

THE CONVERSATION

Scotland Decides '14: does anyone really care what celebrities think?

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"If Scotland votes yes, it'll be the end of the Hogwarts Express!" Anthony Devlin, CC BY-SA

Barely a day goes by when there's not another famous face giving a nod or a headshake to independence. Most recently Daniel Radcliffe and veteran Scottish comic actor Stanley Baxter have both said no, while Elijah Wood appeared to come out for yes before later saying he had misunderstood the question. Days earlier it was JK Rowling and the Pope (both on the no side), while pro-independence actor Brian Cox was on the BBC's Scotland 2014 programme last night restating his views. We asked our panel whether any of these interventions made any difference.

Neil Blain, Professor of Media, University of Stirling

I draw a big distinction between comments from the likes of Hilary Clinton or Barack Obama or the chief executives of large multinational companies and celebrities in the narrower, showbiz sense. My sense is that with the showbiz personalities, it's fairly balanced between yes and no, though honestly I doubt very much if they sway anyone. I'm pretty sure that Elijah Wood does not outrank world leaders in terms of importance to voters.

When you look at the overseas politicians and the business leaders, I'm not seeing much encouragement to vote yes. Does this matter? When you get a rash of comments from, let's say, the Chinese and the Americans, many in the Scottish audience will see it simply as the work of the British government and meet it with a certain amount of scepticism.

On the other hand, maybe the drip drip effect could have some influence in the sense that it does seem to reinforce an environment in the media that feels more sympathetic to no than yes. It results in the SNP senior spokespeople continually on the back foot, having to react. Saying that, we're in a situation where **only one poll**, which was commissioned by the SNP, has shown yes to be in the lead. A lot of people who have already made up their minds will not be swayed by these endorsements. Where it might have some effect is on the don't knows.

I don't think we are going to hear from Angela Merkel because she's too smart, but one comment either way would probably make a bigger difference than the rest of them put together. I would count it as a genuine boost if she said Scotland could survive as an independent country.

Chris Whatley, Professor of Scottish History, University of Dundee

I struggle to understand why we take so seriously the views of actors, or singers (other perhaps than singer-songwriters). Actors spend their working lives reading scripts written by other people, and pretending to be someone they're not. Their business is escapism. They're no more political philosophers than a joiner or painter or decorator or anyone else who aspires to master their craft. Why on earth should the thoughts on Scottish independence of a very fine character actor like Brian Cox be worth listening to any more than the proverbial man in the bus queue? In a sense, it's a disappointing reflection of what our politicians think of us if they really are convinced that by rolling out an actor they'll roll in the votes.

Even more bizarre is the practice of calling up the dead. It was not so long ago that a distinguished biographer of Robert Burns declared that Burns would have voted for independence. Interesting.

Burns was notoriously a man of many voices, who expressed his liking for the British constitution as established at the Glorious Revolution of 1688-9. In this respect Burns was a whig. True, he didn't much like the Hanoverians and had a soft spot for the Jacobites, but during his lifetime he wouldn't have voted for independence, as then it wasn't an issue.

Whether Burns would be calling for independence now is simply unknowable, and I certainly can't imagine he'd be able to resist sending up in satirical verse the more pompous of the leading politicians on both sides of the present debate; lines from "To a Louse" come to mind ("O wad some pow'r the giftie gie us/To see oursel's as others see us"). It's conceivable that like many Scots today, his heart would have said yes but that the risks associated with independence — along with the job he had from the British state - would have persuaded him that we were better together.

John Curtice, Professor of Politics, University of Strathclyde/ScotCen Social Research

It is generally thought that if you are holding a referendum on an obscure topic, where

people are therefore looking for cues as to what to think, then what both politicians and celebrities say can make a difference. For example it is very clear that David Cameron's intervention in the AV (alternative vote) referendum in 2011 opposing any change was important in getting Conservative supporters to vote against. But when you are talking about a referendum on a subject about which people have heard a lot and have strong views, such as the Scottish one, then somebody famous saying something is less likely to make much difference.

Will it anybody change their minds because of what JK Rowling thinks? Probably not. But you can see why the no campaign might see her support as beneficial. They know the media will pick the story up. It provides the media with a human interest angle to what otherwise might seem a rather dull political story. It offers a way of covering the referendum in a way that might secure people's interest. But having said that, such endorsements are only one of a number of ways of attracting attention.

To have maximum credibility, it helps if the person has a long-term engagement with the issue. As a long-term independence supporter, Elaine C Smith clearly has credibility on the issue. I am not sure how influential she is, but she can certainly argue the case as effectively as any politician can. Beyond that, the celebrity needs to be squeaky clean and they need to say the right things. JK Rowling actually wrote quite a good summary of some of the key arguments in the campaign so far – and may thus have helped to generate some publicity for them.

I am not sure it is clear that the no campaign is ahead when it comes to celebrity endorsements. It may well be among what one might call "mainstream English language culture," but you probably could not say that of those involved in the Scottish arts scene, and certainly not the folk or traditional music scenes. And how many celebrities have come out anyway? There are plenty of Andy Murrays out there saying, "I'm not telling you".



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