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Scottish independence: what does the diaspora think?

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ABSTRACT

Scottish independence is a matter for debate, not only in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK, but also in the Scottish diaspora. Their views have rarely been sought, yet they will have a view on the constitutional future of their homeland. This paper draws on research on attitudes to independence within the diaspora, and concludes that individuals in North America generally favour independence more than those in England. But attitudes are changing, partly because of Brexit, and partly related to the UK Conservative government, which is seen as not reflecting Scottish views and values. Independence is now considered more positively.

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Introduction

The cause of Scottish independence is not new, with the main independence-supporting political party, the Scottish National Party (SNP) being formed in 1934, an amalgamation of smaller parties. Initial strategies for achieving self-government were sometimes vague but by the 1960s, the creation of a fully independent nation was the goal, later adapted in the 1980s to ‘independence in Europe’ as a member state within the EU (Lynch, 2002). The first major SNP breakthrough came with the Hamilton by-election in 1967, leading to continuous representation at Westminster (Mitchell, 2017). In 1999, the devolved Scottish Parliament was established, with significant powers, although the areas of defence, foreign affairs, macro-economic policy and much of social security remained with Westminster. In 2007, the SNP formed the Scottish Government for the first time, remaining in government to the present day. Although a Scotland-wide referendum on independence held in 2014 produced a 55%–45% decision to remain within the UK, contemporary polling analysis has shown closer results and occasional pro-independence majorities (politics.co.uk, 2023).

The constitutional debate has continued in both Westminster and Holyrood, and in the media. Opinion polling since 2014 has tended to be limited to Scotland – and occasionally England, but Scottish independence has been discussed worldwide, and often within Europe, mainly relating to the question of whether an independent Scotland might become an EU member state. There has, however, been limited analysis of independence attitudes within the Scottish diaspora, although its members would be impacted by

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independence, not least in relation to their sense of national identity and their potential citizenship of a newly independent country.

The diaspora itself is varied in nature, with Rutherford (2009) identifying sub-groups, including the *lived* diaspora (born, brought up or educated in Scotland), the *ancestral* diaspora (living elsewhere but with Scottish ancestry) and the *affinity* diaspora (individuals with a looser connection to Scotland but without direct family ties). The Scottish Government recognises each sub-group as being part of the diaspora and in developing diaspora policy over the last two decades, always on a cross-party basis, has focused on the cultural, social and economic cases for engagement (Ancien et al., 2009; Leith & Sim, 2022a). Indeed, Ancien et al noted the potential for such engagement to offset Scottish population decline, and resultant economic decline by attracting the diaspora to return; this they tended to dismiss slightly, but recent Census data shows that it is still an issue (National Records of Scotland, 2023).

Ancien et al did discuss whether it would be easier to engage with the diaspora as an independent nation, or as part of the UK (2009, p. 28). Members of the diaspora itself were not able to vote in the 2014 referendum, although there were important changes to the franchise. The vote was given to 16- and 17-year-olds, and also to all EU citizens then residing in Scotland but excluding anyone *previously* resident in Scotland who was no longer on the electoral register. The extension of voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds attracted attention, whereas the exclusion of former Scottish residents appeared to pass with limited comment. Perhaps the disenfranchisement of 'non-resident Scots' was the only workable position, since drawing up a register based on either birth or previous residence in Scotland would have been exceptionally difficult and probably inaccurate (Shaw, 2014). Furthermore, evidence from the United Nations Human Rights Committee indicated that a franchise based on criteria other than residence could have implications regarding international recognition of the outcome and would also be considerably more expensive (Mycock, 2014). Thus, rather than politically empowering the Scottish diaspora, the Scottish Government decided against extending the franchise on any aspect other than residency in Scotland.

In addition, there was a belief that the diaspora were likely to vote for the status quo, thereby skewing the vote against independence, and rendering the result more challengeable (Berry & Berry, 2014). The Scottish Referendum Survey (Henderson & Mitchell, 2015) confirmed that those living in Scotland but born outside the UK tended to vote 'No' (57.1%) but this was only slightly greater than the overall 'No' vote. The largest 'No' vote was among those born elsewhere in the UK (72.1%). Women tended to vote 'No' while support for 'Yes' declined with age, with older people supporting the status quo (McInnes et al., 2014).

But, as we have noted, members of the diaspora were unable to vote at all and so their views were not recorded. In this paper, therefore, we have sought to ascertain how diaspora Scots (whether or not born in Scotland) actually feel about the prospect of their homeland becoming an independent country, and how or if they themselves might be affected. In this paper, we use information obtained from a range of research studies with the diaspora over a number of years to explore their views, and the extent to which these may or may not have changed.

Diasporas and independence movements

Diasporas have often played a significant role in nation-building. It is generally agreed that the Irish diaspora was highly effective in assisting the establishment of the Republic of Ireland, for

example (Boyle, 2001), while Czechs and Slovaks in America were the driving force behind the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918, after the First World War (Adamson, 2016).

The collapse of Communist states in eastern Europe more recently provides us with further examples. In Estonia, for example, large-scale emigration had begun in the 1850s, often to other parts of Russia. After Estonian independence in 1991, there was an important reverse flow of migrants back to Estonia, initially in 1992 with the repatriation of Estonians from parts of the Caucasus. A formal policy of return migration was adopted and during the early years of independence to 1996, over 1,200 Estonians returned from elsewhere in Russia. Although this number is small, it is significant relative to the size of the country (Kulu, 2000).

Croatia is another state which gained its independence in 1991. Its first president, Franjo Tuđman, previously imprisoned for his political activities, spent time in North America encouraging the Croatian diaspora to mobilise and he successfully raised substantial amounts of money for his newly formed political party, HDZ. It is estimated that, around the world, Tuđman raised between 1.5 and 2 million dollars and so the diaspora had a significant impact on the achievement of Croatian independence (Ragazzi, 2009).

Indeed, a key role of diasporas has been in fund-raising for nationalist movements and, again, Ireland is a good example. Prior to Irish independence, Eamon de Valera, recognising the importance of building transatlantic networks, travelled to the USA in 1919 to raise money, partly through the creation of a new Irish Victory Fund and partly through the issuing of bonds, with individual Irish-Americans lending money to their homeland (Lainer-Vos, 2012). Duffy (2021, p. 80) emphasises the importance of de Valera's speeches, which 'posited a broad definition of belonging to the global Irish nation that allowed for dual allegiances to the homeland and the host country – an elasticity which benefited the nationalist movement'.

In addition to the sending of remittances, diasporas have an important lobbying role and may act as advocates for their homelands. Such lobbies may influence foreign policy by framing debates, providing information and policy analysis and by rewarding policy makers that support their goals (Lainer-Vos, 2010). As a country of immigration, with numerous diasporas within it, the United States is home to a number of diaspora lobby groups.

The rise of a global media has aided such activities and new technologies allow dispersed populations to engage in transnational politics in real time (Adamson, 2016). Candan and Hunger (2008), for example, show how Kurds in Germany have lobbied for a Kurdish homeland, by using the internet to create Kurdish supporting websites, with maps, symbols and flags. Such activities may be referred to as 'moderate activism' and Koinova (2013) uses the example of the Kosovar community in the UK, mostly comprising ethnic Albanians. In supporting Kosovan independence, activities included opening a Saturday school for Albanian children, a mosque, and an online UK-Albanian discussion forum. To use a Scottish example, one of the most active pro-independence websites, and associated social media sites, is Wings over Scotland, whose stated aims are to focus particularly on the media – whether mainstream print and broadcast organisations or the online and social-network community – as well as offering its own commentary and analysis. It is run from Bath in the west of England.

In its more extreme manifestation, diasporas have also funded or smuggled arms or supported armed conflict. An obvious example is the Irish Northern Aid Committee (Noraid) which was established in America in 1970, during the Northern Ireland Troubles.

Although Noraid claimed that resources raised were intended for humanitarian relief, it was accused by the British, Irish and American governments of being a front for the IRA (Wilson, 1995). More recently, ethnic conflict in eastern Europe has often been supported by diaspora groups. Skrbiš (2007), for example, suggests that the involvement of diasporas in conflicts became more common with the realignment of ethno-national units, after the disintegration of both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Indeed, the present war in Ukraine has prompted the Ukrainian diaspora to leverage their connections and capital to raise money for humanitarian relief and military support (Hincu, 2022).

In contrast, Scottish diaspora activity has been relatively low key. There are many Scottish diaspora organisations around the world but these are mostly concerned with culture and heritage. Some raise funds for heritage groups in the homeland and assist in the preservation and restoration of historic buildings, for example, but, as Prentis (2008, p. 284) says in relation to the Scots-Australians, 'unlike Irish identity in Australia, Scottish identity has been embraced ... in a broad and fairly vague, apolitical and non-ideological way'. So, there has been little political activity supporting Scottish independence, and the SNP has few branches outside Scotland.

That does not, of course, mean that the diaspora is uninterested in Scottish political activity or indeed in the demand for independence and they often strongly emphasise their sense of a Scottish national identity. But so far, analysis has been generally absent, a position we are seeking here to address.

Methodology

We have elicited the views of the Scottish diaspora on independence over many years, conducting our research 2003. We have undertaken studies in North America (Sim, 2011), Europe (Leith & Sim, 2017; Sim & Leith, 2014), England (Leith & Sim, 2019), and Scotland (Sim & Leith, 2013) and their focus has ranged considerably, from explorations of identity, to membership of Scottish clan associations (Leith & Sim, 2016a), the impact of Tartan Day (Sim, 2011) and awareness of Scottish government diaspora policies (Leith & Sim, 2016b). More recently, we have conducted two online surveys, of members of the diaspora returning to Scotland (Leith & Sim, 2022a) and of Scots living in England following Brexit (Leith & Sim, 2022b). We always began by recruiting a small number of respondents via social media, through Scottish diaspora groups or personal contacts. Our sample was then snowballed to include a much wider range of interviewees.

Because our focus varied, no two surveys were the same, but we always took the opportunity to ask questions about Scottish politics. We did not ask specifically about Scottish devolution, as this was already a fact before we undertook our research and we quickly found that the diaspora was generally well-informed about its development. But we took the opportunity to ask about attitudes to possible future constitutional change, in particular independence, and we amassed interview data over time from 212 individuals. For this study, we contacted previous respondents to ask very specific questions about their views on independence and whether those views had changed since 2014. This exercise resulted in data from 54 individuals, across a wide range of locations, both within and outside Scotland.

We now proceed to analyse this data and use quotes from our respondents to illustrate our analysis. We do not pretend that our data is exhaustive but it has been gathered from

a range of individuals and locations which gives us some reassurance that it is broadly representative of diasporic views. We should, however, state that our data often included personal histories, for example about family emigration, but many stories concerned distant ancestors and would not always have been accurate. Similarly, our attempts to discuss national identities using the 'Moreno question' (Moreno, 1988) proved difficult because of the range of overlapping identities (North American, European etc) and so we have concentrated on the factual aspects of our data (birthplace, gender, age etc). We focused here very specifically on political views.

What does the diaspora think?

In our analysis, we begin by considering the 212 responses which we obtained prior to 2022. This is because our 54 respondents in 2022 were asked specifically about changes in their views of independence over time, and so we consider that data separately.

For the 212 initial responses, we divide them into those who favoured, and those who opposed, Scottish independence. We then include two further categories. One covers those who believed that they did not know enough about the issue to express a view. The other covers those who were reasonably informed but felt genuinely ambivalent about the issue; in the main this reflected the fact that, as these individuals no longer lived in Scotland, they believed that it was perhaps inappropriate to express a view.

Geographical location

We begin by exploring the range of views by the location of the diaspora concerned. Table 1 shows that overall, there was a majority in favour of independence, but a substantial number of 'Don't Knows' or 'Ambivalent'. That said, there were some interesting variations across the data. Americans tended to favour independence, as did members of the diaspora who had chosen to return to Scotland. Scots in England were generally opposed, while those living in northern Europe were more evenly split. In this case, the role of the EU was significant and we discuss this in more detail later in the paper.

Table 1. Location and attitudes to independence.

Location	Attitude to independence			
	In favour	Against	Don't Know	Ambivalent
USA				
Colorado 2003	14	4	2	2
New York 2007	5	2	2	2
N.W. Europe				
Belgium 2011	7	3	1	0
Netherlands 2011	5	8	7	0
France 2011	12	18	3	8
England				
Merseyside 2009	5	6	0	0
Shropshire 2009	1	3	3	1
Scots post-Brexit (online 2020/1)	12	23	2	5
Scotland				
Diaspora Returners, (online 2020)	27	11	2	6
Total	88	78	22	24

As far as those in America were concerned, interviewed in 2003 and 2007, responses were quite varied. Within the group favouring independence, responses ranged from the rather '*Braveheart*' approach:

Oh gosh yes! I would try to get Scottish citizenship ... I would move there in a heartbeat. I absolutely would ... and I would become a Scottish citizen if I could (Male, Colorado, 35)

To a more considered view:

If you look at countries that have split, like Czechoslovakia, then there are certain criteria. Where do the people look to their leadership? ... I would say the people look to Edinburgh. They don't look to London as their spiritual leader. Where the people look is ultimately where they want to be governed (Male, New York, 58).

Some Americans drew comparisons with Ireland, which they viewed as a successful nation which had become independent from the UK. They believed Scotland could be similarly successful but would be horrified if violence was involved:

I'd feel great about [independence] but the division in Ireland is frightening. My husband and his brother went and crossed the border into Northern Ireland. They were under surveillance the whole time ... with guns pointing at them. I don't think you would have that same problem (Female, Colorado, 77).

That said, some people believed that secession was not to be encouraged, perhaps recalling American history in this regard:

I don't think I would support that. The best analogy I would give is I would not support a state breaking away from the United States. I think there are certain things that can be done on a state level, but there are many things that you need to have consistency throughout (Female, Colorado, 71).

Members of the diaspora who had returned to Scotland and who were interviewed in 2020, were also broadly supportive of Scottish independence and indeed, the possibility of its happening was sometimes a factor in return.

It's part of the reason we relocated our business to Scotland – we are counting on independence happening. We would be excited and optimistic and eager to roll up our sleeves (Male, 48).

Ultimately, I think it would be fairer for Scotland as the number of Scottish seats in the UK parliament will always be swamped by the number of other seats. My observations are that the issues people face in Scotland and England are quite different (Female, 48).

Others were hostile to independence, but pointed out the extent to which Scotland was often ignored at Westminster:

I'd be truly saddened. I think English people don't realise just how separate Scotland is. As someone who worked in Whitehall, I feel that it is very far away, very London-centric and not perhaps relevant to the people of Scotland (Male, 35).

I'd be likely to leave Scotland. Nationalism is wrong (Male, 39).

Brexit – the decision by the UK to leave the European Union – was cited by several people as a factor in beginning to change their minds on independence, particularly if an independent Scotland was able to rejoin the EU.

During the run up to the 2014 referendum, I was distressed. I was living in England and felt as though I would be disenfranchised and stateless had Scotland voted for independence. Increasingly with a hard Brexit and the current leadership of the Conservative Party, I begin to feel that I would not mind an independent Scotland (Female, 67).

I was extremely anti-independence whilst living in England. However, following Brexit and the changes to behaviour and politics in England, I would be more welcoming of another vote and would give more consideration to independence (Female, 39).

I feel the Scottish electorate more closely mirrors my own opinion on political matters regarding inclusion and social justice (compared to the rest of the U.K.), so feel it is more likely that I will end up living in the kind of country I want to live in. I also want to ensure close links to the rest of Europe are kept, and that is more likely in an independent Scotland (Male, 40).

Scots who were still living in England, interviewed both in 2009 and in 2020/1, were however, in the main, opposed to independence.

I would find it sad because ... Britain's a small country in the world nowadays. It's lost its empire, it's not as strong as it was. In my opinion, we should stick together and make it a better place ... I would hate to have to have a passport to cross the border (Male, 70s)

We have been a United Kingdom for so long that it would be extremely difficult to extricate ourselves from the Union. Moreover, I believe that we should be trying to unite the world, not rip it apart. (Male, 68).

There were some who supported independence however:

You're breaking up Great Britain. But the principles of an independent Scotland, I think, are good because they could then negotiate for what is best for Scotland (Male, 30s).

I think independence would be a good idea. Because Scotland does have a separate identity and it must be galling for somebody in Aberdeen being governed by somebody 500 miles away who doesn't know anything about what they do or who's never been there. If I could, I would vote for it. (Female, 47)

In the main, however, it was clear that most Scots in England were anxious about becoming 'foreigners' in England, as a result of Scottish independence and felt that the UK should remain united.

Perhaps our most interesting responses came from the interviews we conducted in Belgium, the Netherlands and France in 2011. Support for Scottish independence was weaker, with more people opposing it than supporting it, although there were significant numbers who expressed ambivalence. But the key objection to Scottish independence was the danger of an independent Scotland being outside the EU. Because our interviewees lived and worked in the EU, they believed strongly that decisions should be made at a European level.

Well, I am not really for the independence of Scotland. Because we are all European now and have to stay together. So, what is the use of nations suddenly wanting independence? They have to work together. OK, each country keeps its national identity, but for politics and general government, it must be European (Female, 66).

I don't have strong views either way, to be honest. I have a strong sense of Scottish identity. So, in some sense, it would be nice to have our own country but I wonder what the importance is these days. We have the EU and everything is going to a more European level (Male, 31).

Even those who supported independence did so, in the belief that Scotland would become an EU member state and would be able to contribute to the wider European project:

When I was working in the [European] Council, I used to find it frustrating in a way, We supported the country that holds the Presidency at the time. So, I might be sitting next to the person from the country of the Presidency, taking notes ... But I'd be sitting next to a Finn or an Irish person and you'd think, 'Hey, this country's actually smaller than Scotland and yet here they are, running the EU for six months. Why can't we be doing that, you know?' So, the EU's changing and there's more of a norm that there are lots of smaller states (Female, 30s).

We have a great deal of support politically. I wouldn't expect anybody to tell us that independence is a good idea for Scotland. It's a matter of our choice. But there's certainly nobody saying it's a bad thing. And the [European] Commission will take a realistic view when that day comes (Male, 37).

I think the SNP are viewed positively because we are very much in the European mainstream. We're civic nationalists in that we have members from all ethnic and religious backgrounds. We talk about what independence could achieve rather than having resentments about 'the other' (Male, 30s).

Of course, these interviews were conducted in 2011. The then UK government was becoming more Eurosceptic and the Conservative-led coalition was increasingly under pressure by the growing UK Independence Party (UKIP) to hold a referendum on EU membership. Five years later, when this was finally held, the UK voted to leave the EU.

This decision has had an impact on the arguments for Scottish independence and in our online survey of Scots living in England after Brexit, which we carried out in 2020/1, it was clear that there were already some shifts in opinion:

I think Scotland is safer and stronger as part of the UK. However, I feel that the Brexit vote has raised the question as to whether Scotland should now have the option to vote to remain part of Europe, rather than part of Britain. (Female, 56).

Pre-Brexit, I was against independence mainly for economic considerations. I am somewhat undecided now. However it may be the way to go to get back into the major EU trading bloc. (Male, 82).

Since Brexit I believe that we should become an independent nation. (Male, 64)

The SNP has argued that Brexit is a significant change of circumstances from those that prevailed at the time of the 2014 referendum. Indeed, one of the key planks of the unionist 'Better Together' campaign at that time was the threat that an independent Scotland might not be allowed to be in the EU and would have to join a queue for membership. It might now be argued that, in contrast to 2014, Scotland's best way of being an EU member state is by becoming independent (Nyatanga, 2021; von der Burchard, 2021). It is possible therefore that some of our European interviewees, faced with the reality of the UK being outside the EU, may also have changed their views in relation to an independent Scotland.

Gender

Table 2 analyses our interviewee responses on the basis of the gender of the interviewee. We have done this, as analyses of the 2014 result show that, while 47% of men voted for independence, only 44% of women did so (Ashcroft 2014). Another study reported that 43.4% of women voted Yes, while 53.2% men voted Yes (Henderson & Mitchell, 2015). We wished to see if that gender split was replicated amongst our interviewees.

In fact, we found relatively little difference between male and female attitudes to independence. There were slightly more females than males in favour and marginally fewer female 'Don't Knows'. But the differences do not appear to be significant.

Age

The Ashcroft (2014) analysis of the independence referendum showed that younger people were very much more likely to vote for independence than older people. He suggests that 71% of the newly enfranchised 16- and 17-year-olds voted Yes, and there was a Yes majority in age bands up to age 54. Older voters were more likely to vote No, with 73% of over-65s voting No. Similar findings were reported by Henderson and Mitchell (2015), with 62.5% of 16–19 year olds voting yes, and a majority of age groups through to 50 voting Yes, while above this, the majority shifted to No.

Our analysis showed a similar trend. **Table 3** actually shows a small majority against independence in those aged 30 and under, but the numbers are too small to be significant. Essentially, there was a majority for independence up to age 69, with those aged 70 and over very definitely against. There appeared to be some concerns about pensions in an independent Scotland, while for some people, they had become happier with the status quo.

My worst ever nightmare. I am a Scot living in England. Who is going to pay my Old Age and Military Pension? Scotland? England? (Male, 68).

Table 2. Gender and attitudes to independence.

Gender	Attitude to independence			
	In favour	Against	Don't Know	Ambivalent
Male	42	42	12	11
Female	46	36	10	13
Total	88	78	22	24

Table 3. Age and attitudes to independence.

Age	Attitude to independence			
	In favour	Against	Don't Know	Ambivalent
30 and under	1	3	1	3
31–40	18	5	3	2
41–49	17	8	4	2
50–59	16	12	6	6
60–69	24	21	4	7
70 and over	12	29	4	4
Total	88	78	22	24

I think, when I was younger, it was attractive – yes, Scotland should be independent. I think now, is Scotland ready to be an independent nation, could they make it work? I just don't think at the moment it's really close to being feasible (Female, 33).

One time, a few years ago, I thought Scotland could do quite well being independent. I think I've changed my views now, perhaps with being [in England] quite a long time. The things that concern me about independence is if Scotland would be sufficiently wealthy to exist on its own. So I just wonder where would we make our money from and is it really viable? (Male, 70s).

Birthplace

Analysis of the 2014 voting patterns showed that those born in Scotland tended to vote Yes to independence, by a margin of 53% to 47% (Henderson & Mitchell, 2015). But this majority was offset by the large percentage of No voters amongst those born elsewhere in the UK – 72% No to 23% Yes. This large No majority was sufficient to bring about an overall No vote.

This is confirmed by analysis carried out by Ayres (2014), demonstrating that areas with a high proportion of people born elsewhere in the UK demonstrated the weakest support for 'Yes'. In the case of the Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway – the two local authorities sharing a border with England, this was perhaps unsurprising. But the No vote amongst those born elsewhere in the UK was generally the case in the urban areas as well.

Our data showed no difference in support for independence amongst those born in both Scotland and England. The greatest support for independence came from those born in North America (Table 4).

As we have noted earlier, the diaspora were unable to vote in 2014. In our later studies, we have explored this issue with members of the diaspora and our findings are reported in Leith and Sim (2023). Unsurprisingly, opinion on this issue was divided but there was a general agreement that eligibility for voting would be extremely difficult to determine.

Recent data: is opinion shifting?

As we noted earlier, we contacted participants from our most recent online studies and asked specific questions about their views on independence and whether those views had changed since 2014. We obtained data from 54 individuals from a wide range of locations. Of these, 16 had actually returned to Scotland after living in the diaspora for some time, with 38 still currently living outside Scotland. Of our 54 respondents, 35 had been born in Scotland, and 19 elsewhere, of whom 14 had been born in North America. There was a fairly even gender split, with 26 men and 28 women, while in terms of age, 34 were aged 60 and over and 20 were under 60.

Table 4. Birthplace and attitudes to independence.

Place of Birth	Attitude to independence			
	In favour	Against	Don't Know	Ambivalent
Scotland	62	62	17	14
England	9	9	0	5
North America	14	4	3	3
European Union	0	1	1	2
Elsewhere	3	2	1	0
Total	88	78	22	24

We asked, firstly about attitudes to independence in 2014 and if respondents had been able to vote. We then asked how they had or might have voted and the results are shown in Table 5. If we exclude the eight ‘Don’t Knows’, the ‘vote’ splits 25–21 in favour of remaining in the UK and this 54% to 46% split almost exactly mirrors the actual 2014 referendum result.

We then asked how respondents would vote in a second independence referendum, if one is eventually held and assuming they could participate. Interestingly, there had been a significant shift in opinion since 2014, as shown in Table 6, with 34 respondents stating that they would now vote for independence:

The main reasons for this shift in opinion seem to be Brexit, with the UK leaving the European Union despite a large majority within Scotland voting to remain, together with a view that the present Westminster government does not reflect Scottish views and values. Thirteen people specifically referenced Brexit and ten the failings of Westminster. Of those who cited Brexit as the reason for now supporting independence:

My view has changed significantly after Brexit. I believe Scotland has always had a European outlook and would in time become similar to Denmark in its social policies (Male, 66).

I was extremely against independence in 2014 and would have voted no if I had been living in Scotland at the time. Following Brexit, I noticed a substantially negative behavioural change in the English population ... I would have to pay more attention to the economic side of independence before voting yes, however emotionally I would like to separate from England (Female, 42).

I want Scotland to join the EU as an independent state. The Union with England has become detrimental to our development (Male, 69).

My considerations are pragmatic. Scotland’s long-term benefit is to remain in the EU. The people of Scotland clearly expressed this preference, but were outvoted by British citizens outwith Scotland. Scotland’s interests are no longer congruent with England’s. It is time to go, with deep regret (Male, 53).

Others expressed dissatisfaction with the present Westminster government:

I sense the UK government is becoming too right-wing. The government does not believe in social justice or welfare ... I have a vision of a fairer country (Male, 66).

Table 5. Voting in the 2014 referendum.

	Returned diaspora	Current diaspora	Total
Able to vote: Voted for Independence	4	1	5
Able to vote: Voted to stay in UK	4	0	4
Not able to vote: Would have voted for Independence	2	14	16
Not able to vote: Would have voted to stay in UK	4	17	21
Not able to vote: Don’t Know	2	6	8

Table 6. Potential voting intentions in a second referendum.

	Returned diaspora	Current diaspora	Total
Yes: For Independence	11	23	34
No: To stay in UK	3	13	16
Don’t Know	2	2	4

The Scottish electorate are of a very different political persuasion to that in England. It would suit them better to be in charge of their own affairs ... I believe that Scotland could thrive economically without being part of the UK (Female, 68).

Westminster is so far removed from Scotland and Scottish issues and really doesn't care enough to get educated on such matters, therefore we should look after our own interests (Female, 57).

A number of respondents combined the two issues:

Scotland has shown itself to be a different nation to England repeatedly in who they elect ... and the kinds of policies they enact. Scotland also wants to be part of Europe (Female, 57).

I'm on the fence but lean towards Scottish independence ... I dislike the way in which consecutive Tory prime ministers are dragging the UK to the right economically, and out of the EU, against Scotland's will (Male, 32).

It is inevitable, because of sheer numbers alone, that the government in Westminster is an English government. That would not matter if Scotland tended to vote the way that England does, but that has generally not been the case. A different issue is whether or not Scotland needs England in order to survive economically. Post-Brexit, I really don't think there's any argument about that (Female, 77).

Scotland's distinctive institutions need protecting from a remote Westminster that appears ever more centralising; decisions are best made closer to the people they affect. Scotland's political leanings have rarely been represented in Westminster and the final straw was being dragged out of the EU, making us poorer in every way (Male, 57).

That said, some people remained committed to the union:

On balance, I think economic considerations take precedence over political and the rest of the UK is Scotland's largest trading partner (Male, 84).

Independence would be detrimental to Scotland. Firstly, the economy is not robust enough ... Secondly, to extricate Scotland from the UK would be a nightmare ... There are so many links across Britain, family, business and other, that it would be impossible to satisfactorily separate what and who could be called Scottish. The fallout would be long lasting (Female, 74).

I don't believe that the Scottish economy is strong enough to maintain the current living standards ... I cannot see any advantage of independence (Female, 78).

Clearly, there seem to be some important shifts taking place in attitudes to independence within the diaspora. Indeed, the diaspora has shown itself to be well informed about UK politics, and the combination of Brexit and a Conservative government at Westminster which is viewed as out of step with Scottish opinion has led to an interesting change in views, compared to some of our previous surveys.

Discussion and conclusion

The concept of a diaspora is generally understood and is used relatively loosely to cover a range of emigrant groups, many of which have been largely assimilated into their host societies. It has become a social construct, in which a diaspora reality is based on a range of factors, including a sense of national or group identity, feelings of belonging, mythology, history, memory and dreams (Shuval, 2000).

As we have noted earlier, diasporas have played a significant role in nation building of homelands but these have often been in colonies, such as Africa, or in places where the homeland has been absorbed (possibly against its will) into a larger state. Examples of this exist in eastern Europe and we have already referred to the role of the Estonian diaspora in helping to establish a post-Soviet Estonian state (Kulu, 2000). The struggle by Kosovo to achieve its independence from Serbia with the aid of the Kosovan diaspora is another well-documented example (Koinova, 2013).

Scotland (possibly like Catalonia), however, does not fit with these narratives. It is certainly a stateless nation, not being independent and sovereign. But it is recognised as a nation within the UK, with a strong identity, its own (devolved) parliament and strong links with its diaspora. The work of Sheffer (2013) is helpful here in his distinction between *stateless* and *state-linked* diasporas. Stateless diasporas, without a homeland, may become directly involved in the building of that homeland. But state-linked diasporas engage in more benign activities, such as fundraising, economic support and communality. The sending of remittances may be less important here than in the developing world, but foreign direct investment (FDI) remains extremely significant (Cohen, 2008; Newland & Plaza, 2013).

Scotland holds its diaspora to be hugely important, not least because, as we noted earlier, the country has stagnant population growth and this will have a potential impact on economic growth. Direct investment from the diaspora is therefore to be encouraged, as well as homeland visits, benefiting the tourism sector. Support for diaspora engagement has been consistent across political parties and, in May 2023, the Scottish Government launched its policy on future diaspora engagement (Scottish Government, 2023) stressing the value of the relationship.

As we have discussed above, opinion polling in relation to Scottish independence has generally ignored Scots living outside Scotland and, as a result, their views on the country's constitutional future have remained unclear. In contrast to some other countries, where diasporas have played a part in independence movements, the Scottish diaspora has generally remained outside the debate, with limited direct involvement in Scottish politics. That said, our research has shown very clearly that the diaspora holds views (quite strongly in some cases) about the future status of their homeland.

At one level, the views of the diaspora are of limited significance, because it is extremely unlikely that they would be able to vote in a future referendum (for fuller consideration of this, see Leith & Sim, 2023) and so would be unable directly to influence the result. But the connections between Scotland and its diaspora are important in a number of ways beyond voting. Diaspora Scots feel strongly about their national identity and there is an ongoing interest in ancestry and genealogy. Many members of the diaspora regularly travel back to Scotland and so the connections remain strong. If Scotland were indeed to become independent, then it would be essential for diaspora connections to be maintained so that potential investors in, and visitors to, the homeland were not deterred by constitutional change.

In fact, our analysis shows that the diaspora is increasingly inclined to look favourably on independence. In the past, diaspora members in North America might be summarised as being broadly positive, those in the rest of the UK as being generally opposed and those in northern Europe as being ambivalent or wary. Our analysis here shows change.

The main changes to this position in recent years appear to relate to Brexit and Westminster, with the diaspora echoing the disenchantment with both which are evident within

Scotland itself. As far as Brexit is concerned, Scotland voted decisively in 2016 to remain within the EU and business interests were particularly in favour of this (Anderson, 2019). As we have noted earlier, the Scottish Government remains strongly Europhile and would wish an independent Scotland to rejoin the EU. If this were to happen, then it is very likely that business interests within the diaspora – and perhaps particularly in North America – might see Scotland as an increasingly favourable place to do business and to invest.

In relation to Westminster, we have seen how many of our interviewees believed that the present Conservative government's policies were at odds with Scottish views and values. This is perhaps unsurprising as the Conservative vote in Scotland has been weak for many years, in contrast to the position in England. In addition, the present UK Government is often seen as hostile to devolution and to the Scottish Government in particular (Financial Times, 2022), and there have been several clashes over Scottish legislation and the limits of the Scottish Parliament's powers (Herald, 2023).

Interestingly, several of our interviewees linked Brexit and Westminster to explain why they had begun to change their minds about Scottish independence. It is possible, of course, that Brexit will produce more identifiable benefits to the UK – and to Scotland in particular – and it seems likely that there will be a change of government at Westminster at the next General Election (expected in late 2024). Whatever happens in the immediate future, it seems clear that the Scottish diaspora is looking increasingly favourably on the prospect of Scottish independence, a trend that may have implications for future constitutional debates.

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Ethics statement

The research reported here has been subject to ethical approval by the appropriate committees of the University of the West of Scotland.

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