



Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-based policy and law-making within Northern Ireland



Dr Gerry Mooney and
Dr Philip O'Sullivan

Faculty of Social Sciences,
The Open University

*The impact of the
Scottish Independence
Referendum on
Devolution and
Governance in the
United Kingdom*

Introduction

- Reflections on the 2014 Scottish Independence Debate and its consequences for the rest of the UK – and in particular for Northern Ireland
- Emphasis is on the entanglements between constitutional and national(ist) issues and social welfare/social justice issues – for instance UK Government ‘welfare reforms’/cuts
- These were central to the entire Scottish Independence Debate and arguably they are also central now to the future of the UK?



Setting the Scene

- The Scottish Independence Referendum of 18/9/2014 has dramatically transformed the debate about the future of the UK
- A Referendum result that was heralded as saving the Union may now have contributed to its future dissolution
- To the outside world the UK appears a unified entity – one country – with a unified state - misunderstands the nature of the UK as a multinational union of different nations
- The UK is an economic union, a social union, a political union, a military union and a cultural union – *and a welfare union* (at least in the past but now?)
- It is a union wherein welfare (*broadly understood as including health, education, housing etc.*) has played a key role in its development – especially in the post-1945 period - UK 'nation-building' – key to UK membership for the different countries
- However, welfare has long been central in the UK's evolution – e.g. Scotland in 1707 and Northern Ireland since the early 1920s
- And welfare has and is now also playing a key role in its fragmentation.

The UK Constitutional Context Today

Nobody asked to design a political system for Britain would ever propose the one it has. The one-and-a-bit large islands (and many smaller ones) that The Economist calls home are a hotchpotch of parliamentary systems, unevenly distributed powers and constitutional uncertainties. The set-up is as uneven as Britain's history is eventful, which is no coincidence: the causes of the mess date back centuries. The latest upheaval - Scotland's referendum on independence, which ended with a "no" vote on September 18th - has made things untidier still'

(The Economist, September 27, 2014).

The Scottish Independence Referendum has dramatically transformed the debate about the future of the UK



The Scottish Independence Debate: Questions of Social Justice and Social Welfare

- Scotland as an essentially social democratic, socially just, left-leaning society committed to equality, fairness
- ‘Myths’ of Scotland as collectivist and egalitarian – but very potent and politically powerful – have real political effects
- SNP and YES Campaign – strong emphasis on social justice issues – opposition to UK Government welfare ‘reforms’, ‘austerity’ and cuts in social welfare and public services spending
- Strong opposition in Scotland to privatisation of NHS etc
- This was a key plank in the pro-Independence campaign over the past 2 years and in the entire Independence debate.

Promise of More Powers to Scotland: What Does this Mean for the Rest of the UK?

- Huge issues not only for the future of Scotland but for the future of the entire UK
- Increasing resentment in England and demands for English devolution?
- Key role played in all of this by social welfare and social justice issues – entangled with issues of national(ism) and national identity/ies
- Consequences for all of the UK and not least here in Northern Ireland.



An Unsettled Future?

- Scottish Independence Referendum highlighted issues of national identity and allegiance here: threat to the future of the union - averted for now?
- Nicola Sturgeon: *'The debate about Scottish independence is not about identity but about where political and social powers lie'*.
- Can we say the same about devolution and governance here in Northern Ireland?
- Cameron's speech on Sept 19 raised new questions about devolution for the UK. No 'settled will', rather 'a constitutional chain reaction unfolding'
- Driven not only by greater devolution of powers (tax, spending and welfare) to Scotland, but crucially also to England
- *'English votes for English laws'* – the answer to the West Lothian question?
- Cameron (Sept 19): *'Just as the people of Scotland will have more power over their affairs, so it follows that the people of England, Wales and Northern Ireland must have a bigger say over theirs.'*
- What might this mean for Northern Ireland?



Consequences and Questions

- Options for English devolution may lead to a federal UK, home rule
- City Growth Commission (Oct 2014) proposals for regional powers including tax raising – e.g. Greater Manchester
- While Scotland and England demand greater devolution, parties here split on desirability or necessity of additional powers given stalemate over welfare reform
- Serious talk of collapse and return to Direct Rule, yet trajectory elsewhere in UK is anti-Westminster and for greater self-government, not more integration or direct rule
- Welfare impasse not an issue of national identity, yet it still maps the ethno-national divide in Northern Ireland – contrast this with Scotland
- Little agreement on ‘bread and butter’ politics in Northern Ireland?

Related Issues and Questions for N.I.

- Devolution the cause of, or solution to, lack of political progress?
- Smith Commission in Scotland - 14,000 submissions, huge civic engagement
- Could similar political engagement revitalise democracy in Northern Ireland?
- Disillusionment with politics growing, crisis of legitimacy
- Reform of NIA necessary? Streamlining, opposition?
- Financial constraints – reliance on block grant, impact of Treasury cuts, austerity to continue
- English devolution now setting the agenda, reducing NI influence at Westminster?

Back to the Future?

- Implications of post-UK General Election of May 2015, possibility of large UKIP vote – and large SNP vote (November 4 opinion poll in Scotland puts the SNP on 57% for 2015 UK General Election)
- Support for another Scottish Indy Ref – 66% for one another 10 years and 53% for another in 5 years if Tories win in 2015 and have no Scottish MPs
- ‘Minority’ parties might hold the balance of power (Labour potentially reduced to a rump in Scotland)
- If the UK votes to leave the EU – huge implications for Ireland (North and South) and Scotland (more pro-EU support in Scotland for example) (55% of Scots now support another Indy Ref if UK votes in 2017 to leave the EU)
- What does this all mean for the future of the UK and the relationships between different parts of the UK and between the UK, Northern Ireland and Irish Republic?



Northern Ireland
Assembly



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