

Books

Reviews



The Battle for Britain: Scotland and the Independence Referendum

David Torrence

Biteback, 370pp, £14.99



The question sounds straightforward enough: ‘Do you think Scotland should be an independent country?’ Yes or no? No third way, no conditions, no promises. It’s make your mind up time.

Or is it? What exactly is Scotland deciding? In *The Battle for Britain*, his detailed analysis of the independence debate, David Torrence argues that September’s referendum is “not a good way of resolving a complex issue”, neglecting what a swathe of Middle Scotland actually wanted (more powers) and failing to qualify the word ‘independence’ in any meaningful way. No post-independence constitution has been put before the people, and Scotland’s future relationship with the

rest of the UK and the EU remains to be negotiated. On a whole raft of vital issues, Scots are voting in the dark.

Torrence, a former aide to Scotland’s only Tory MP, David Mundell, and biographer of First Minister Alex Salmond, even-handedly douses the claims of ‘scaremongering’ unionists and ‘incoherent’ nationalists with bucket loads of ice-cold Highland Spring. In the most revealing chapters, he imagines Scotland ten years from now.

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The Scotland that voted ‘No’ finds itself in a looser, fully-federal UK (although another referendum looms in 2030). The independent Scotland, meanwhile, operates in a highly co-operative ‘partnership’ with England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which looks a lot like, well, a looser, fully-federal UK.

Nationalists tend to “lazily conflate” policy and the constitution, says Torrence, as if dissolving the Union makes all things possible. Salmond sells independent Scotland as a low-

tax ‘Celtic tiger’ with a Swedish welfare state. Sometimes, his case seems to rest entirely on the flimsy veracity of the Laffer curve, the proposition that cutting taxes increases tax revenues. Unionists, meanwhile, often resort to lurid predictions of economic disaster stemming from policies which not even the SNP are advocating.

Living standards, employment and welfare in Scotland will depend on the policies of future Governments or circumstances outside Scotland’s (or the UK’s) control, not on independence *per se*. Torrence quotes the Oxford economist John Kay: “In the modern world, economic sovereignty for small nations is inescapably limited, and political sovereignty is largely symbolic.”

The SNP knows this full well. Hardly a week goes by without Salmond proposing to share some new aspect of running Scotland with the rump UK: a currency union, a shared head of state, common security and immigration policies, joint welfare ‘administration’, a single energy market. “Salmond is offering a new British confederation in everything but name,” enthuses the pro-SNP commentator George Kerevan. Yet none of this has been agreed, or even discussed, with the rest of the UK.

So far, a dismal campaign has presented Scots with the usual choice between two groups of politicians promising to make them better off, neither of whom they believe. “In truth, no one could emerge victorious from a battle over statistics and hypothetical scenarios,” says Torrence. “But what the referendum campaign exposed were weaknesses in both Nationalism and Unionism.”

Nationalists have failed to show why independence is worth having for its own sake or what distinguishes Scotland as a political entity from, say, Wales or the north of England. Unionists have failed to articulate what the United Kingdom is for or what it could be. Yes or No, come September, the big questions may still be unanswered.

Reviewed by Craig Ryan