

# Whilst the debates in Scotland were a very welcome sign of political engagement, we should be cautious about the nature and the extent of that engagement

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*Reflecting on the Scottish independence referendum, [Mary Evans](#) asks whether the politics of localism are sufficient to challenge neoliberal policies. She writes that what is clear is that a lot of people care a great deal about the neoliberal assault on the public sector, but we do not all have that sense of shared political identity which allows us to create a viable and effective sense of political solidarity.*



The campaigning group [38 Degrees](#) recently sent me an email asking if I am jealous of the debate created in Scotland (and indeed the rest of the UK) around the issue of Scottish independence. This new political energy could, the email suggested, indicate transformatory possibilities for the rest of the UK and would further demonstrate the latent political energy demonstrated in successful online campaigns.

This might sound very appealing, and clearly the debate in Scotland about independence did attract general interest and a high turnout at the ballot box. But there remains the question of independence from what and for whom: to put it as briefly as possible, to ask the question if the politics of localism are sufficient to challenge neoliberal policies, many of which (particularly on issues about various forms of state provision) were important in the debates in Scotland and have been prominent in the campaigns organised by, amongst others, 38 Degrees. What is clear is that a lot of people care a great deal about the neoliberal assault on the public sector, but we do not all have that sense of shared political identity which allows us to create a viable and effective sense of political solidarity.

The history of relations between England and Scotland have, of course, provided the Scots with a very long list of reasons why that union, of which the 'No' campaign made so much, has not always worked to the advantage of the Scots. So a cultural heritage existed – a vivid and much rehearsed sense of a political identity – in which it was possible to place other debates about public policies, those, for example, about education and health care. The word 'fair' kept appearing in speeches for the 'Yes' campaign, against which the 'No' campaign reproduced that endless re-iteration of 'all in it together' formula which seems to have become an essential element in British political rhetoric.

The [speech by Gordon Brown](#), widely praised, did much to enlarge on that theme but obscuring – as did other 'unity' messages – quite what it is that we are all unified *for*. In the light of the neoliberal policies of the present Coalition Government which accord rather more closely with the interests of global capital than with any idea of 'fairness', it would have been encouraging to hear Brown say that we need to be unified to challenge these policies, but the part of his speech that might have challenged the neoliberal orthodoxy about the public sector seems to have been omitted.

So one further consideration of the 'Scotland question' might be to suggest that whilst the debates in Scotland (at least those reported in the mainstream media) were a very welcome sign of political engagement, we might be more cautious about the nature and the extent of that political engagement. Dislike of an English, metropolitan, political class has a long history and of course underpins not just what we might regard as 'good' political debates (those in Scotland) but very positively 'bad' debates (if we can call them that) proposed by UKIP. In both cases there is a sense of repressed, unheard, minorities who have been denied the proper control of their circumstances. But the origin and the meaning of those circumstances perhaps needs more thought and focus than what might be termed the return of the native.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit: [K. R](#) CC BY 2.0*

## **About the Author**

**Mary Evans** is a Centennial Professor at the LSE, based at the Gender Institute. She has written on various aspects of gender and women's studies and many of those publications have crossed disciplinary lines between the social sciences and the humanities. She was a founding editor of the European Journal of Women's Studies and is presently working on a study of narratives – and continuities – of class and gender. Her latest edited book is *Gender* (Routledge, 2010).

