you know?

Russell's invocation of *our country* reminds us that 'nationalism' need not be of an explicit flag waving kind, but can be more about the routine assumptions about the world and 'our' place within it. Understanding and "drawing out ... nationalist assumptions ... means becoming linguistically microscopic. The crucial words of banal nationalism are often the smallest" (Billig, 1995: 94). Here then Russell is distancing himself from a particular kind of nationalism, the 'raving' kind, whilst simultaneously engaging in a banal (and 'reasonable') form of nationalist rhetoric.

Significantly, some respondents complicated simplistic 'nationalist' narratives by describing the development of their own views from a 'naïve' romantic nationalism towards a more nuanced and social justice-focused understanding of independence. Active engagement with the Yes campaign tempered and complicated Tom's initial views:

Tom: I remember I was in school and we were doing persuasive essays, and the teacher was trying to get us to discuss things, and he put up Scottish independence, and this guy started talking about the economy and I thought, 'what has this got to do with the economy?!' which seems so naïve now, but for me I thought it was kinda like how Ireland got taken over by England, and I thought, very kinda Braveheart ...

Gregg, likewise, distances himself from nationalism, describing a disagreement with a school friend prior to the referendum. Here he uses social justice motivations for independence to counter her dismissal of 'unnecessary nationalism':

Gregg: She was kind of someone that saw this as, well certainly her Dad did, saw this as nationalism, as unnecessary nationalism, and certainly and my perspective was, you know that this was not about being more Scottish, it's about social justice and becoming more equal and helping the most vulnerable, and the UK state doesn't do that... we were saying, it's unacceptable to you know pin this on nationalism, and that's not good enough, like we need change now.

Leading by example

Several respondents emphasised social justice as a primary motivation for their Yes vote, placing an independent Scotland in wider geo-political context. The idea of Scotland leading by 'progressive' example provided a common thread:

Gregg: This society that we live in is incredibly unequal and we need to do something about it, and that was at the heart of why I wanted Scotland to be independent, because I thought, I believed and I still believe that we are a little more left wing, we are a little more, I think there is a platform to be progressive within that... I think that an independent Scotland is a progressive force, and the English left can take inspiration, from that.

Brian: I didn't have a sense of oh I'm Scottish therefore I'm gonna vote Yes for Scotland, it wasn't so much about being an independent country, it was more about for me, I don't know how this will sound, but it was more about breaking up the current system... and showing the world really, that positive change can be done, it's possible to look after your own poor neighbourhoods and everybody, and have a political system that's geared towards that kind of thing.

In conceptualizing independence as a chance to show the world 'that positive change can be done', Brian considered the referendum as an opportunity to change 'the whole political system down south' as well. Far from a 'dangerous nationalism' these accounts suggest a more nuanced picture, in which young Yes voters imagine Scotland not only in contrast or opposition to England, but in a broader context, in terms of relationships with Europe and the rest of the world. The imagined 'Others' for our respondents were not 'the English' nor even No campaigners, so much as the politicians and policies that perpetuated inequalities within and between nations.

Outward-looking, internationalist visions that jar with common portrayals of narrow-minded and insular nationalists were echoed in Tom's decision to join the SNP after the referendum, along with a strong sense of a contemporary 'democratic deficit'. Tom posited independence as a means to address broader issues, such as poverty, austerity, and nuclear weapons:

Tom: I mean independence isn't the biggest issue, but those issues kind of make it the biggest issue if that makes sense, because I feel like, in Scotland, you can't address those issues, until we take them into our own hands. We're kind of relying on people down in England voting for a party that might do something about it, but let's face it, the focus on the election in England is about immigration and the EU, the question of poverty barely even comes up.

Russell, similarly, described a sense of 'ownership' of, and perhaps agency in, Scottish politics. This compared to a lack of connection to, and opportunity to influence, UK politics:

Russell: ...'cause you know you look at Dundee and you know, it's not great, there's a lot of poverty and all that kind of stuff, after both Labour and Tory governments it's still here. So you think, you know, you might as well try independence ... well I mean, obviously, it's more detailed than that, but I just thought it would let us make a kind of new politics, which I would have liked to have been part of, you know, whereas, I don't feel ownership of UK politics, in a way that I feel ownership of Scottish politics.

Russell's reflections here seem far from a 'flag-waving' nationalism, but do perhaps speak to a sense of civic nationalism, where political membership is constitutionally defined as well as being complex and embedded (McCormack, 1995).

I am a Nationalist but...

Whilst the interviewees cited above conform to the Yes campaign's self-depiction as progressive 'civic' nationalists, the pro-Independence camp clearly embraced a diversity of participants. By contrast, both Fiona and James explicitly identified themselves as 'Nationalists', in the sense of aligning themselves (or their families) with the SNP. In Fiona's case she distinguished herself from a group of 'socialists' in her area also campaigning for Yes:

Fiona: The day after the referendum, I was going around with [a group], but they are all socialists, which made me kind of think, 'hmmm I'm maybe not sure about this', because I'm a Nationalist, so I went to the branch meeting for the SNP and [a friend] was there so I was talking to him and I was saying 'what would you say to these people who are socialists, they've got to vote SNP' and he was saying 'well just bring up prescriptions, bus passes, anything that you can think of that we've done'.

James describes becoming 'a Scottish Nationalist without really realizing', through discovering Scottish history, otherwise relatively absent from the school curriculum:

James: When I was in primary school we didn't do Scottish history... but [in secondary] I found ... a fascinating little book, and I'd been wanting to study this, for ages, and I thought this whole period, the wars of independence and William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, I was aware of all these Scottish characters, but I didn't

have a good grasp of what they'd actually done, and this one book opened the door to the whole Scottish medieval period... I think it was at that point that I became a Scottish Nationalist without really realizing, if you see what I mean, 'cause I knew that Scotland had been an independent country at one point, and I saw no good reason why it shouldn't be right now.

An explicit disavowal of nationalist politics and sentiment was therefore by no means constant across all interviewees. Between the polar opposites of those who explicitly distanced themselves from the term 'nationalism' and those who explicitly described themselves as Nationalists (usually denoting SNP membership or support) was a blurry spectrum where narratives of social justice blended with ideas of national identity, and where conceptions of 'the left' overlapped with those of 'the nation'. Even in Fiona's account above, socialists are to be won over to the SNP through the social justice frame. The emphasis on such issues helps explain why, despite and because of his 'Nationalist' SNP upbringing, Mike's referendum campaign encounters with the left broadened his reasons to vote Yes:

Mike: ... my reasons for voting Yes changed, 'cause like I say, I was brought up in a very Nationalist family. So when it was first announced it was like, well I'm voting Yes, I think Scotland should be independent. 'Why do you think Scotland should be independent?', well it just should, was kinda like, my only argument at the start. But then ... I got more politically involved... I saw not that Yes was gonna be a miracle and change everything, but that it would open so many more doors to allow change. If we wished to campaign on those issues, it would make it much more easier to, so coming from a very socialist, like I mean even though my family are SNP, they still have left wing values ... I've joined the [Scottish Socialist Party] obviously shows I've got left wing values, I think Yes was a way to get these values actually, 'cause I don't think we're going to do it in the right wing United Kingdom that we have at the minute, with the rise of UKIP and stuff like that.

Conversely, James speaks of being 'sculpted into the perfect young Nationalist' in the context of his left-wing family background:

James: [my family] raised us to have a respect of, treat everyone as your equal, and no-one has any right to rule over you just because of their birth or just because they've got more money or anything like that. It just makes it justice, that sense of social justice, so I think it was instinctive, really instinctive for me to be pro-independence, just because of that whole general upbringing... I was essentially sort of, made, sort of sculpted into the perfect young Nationalist.

Lines of connection between Nationalism, national identity and questions of socialism and social justice run in both directions, and get tangled up in literal combinations of national(ist) symbols with left-politics. James describes his peculiar outfit on the day of the referendum:

James: So I got a couple of, I got like a “vote Yes to keep the Tories out” billboard, placard type thing, and I put that on my front, and I had a saltire from the Yes Kelvin shop on my back, and I used like rubber bands to put through loops to keep it on, and I walked all the way up from Argyle Street, all the way up to the polling station.

These accounts involve complex intersections of the global and the local, of understandings of what counts as ‘national’ and what counts as ‘N/nationalist’. While James chose to wear symbols both of nationalism and of ‘the left’, a different nuance was apparent for Pamela, who saw no reason to explicitly ‘flag’ her Scottishness:

Pamela: It was something I felt like I was a part of, so something you’ve got to defend... ‘cause it was something that I was voting for, it’s my country, it’s where I live, it’s where I was born, it’s everything, aye so... I mean I’m Scottish, I live in Scotland, I dinnae need a flag in my window to show where I live.

For Russell such explicit acknowledgement of national *feeling* had been deliberately underplayed by No supporters in order to distance ‘Better Together’ from British nationalism and to cast Yes as ‘romantic nationalism’:

Russell: I think a lot of the reasons why people were Yes or No were very deeply emotional anyway. I mean the No people would like to think that it’s all rational and they just looked at the cold hard facts and decided that Scotland was better [remaining within the UK] but at base they’re just British nationalists who like the UK. And that’s fine, there’s also Scottish nationalists that like Scotland, but [No campaigners] are kinda, trying to portray themselves as the logical ones and us as the emotional ones, when the reasons for their decisions were just as emotional as ours.

Russell was thus keen to emphasise the hidden or banal *British* nationalism of the No camp. In these young people’s accounts, both sides of the debate operated with an implicit understanding of nationalism as potentially problematic, but also multiple in meaning: nationalism was disavowed by some respondents at the very time that they were (at least partially) mobilising around it. Indeed here it may be that Nairn’s (1995) distinction around upper and lower case Scottish nationalism is usefully

complicated by a recognition of more varied, global, and sometimes negatively-viewed forms of nationalism.

Conclusion

For the young people we spoke to, questions of nation, national identity and nationalism bled into social justice motivations for an independent Scotland. These motivations – concerned with inequalities in respondent's local areas, in Scotland, in the rest of the UK, and in the rest of the world – do not cohere around a singular nationalist narrative. Young people were aware of different takes on nationalism, even identifying different forms of nationalism. While some respondents explicitly distanced their Yes politics from national(ist) sentiment that ideas of nation and national(ist) identity *do* play a role in these young people's political attitudes and engagement - though not in the sensationalist or simplistic way that some accounts might have it.

For all the claims of conflict and division around the referendum, our interviewees articulated nuanced and tempered accounts that recognised the importance of working together. Pamela, thus, expressed annoyance at friends who were 'voting aye' simply because they 'wanted to be Scottish'. Asked if these differences of opinion led to any lasting disagreement, however, Pamela responded: "Not really, nah, 'cause everybody's Scottish at the end of the day, and they're still going to be stuck here whether they voted Yes or No." The importance our respondents placed on working together means that this research can be added to the growing critique of theories of youth and politics that 'overemphasize the importance of individualism and lifestyle politics' (Rheingans and Holland 2012: 1). Whilst some commentators have spoken of communities and families 'rent asunder' by the referendum (McKenna 2014) and the need for 'healing and reconciliation' (Church of Scotland, 2014), the young people we interviewed offer more grounded and hopeful accounts. These see a future inspired not by 'raving' or 'romantic' nationalism, but by a desire for a just and equal Scotland. This accords with McCrone's understanding of contemporary nationalism as 'a response to the problem of who we wish to become' (1998: 183).

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