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New Scots and Migration in the Scottish Independence Referendum

Eve Hepburn

Abstract

This article explores how the issue of immigration was debated by Scottish and UK political actors during the Scottish independence referendum. It considers the longer-term positions of Scottish elites on immigration, before focussing on the ways in which the Yes camp's liberal, multiculturalist approach contrasted sharply with the more restrictive, assimilationist position of the UK Government. The article concludes by considering Scottish voter attitudes towards immigration, before reflecting on the reasons why Scottish parties have adopted a welcoming approach to New Scots.

Bio

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Introduction

A few months before the referendum on Scottish Independence, the Scottish Government published a document entitled *New Scots: Integrating Refugees in Scotland's Communities*. Although there was little fanfare surrounding the document, the contents were quietly telling of the SNP's position on an issue that could have, in other scenarios, undermined the case for independence. Rather than viewing migrants as a threat to Scotland's distinct identity or culture, *New Scots* set out a vision of a 'society in which social justice, equality and human rights are at its heart ... We want to ensure that everyone – no matter their race, religion, cultural background – is given an equal opportunity' (Scottish Government, 2013a: 1). This strongly multiculturalist orientation was quite unusual in the UK, contrasting sharply with both the UK's refugee integration strategy, which placed an emphasis on the requirement for migrants to adopt 'British values' (Home Office, 2007; Hepburn, 2014), as well as the increasingly restrictive position of the UK's mainstream parties on immigration (Bale, 2014; Hepburn and Rosie, 2014).

The Scottish Government document also made a break from other minority nationalist approaches to immigration. For instance, in the last weeks of the referendum campaign in Scotland, a senior Parti Québécois (PQ) figure stated that 'They managed to find a place for newcomers in Scotland. I think we have to do the same here in Quebec' (quoted in Plante, 2014). He was referring to the Yes camp's efforts to welcome immigrants into the Scottish nation and to encourage them to support independence. His admission was a salient one. When Quebec's second referendum on independence in 1995 failed by the smallest of margins, PQ leader Jacques Parizeau infamously blamed it on 'the ethnic vote'. This was a reference to Quebec's sizeable immigrant population and their tendency to learn English (rather than French) and, relatedly, to be socialised into the anglophone federalist perspective rather than the francophone independentist one. The Quebec nationalist movement is not the only one that has faced challenges in integrating newcomers: the Catalans and Basques have also sought to stress their liberal credentials and openness to migrants (despite their emphasis on the need to assimilate migrants into the minority language), while the Flemish and Northern Italian nationalist movements have portrayed

migrants as the dangerous 'Other' that threatens the nation (Hepburn, 2009, 2011; Jeram, 2013; Adam, 2013).

Not so in Scotland. Contrary to some assumptions in the academic literature that all 'nationalisms' are inherently exclusivist and monocultural (Hobsbawm, 1990; Ignatieff 1993), the Scottish National Party (SNP) has articulated what many of its opponents acknowledge as an 'impeccable' civic nationalism that welcomes immigrants and ethnic minorities as part of Scotland's rich 'tartan tapestry' of faiths and cultures (Hamilton, 1999; see also Leith, 2008). Indeed, while many European countries have moved away from the pro-diversity model towards more neo-assimilationist forms of civic integration (Joppke, 2007), Scotland has bucked the trend by holding firmly to a multicultural course (Hepburn, 2014). As a result, and to the surprise of many international commentators, the referendum in Scotland had very little to do with an essentialising and exclusivist culture; instead, the SNP put forward a vision of an independent Scotland of 'many cultures' and boldly stated its (unusual) aim of supporting increased immigration.

One Scotland: The Multicultural Discourse

To understand the position of the Yes camp on immigration, it is helpful to put these political debates into historical context. The Scottish National Party – and indeed all of Scotland's parties – have in recent decades adopted pro-diversity and pro-immigration positions. The multiculturalist orientation was first evident in the early 2000s when Scotland's first executive, led by a Scottish Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition, launched the 'One Scotland, Many Cultures' campaign. The One Nation campaign involved the promotion of race equality and multiculturalism in school curricula and the funding of cultural groups in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2006). The principles underlying the One Scotland campaign have subsequently been endorsed by SNP governments (Hepburn, 2015). In particular, the theme of multiculturalism and openness to newcomers was underlined in the *New Scots* policy mentioned earlier, which seeks to create 'cohesive, multi-cultural communities' and recognise 'the contribution that refugees can make by enriching our cultural diversity' (Scottish Government, 2013a: 9, 7). Indeed, the Scottish Government's choice of term *new Scots* suggests that 'those arriving in Scotland from elsewhere could stake some sort of claim to national belonging' (Hepburn and Rosie, 2014).

The principles of the One Scotland campaign also segued into the Fresh Talent initiative of 2004-8, which focused on increasing migration flows to Scotland. The Fresh Talent Working in Scotland Scheme (FTWiss) allowed international graduates who had pursued studies at a Scottish university to live and work in Scotland for two years without the need for a work permit directly after graduation. The FTWiss narrative portrayed Scotland as a land of immigrants, welcoming 'bright, talented, hardworking people who can make a positive contribution to the Scottish economy' (Scottish Executive, 2005). The scheme's attempt to increase immigration to Scotland was therefore underpinned by an emphasis on pluralism. As Penrose and Howard (2008: 106) maintain, 'the Scottish Executive's desire to establish a history of diversity can be seen as a strategy for dissolving fear of ongoing immigration and attendant social change.' It was also part of a bigger argument that immigration was necessary to maintain demographic and economic growth.

These aims – of moderately increasing immigration to meet labour market needs and of welcoming migrants in a multicultural Scotland – have received broad support across Scotland’s political parties, trades unions, universities, businesses and civil society. For instance, in contrast to the increasingly anti-immigrant debates amongst political parties elsewhere in the UK, Scotland’s parties have ‘carefully crafted an elite discourse that portrays immigrants as key players in an open, inclusive and multicultural Scotland’ (Hepburn and Rosie, 2014). Even Scottish Conservatives have argued that ‘Scotland has benefited overall from immigrant communities wherever they have come from ... of course we should bring people in. We have plenty of space!’ (author’s interview with Scottish Conservative MSP, 20 November 2012). A more liberal immigration policy is also supported by Scottish universities, which seek to attract the highest calibre international students, and civil society organisations have supported efforts to protect the human rights of refugees and asylum seekers.

Immigration and Scotland’s Future

How important was the issue of immigration in the referendum campaigns? On the face of it, immigration was not as salient to Scottish voters as the economy, the welfare state and the NHS, which were the primary battlegrounds in the referendum (Henderson, 2015). In one pre-referendum study immigration and asylum ranked 5th in a list of issues deciding the referendum vote in Scotland – far behind the economy (which ranked 1st). The study also noted that the migration issue was ‘less salient’ in Scotland as compared to England & Wales (Migration Observatory, 2014:7-8).

However, immigration remained a key cleavage between the Yes and the No camps. To begin with the latter, the Scottish Government set out their vision of immigration in their white paper, *Scotland’s Future: Your Guide to an Independence Scotland*. The document advocated an inclusive and multicultural model of citizenship in an independent Scotland:

Migrants have played an important part throughout Scottish history in enriching and renewing our culture and boosting the economy of the country ... Scotland is already a welcoming society that is stronger for being a culturally rich and diverse nation and will continue to be so.
Scottish Government (2013b: 269, 271)

This position on migrant integration tallies with the SNP’s self-perception as a democratically inclusive party: ‘we are always very keen to emphasize that this is a civic nationalist party; we are based on the community... rather than it being based on some kind of strange ideal of what it means to be ethnically Scottish’ (author’s interview with SNP MSP, 21 November 2012). Although the SNP’s emphasis on multiculturalism marks a strong contrast with the neo-assimilationist approach of the UK government (Lewis and Craig, 2014), the No camp did not seek to challenge the Yes camp on its declared preference for multiculturalism. Instead, the No camp focussed its energies on issues relating to immigration control.

One of the Yes camp’s most contested policies was to increase the level of migration to Scotland, which directly challenged the UK government’s efforts to decrease net migration. SNP leaders Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon consistently criticized UK

immigration policies as ‘damaging’ to the interests of Scotland. *Scotland’s Future* noted that:

Westminster has also adopted an aggressive approach to immigration ... culminating in the recent controversy over advertisements to tell people to leave the UK and “go home”. Scotland has a different need for immigration ... Healthy population growth is important for Scotland’s economy. Scottish Government (2013b: 267).

Thus the SNP stated during the referendum that it wanted to raise Scotland’s demographic growth rate to the EU average (ibid). This was part of the Scottish Government’s perception that attracting and retaining migrants was a key driver of population and economic growth in Scotland, as well as a way of enriching Scotland’s ‘cultural diversity’ and international linkages (Scottish Government, 2013b: 269).

In response the UK Government opposed the Scottish Government’s plans as ‘undermining’ the work they had done in scaling back immigration (*The Guardian*, 2012). Here, the UK approach has been driven by the perception that there is *too much* immigration; that the UK’s social benefits to migrants are too generous; and that migrants were failing to integrate – leading to pockets of extremism (Spencer, 2011). Together, these concerns fuelled the rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which increased its vote share significantly in the local and EU elections of 2014, and was seen as a major threat to both major UK parties in the general election of 2015.

With these considerations in mind, UK Home Secretary Theresa May argued that different immigration policies in Scotland and the rest of the UK (rUK) would necessitate stricter controls, including border posts and passport checks (*The Guardian*, 2012). These debates were linked to whether Scotland would have to join the Schengen Area upon membership of the European Union (EU). The Yes campaign insisted that Scotland would not be required to join Schengen and would instead create a Common Travel Area. No campaigners retorted that a CTA would be impossible if Scotland had a different immigration strategy.

Thus the No campaign sought to highlight the perils of a more liberal immigration system in an independent Scotland. But interestingly, the ‘dangers’ were not to Scotland itself (unlike many of the other big issues in the campaign, such as the economy), the currency and the NHS: instead the No campaign sought to protect the interests of rUK. In particular, border-posts were only supported by the UK Government (not the Scottish Government), ironically conjuring a hackneyed image (see, e.g., *The Guardian*, 2012) of Hadrian’s Wall in keeping out the unwanted Scots, though this time it would be a ‘tide’ of unwanted *immigrants*, using Scotland as some kind of back-door into the rUK that the border was meant to keep out.

What Scottish voters think

How did these debates play out with the Scottish voter? Research by Oxford Migration Observatory has revealed that public opinion in Scotland is moderately more positive about immigration than in the rest of the UK. While more Scots want to reduce migration than to increase it, there is less opposition to immigration in

Scotland than in the rest of the UK (58% in Scotland support reduced immigration compared to 75% in England/Wales). More people in Scotland think immigration is good for Scotland (41%) than say it is bad for Scotland (31%), while 20% of Scots would support the number of immigrants being increased by 'a lot', compared to only 2% in favour of increased flows in the south of England. The Observatory has put the more positive Scottish attitudes down to Scotland's more 'tolerant political culture' (Migration Observatory, 2014).

What about the views of Scotland's migrant community on independence? First, it is interesting to note that the SNP (and other Yes groups) made a point of welcoming ethnic minorities and immigrants into their ranks, for instance through the creation of groups such as Scots Asians for Yes, EU Citizens for Independence, and English People for Scottish Independence. This inclusive strategy was a continuation of the SNP's efforts to increase the participation of immigrants and minorities in its party ranks and to mobilise them towards independence (see Hepburn, 2011). Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon made a number of high-profile speeches to ethnic and migrant groups during the referendum campaigns in order to win their support. As Sturgeon stated at one event, 'I don't care where you have come from... If you choose to make Scotland your home and you do this country the privilege of making it your home, then you have as much say in the future of our country as anyone else' (quoted in Ng, 2014).

Similarly, following reports of an opinion poll that revealed a surge in support for independence amongst Scottish Asians (see Duffy, 2014), Salmond asserted that 'I'm absolutely confident that whatever else happens, the majority of Africans, the majority of Asians, the majority of people who come from a variety of Scotlands will vote yes to independence' (quoted in Ng, 2014). But did Salmond's assumption hold true? A panel survey by University of Edinburgh academics before and after the referendum revealed that immigrants were just as split on the issue of independence as native Scots, with 43% of people born outside of the UK supporting independence, and 57% opposing it (Henderson, 2015). This finding was very similar to the overall results for the referendum (45% Yes to 55% No), indicating that migrants may have interpreted the independence debates just like any other Scots; a possible sign of their successful integration (or at least, political socialisation) into Scottish society.

Conclusions: explaining the Scottish approach

The issue of immigration in the Scottish independence referendum debates pitted the Scottish Government against the UK Government, rather than pitting the SNP and Yes supporters versus the unionist parties in Scotland. This is because the Scottish Labour, Scottish LibDem, and to some extents the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party have had similar *rhetorical* approaches to immigration as the SNP. In contrast, the *policy* approaches of the Scottish Government and Conservative-led UK Government on immigration and migrant integration have, in many ways, been diametrically opposed.

Why has the SNP – and other Scottish political parties – pursued a liberal approach to immigration? First is the demographic situation and the perception of Scotland's different migration needs compared to (in particular the southeast of) England. In Scotland, there have been concerns of an ageing population and the need to fill key

gaps in the labour market through increased immigration, which motivated the Fresh Talent initiative. Secondly, those born outwith the UK make up only 7% of the overall Scottish population (compared to 13% in England & Wales), and the general perception is that Scotland's migrant communities have integrated fairly well into Scottish society. For instance, research conducted by Hussein & Miller (2005) revealed that Muslim Pakistanis in Glasgow consider themselves more Scottish than British, and they were more likely to vote for the SNP than other Scots. A final reason why Scottish parties have been able to maintain liberal positions is arguably because of Scotland's lack of power on the issue. Holyrood's lack of competence over immigration policy allows it to avert responsibility – and culpability – to the UK Government on unpopular aspects of immigration (Hepburn and Rosie, 2014). This may explain why the Scottish Government was able to subdue the potentially negative effects of increased immigration during the referendum debates.

Yet while immigration remained a relatively muted concern during the referendum on independence, it is likely to take centre-stage in the next referendum that Scots will be asked to vote in: the proposed UK referendum on EU membership. Here, UK Prime Minister David Cameron has made immigration a key 'red line' in his negotiations with the EU, seeking "new mechanisms ... to prevent vast migrations across the Continent" upon further EU enlargement (Cameron, 2014). It is here that one expects to see the greatest battle on immigration, given that the Scottish and UK Governments have radically different position on migrant rights as well as migrant flows. Furthermore, a recent opinion poll has revealed that a clear majority of Scots (66%) wishes to continue membership of the EU compared to only half (51%) of people in England (Panelbase, 2015). If Scotland opposes the restriction of EU migrant flows, and votes against the UK leaving the European Union, this scenario would, in the words of Nicola Sturgeon, constitute a 'material change in circumstances' that may well provide the popular justification necessary for a second referendum on independence.

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