If Scotland votes 'Yes', we will likely see an immigration policy that is markedly different from the rest of the UK

blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/if-scotland-votes-yes-we-will-likely-see-an-immigration-policy-that-is-markedly-different-from-the-rest-of-the-uk/

The Scottish National Party (SNP) has articulated a civic nationalism that welcomes immigrants and ethnic minorities as part of Scotland's rich 'tartan tapestry'. Eve Hepburn explores why Scottish parties have been able to avoid the anti-immigration hysteria that peppers political debates south of the border, writing that if Scotland votes 'Yes', we will likely see an immigration policy that is markedly different from the rUK. If it is 'No', there may still be some changes afoot in the area of immigration.

"They managed to find a place for newcomers in Scotland. I think we have to do the same here in Quebec". So said a senior figure in the Parti Quebecois (PQ) during his Scottish referendum tour earlier this week. He was referring to the 'Yes' camp's efforts to welcome immigrants into the Scottish national community and to encourage them to vote for independence. His admission was a salient one.

Quebec's independence-seeking party, and indeed many other nationalist movements around the world, have much to learn from the Scottish model. When Quebec's second referendum on independence in 1995 failed by the tiniest of margins, PQ leader Jacques Parizeau infamously blamed it on "money and 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 sovereigntist one.

Not so in Scotland. Contrary to vast assumptions in the academic literature that 'nationalism' is inherently exclusivist and monocultural, 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. Indeed, while scholarship has revealed how many European countries have moved away from the pro-diversity multicultural model (being blamed, for instance, for the creation of 'parallel lives' in the UK case) towards more neo-assimilationist forms of civic integration, Scotland has bucked the trend by holding firmly to a multicultural course.

The SNP – and indeed all of Scotland's parties – have advanced an overwhelmingly positive position on immigration. As Michael Rosie and myself have shown in our essay 'Immigration, Nationalism and Political Parties in Scotland' (in *The Politics of Immigration in Multilevel States*, Palgrave, 2014), Scottish political parties have carefully crafted an "elite discourse that portrays immigrants as key players in an open, inclusive and multicultural Scotland". This started in the early 2000s with the Scottish Labour/LibDem government's 'One Scotland, Many Cultures' campaign, and was significantly extended by susbequent SNP governments, whose policies have included a progressive refugee integration strategy called *'New Scots'* and a proposal for a more liberal citizenship policy. As a party, the SNP has also sought to welcome ethnic minorities and immigrants into its ranks, supporting the creation of groups such as Scots Asians for 'Yes', Africans for an Independent Scotland, Poles for an Independent Scotland, and even English People for Scottish Independence.

In concert with these attempts to increase the political participation of immigrants and minorities, and to mobilise them towards independence, the SNP has also fought to increase immigration to Scotland. First Minister Alex Salmond has consistently criticized London's immigration policies as 'damaging' to the interests of Scotland, especially its economic interests. Instead, the SNP wishes to pursue in a more liberal immigration policy, not only for cold, hard economic reasons (though increasing economic and population growth is by far the most important consideration), but also – in a more humanistic vein – to enrich Scotland's cultural diversity and international linkages. This positive endorsement contrasts sharply with UK politics where the topics of immigration and multiculturalism have been perceived as akin to uncontrollable wildfires that each of the main UK parties – the

Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats – have sought to put out, either by disowning them (as in the case of multiculturalism) or by strongly attacking them (in the case of perceived unmanageable immigration).

Why has the SNP – and other Scottish political parties – pursued a distinctive, multicultural approach to immigration? There are a number of reasons for this. First is the demographic situation. The immigrant community only makes up about 7 per cent of the overall Scottish population (less than half that of England), and while a handful of anti-immigrant stories have made the Scottish papers, the general perception is that Scotland's small migrant community has integrated fairly well into Scottish society. Indeed, research conducted by Asifa Hussein & William Miller in their landmark book *Multicultural Nationalism*, revealed that immigrant and ethnic minority communities – such as Pakistanis in Glasgow – consider themselves more Scottish than British. Moreover, they are more likely to vote for the SNP and support independence than the average Scot.

Another reason for the positive positions of the SNP and Scottish parties is because of the broadly accepted need for *more* immigrants. In the mid-2000s former Labour First Minister Jack McConnell argued that "the single biggest challenge facing Scotland as we move further into the 21st century is our falling population." He subsequently mobilised the Scottish Government to negotiate a modicum of devolved control over the (reserved) policy of immigration: the 'Fresh Talent' scheme, which extended the work permits of overseas graduates from Scottish Universities for two years. However, the Home Office quickly clawed back control of the initiative, and then abolished it in 2008. This aroused the hackles of the SNP government, for which immigration remains the key plank by which to grow the Scottish population.

A final reason why Scottish parties have been able to avoid the anti-immigration hysteria that peppers political debates south of the border, is arguably because of Scotland's lack of power on the issue. The Scotland Government's lack of competence over immigration policy allows it to subdue political mobilisation, to avert responsibility – and culpability – to the UK Government on unpopular aspects of immigration, and to avoid the glare of media attention on rising numbers. However, this is all set to change if we have a 'Yes' result on 18 September.

If Scotland becomes independent, the SNP has pledged to whip up a storm of new policies that diverge radically from those of the UK Government – in welfare policy, nuclear policy, EU policy and many others (for details of these, see the white paper on *Scotland's Future*). Yet one of its most controversial policies is its commitment to a more liberal immigration policy with increased flows. And it is this position that is most worrying for the UK Government, whose success in office is predicated on reducing immigration. By making even a passing nod to increasing levels of immigration in the UK (even if only to Scotland) would earn the Coalition Government the wrath of the far-right (including UKIP and the British National Party), the left (if we can still categorise the British Labour Party as such), the British media (where readership of the sensationalist anti-immigrant *Daily Mail* is amongst the highest of any paper) and thereby the British (that is, English) public at large.

The issue of public opinion on immigration is an interesting one. Research by the Oxford Migration Observatory has revealed that Scots are less likely to see immigration as a problem than their English brethren, though not radically so. The Observatory found that 20 per cent of Scots would support the number of immigrants being increased by "a lot", which compared with only 2 per cent in favour of increased flows in the south of England. Researchers at the Observatory have put the more positive Scottish attitudes down to Scotland's more 'tolerant political culture'. But this does not mean that Scots want more immigrants. A recent survey by the Observatory found that the majority of Scots support reduced immigration (58 per cent), though this is far lower than England and Wales (75 per cent).

These figures, if representative, mean that the majority of Scots do not support the SNP's policy – and indeed, the approach of all of Scotland's parties – towards increasing levels of immigration. But this doesn't seem to bother Alex Salmond. His focus is on convincing Scots voters of the need for an 'enlightened approach' to immigration, which he views as an economic necessity. If Scotland becomes independent, the SNP will create a Scottish points-based system that increases net levels of immigration with the aim of raising Scotland's demographic growth rate to the EU average. Furthermore, the SNP are committed to a more humane refugee and asylum policy, which would put a halt

to the 'dawn raids' of detention centres.

While the policy of encouraging 'healthy population growth' and enhancing refugee rights might go down like a lead balloon if it were initiated in England/the UK, in Scotland the most outspoken professional organisations – business federations, trades unions, and civic society – have rallied around this plan.

The UK Government has been quick to oppose the SNP's plans as 'undermining' the work they've done in scaling back immigration. Home Secretary Theresa May filled of our minds with images of border posts and barbed wire along Hadrian's Wall (a defensive fortification created by the Romans in England to keep out the 'barbarian' Scots of the north). She argued that wildly different immigration policies in rUK and Scotland would necessitate stricter controls, including passport checks. Meanwhile, the UK Secretary of State for Scotland warned that an independent Scotland would face 'incredible expense' to protect its borders from terrorism and illegal immigration. The SNP said that both of these analyses lacked all credibility. And so the debate continues.

Two days before the referendum, with the polls neck and neck, we have very little idea which way the result will go. But we can make some assumptions about what would happen to immigration in Scotland following either result. If Scotland votes 'No', there may still be some changes afoot in the area of immigration. The SNP wants a regionally based points system to attract potential immigrants to move to Scotland, which has also received some support from the unionist cross-party Scottish Commission on Devolution. This would likely be on the table as one of the issues the pro-UK parties might grant Scotland more powers on.

If Scotland votes 'Yes', however, we will likely see an immigration policy that is markedly different from the rUK, though perhaps not as liberal as the SNP might like if public opinion and the media come down hard on increasing immigration. Scotland would likely be part of a Common Travel Area, though any border posts would need to be created by the rUK Government, mimicking the original purpose of Hadrian's Wall in keeping out the unwanted Scots, though this time it would be unwanted immigrant Scots.

On a final note, some of the UK's media – most notably the *Daily Mail* – have picked up on the possibility that Scotland's small immigrant population may in fact tilt the vote in favour of a Yes. Such stories are only a small step away from headlines that shout out 'Immigrants (in Scotland) break up UK!' – finding yet another thing to blame immigrants for. While voices of reason – such as John Curtice – have revealed through survey data that most immigrants are just as split on the issue of immigration as native Scots, if immigrants did tilt the vote in favour of a 'Yes', is that necessarily a bad thing? If immigrants feel a strong sense of belonging to Scotland, feel welcomed and integrated into the fabric of the nation, and hold strong, informed, opinions about its future path, shouldn't that be celebrated not scorned?

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: James MacDonald CC BY 2.0

About the Author

Eve Hepburn is Senior Lecturer in Politics in the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh.