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Finality, Sir, is not the Language of Politics

Author(s): James Mitchell

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Article text:

Referendums do not necessarily solve the issues they are meant to address, writes James Mitchell. He argues that, similar to the [Scotland independence referendum](#), the EU referendum is unlikely to be definitive, but it will shape the UK's relationship with the EU whatever the outcome.

If David Cameron imagines that the UK's referendum on EU membership will bring closure to an issue that has divided his party and country, then he might reflect on the recent experience following the Scottish independence referendum.

In October 2012, the UK and Scottish Governments signed the [Edinburgh Agreement](#) stating that the referendum should:

- have a clear legal base;
- be legislated for by the Scottish Parliament;
- be conducted so as to command the confidence of parliaments, government and people; and
- deliver a fair test and decisive expression of the views of people in Scotland and a result that everyone will respect.

The Scottish referendum almost achieved these objectives, but nobody could pretend that the Scottish Question has been resolved. The majority against independence was accepted by the Scottish Government but debate continues, further extensions of powers are planned and there is a real prospect of a second independence referendum at some point in the not-too-distant future.

The Scottish Question is as much a live issue today as it was at any time in the previous century. The Scottish National Party (SNP), as the main advocate of independence, has never been stronger. The referendum removed the immediate prospect of Scottish independence but has hardly brought closure or much comfort to the UK Government.

The reasons that the EU referendum is unlikely to bring closure are broadly the same as the Scottish referendum. The UK's European Question is not really one question but several interconnected questions and issues. The European 'primordial soup' continues to change. New issues arise and old questions re-emerge with regularity. The referendum will offer a simple question to answer a complex set of issues.

Both Scottish and EU referendums were about relationships and relationships

require constant attention. It would be rare for some event or decision to define a relationship in perpetuity. Changed circumstances can lead to changed expectations. Even an emphatic vote for or against membership cannot ignore the fact that the UK will need to engage in the European primordial soup. Leaving the EU only means that the UK's engagement with the EU will occur from the outside. It can no more cut itself off from the rest of Europe than an independent Scotland could cut itself off from the rest of the UK.

If the UK votes to remain in the EU, then there is no reason to believe that this will mark a shift to a more positive engagement. There is no equivalent of the *Edinburgh Agreement*. Any hint of civil service involvement on the side of continued membership will be raised as evidence that the referendum was unfair. Far less effort has been made to ensure that losers will consent to the outcome than occurred with the Scottish referendum.

The Scottish referendum now looks to have been an important catalyst altering Scotland's party system. Labour found itself on the winning side in the referendum but at considerable cost as a parliamentary party. The referendum provided the bridge over which a significant body of Labour voters shifted to the SNP. It is quite possible that those who vote against EU membership will have been shaken loose from an already weak association with the Conservatives or Labour. Even if UKIP loses the referendum, it may be able to mobilise a high proportion of opponents of the EU to support it at subsequent elections, especially if there is a widespread perception amongst Eurosceptics that the referendum was unfair.

Referendums have been used by party leaders to manage difficult internal party politics. Such use may offer a temporary means of managing a problem. The EU referendum may well suit David Cameron, especially if he intends to stand down as Prime Minister in a few years' time. If the Scottish independence referendum is an event he would prefer to forget, then he might recall the words of one of his Tory predecessors.

In 1859, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Benjamin Disraeli argued the case for extending the franchise. He expressed the intention to propose a measure that would 'as far as the circumstances of the age in which we live can influence our opinion, will be a conclusive settlement' but admitted that, 'Finality, Sir, is not the language of politics'. Disraeli most certainly did not bring finality to franchise extensions. Indeed, the franchise for the Scottish independence referendum, permitted by the *Edinburgh Agreement*, saw another extension with votes for 16 and 17 year olds.

Author information:

James Mitchell

The University of Edinburgh

Prof James Mitchell FRSE FAcSS is Professor of Public Policy and Co-Director of the Academy of Government at the University of Edinburgh. His research currently focuses on public service reform and his latest book, [The Scottish Question](#) (2014),

sets debates on Scotland's constitutional status into wider historical and public policy contexts.

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