

# Out of Hours

## Stands Scotland where it did?

For a brief period in September 2014, the Scottish referendum was front-page news around the world. Although the campaigns for and against independence had been running in Scotland for 2 years, an opinion poll 2 weeks before the vote, suggesting a narrow Yes victory, unleashed a torrential rearguard action by UK supporters of the No campaign, including the three main UK political parties, banks, businesses, world leaders, assorted celebrities, and, with the exception of the *Sunday Herald*, every Scottish and UK national newspaper.

Two days before the referendum, the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, and Leader of the Opposition, signed a 'Vow', on the front page of the *Daily Record*, promising increased, unspecified, devolved powers for the Scottish parliament, should there be a No vote. Emerging from political hibernation, former Prime Minister Gordon Brown rediscovered himself as a barnstorming orator, advocate, and guarantor of the Vow in the final days of the campaign. In this way, 'Devo-max', or enhanced powers for the Scottish parliament, which the Prime Minister had vetoed as a third referendum question, returned to the agenda after postal voters, comprising one-sixth of the electorate, had already voted.

On 18 September, the sovereign will of the Scottish people was expressed in a majority No vote, rejecting independence by 55% to 45%, in an unprecedented turnout of 85%, which was said to be the highest turnout in a national election since universal suffrage was introduced to the UK in 1918.

Within 48 hours of the result, Alistair Darling of the Labour Party and Danny Alexander of the Lib-Dems found it necessary to warn of the dire consequences of the Vow not being delivered, in time or substance. The West Lothian question (why can Scottish MPs at Westminster vote on English matters such as health and education, which do not affect their constituents, when English MPs cannot do the same in Scotland?) was introduced to the equation, courtesy of Cameron and threatening, some said, the Labour Party's ability to achieve again a majority at Westminster. Re-avowals of the Vow were quickly made. Despite general agreement in the referendum debate that Scotland contributes more to the UK Exchequer than it gets out (oil revenues helping to

---

*"Just as the No campaign found it profitable to raise fears based on the economy, the Yes campaign profited from raising fears about the NHS."*

---

pay for additional public expenditure), Boris Johnson, continued to contend that 'Scotland's fantastic deal' out of the UK is 'paid for by London taxpayers'.

And so, the referendum was left behind, Scotland disappeared from the front pages, the UK establishment sighed with relief, the Queen was said to have 'purred' with satisfaction, and UK politics rumbled and stumbled its way on.

Both sides were spared the difficulty of a narrow result. Independence is 'off the agenda', but perhaps not 'for a generation'. Four out of nine Scots voted for independence, including majorities of people <55 years of age, 16-17-year olds who were eligible to vote for the first time, and the populations of Glasgow and Dundee.

Surprisingly, many traditional Scottish National Party (SNP) heartlands in the North voted No. Whatever they had been voting for when returning SNP members to the UK and Scottish parliaments, it does not appear to have been independence. In contrast, the traditional heartlands of Scottish Labour voted Yes. While the No vote was dominant, the Yes vote was emergent. The ground has shifted. Within 4 days of the referendum, the SNP attracted more than 26 000 new members, doubling its membership and making it the third largest political party in the UK.

In 7 years, Alex Salmond took his party from opposition, to minority government, to majority government to a coalition for Yes, involving just less than half of the country. By any standard, this rate of progress is astonishing. So also was the nature of the Yes campaign, involving many more people than the SNP and quickly detaching from central control or coordination, with hundreds of spontaneous, autonomous, local groups: an outpouring of democratic discussion and debate the like of which had not been seen in Scotland before.

Just as the No campaign found it profitable to raise fears based on the economy, the Yes campaign profited from

raising fears about the NHS. In practice, the NHS in Scotland and England face similar challenges in terms of ageing populations, resource constraints, and widening health inequality, but are addressing the challenges in different ways. In England, the future of the NHS has been reimagined in partnership with the private sector. In Scotland, while there is no appetite for this, there are hard choices ahead. From furious arguments, we learned that only a Scottish government could privatise NHS Scotland. What was not resolved was whether a Scottish government within the UK could protect NHS Scotland from commercial predators empowered by the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Although health is a devolved matter, the different trajectories of the NHS in England and Scotland perhaps provide a more general explanation of the rising tide for independence. Where England has led, on matters of social and economic policy, Scotland does not wish to follow.

With Nicola Sturgeon expected to take over as the first female First Minister of Scotland, the challenge now for the SNP is to strengthen its position as the natural party of government, making independence the logical next step, rather than a risky jump. For Scottish Labour, the challenge is to re-establish itself as the preferred alternative. For the country as a whole, the challenge is to unite and harness the mass engagement and energy of the referendum campaigns.

Having reached a high point, support for independence could flourish or flounder. Will increased devolved powers for the Scottish parliament defuse the situation? Will Westminster politics continue to estrange the Scottish electorate? Will events unite or disunite the United Kingdom?

**Graham Watt,**  
Professor of General Practice, University of  
Glasgow, Glasgow.  
**E-mail: [graham.watt@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:graham.watt@glasgow.ac.uk)**

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp14X682369