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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?
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