

Lessons from Scotland

Alex Salmond is not a popular figure south of the border. There's a good joke currently doing the rounds that sums up English sentiment towards the SNP Leader. His colleagues, so the story goes, decided it would be a worthy gesture to name a railway locomotive after him. So an official went to the National Railway Museum at York, to investigate the possibilities. "There are a number of locomotives at the NRM without names" a consultant told the official, "but they are mostly freight locomotives."

"Oh dear, a freight locomotive is not very fitting for a party leader," said Sir Humphrey. "'How about that big green one, over there?" he asked. "That one has already got a name" said the consultant. "It's called 'Flying Scotsman'."

"Couldn't we rename it?" asked the official. "I suppose for Alex Salmond it might be considered," said the consultant. "That's excellent", said the official, "So that's settled then. How much will it cost? Remember we can't spend too much, given the expenses scandal!"

"Well", said the consultant, "'Why don't we just paint out the 'F'."

Of course, it's only a joke and, for the record, Flying Scotsman is being repaired. It's in pieces in Bury, Lancashire at the moment and is currently painted black, but the Salmond-led Yes campaign is doing somewhat better. After consistently lagging behind in opinion polls, supporters of independence are running neck and neck. It is possible that Scotland may break away to become an independent country – well, sort of, Salmond does not want real independence. He doesn't want Scotland to be ruled from London but for some strange reason is happy to be ruled by Brussels.

Whether or not Scotland votes to secede from the United Kingdom in six days' time, Scottish politics will never be quite the same whatever happens. For those of us who didn't

expect the Yes campaign to come anywhere near achieving its object and who want to ensure that our “out” campaign does produce a vote to leave the EU, there are some very interesting lessons to be learnt.

Firstly, it's not just about economics. If there's one area where the “Lying Scotsman” epithet does seem rather close to the mark, it's the bravado attitude towards Scotland's economic prospects. I'm not convinced that Salmond's sums add up. Scotland richer if it leaves? Who is going to pay for the increased state expenditure? What about partitioning the national debt? What if there isn't as much North Sea oil as the most optimistic predictions? What about the issue of keeping Sterling? The bottom line is that these unanswered (or badly answered questions) do not seem to be a deterrent to the Yes supporters. They brush aside pro-unionist concerns about the economic uncertainties that independence would generate. Something deeper seems to motivate them – something which we will consider shortly. Perhaps therefore, any tactic by supporters of EU membership to use economic arguments to frighten us into remaining in the EU will prove to be of only limited effectiveness, especially given that supporters of withdrawal include respected economists like Tim Congdon who can make a far more reasoned case for the economic benefits of independence from Brussels than Salmond's back-of-a-fag-packet arithmetic.

So, then, what is it that inspires the Yes supporters in Scotland? One key issue is the seeming remoteness of Westminster. London is indeed a long way from Stornoway or Inverness, but it's not just geography. Even in the Central Belt, independence supporters feel little affinity with London. They would prefer Scotland to be governed by people they feel (rightly or wrongly) represent their own interests. “A lot of the decisions which affect us are still being decided by people in London. Can they really have our best interests at heart?” asks one independence supporter. Here,

the parallels are obvious. The distance between London to Edinburgh is greater than London and Brussels as the crow flies, but the sense of being governed by remote control – by people who do not have the UK's interest at heart is even greater. Trust in our politicians has fallen to dangerously low levels and withdrawal, besides ridding ourselves of unwanted interference from abroad, would also deliver a massive kick up the backside to our own politicians.

Closely related to this is the disconnect between the political landscapes north and south of the Border. The Tories have only one MP out of 59. In the Scottish Parliament, Tory representation is slightly higher in the Scottish Parliament – 15 out of 129 MSPs – and to many people's surprise, Scotland returned a UKIP MEP in last May's European Parliamentary election, but the SNP and Labour basically rule the roost. In England by contrast, the Conservatives won 298 out of 533 seats – over 50% of the total. Consequently, many Scots complain that any Tory government does not represent their predominant political ideology – in other words, they are governed by people with different objectives. Once again, there is a parallel here. In the EU we are lumped together with nations pursuing an objective – federal union – that we aren't comfortable with. Basically, we've always viewed the EU in terms of trade and have never felt comfortable with loss of sovereignty. While we may regret that so many Scots feel that they are locked into an unhappy marriage in the Union, we can learn much from the Scottish Yes campaign as how to show that our shotgun wedding to the EEC 41 years ago has become an even unhappier marriages and best ended in divorce.

Where there is no parallel – at least yet – is the buzz that the independence debate has generated. Turnout is expected to be over 80%. Some people are talking of the referendum as the most important vote they will ever cast in their lifetime. Media reports say everyone is talking about it – in pubs and in homes as well as in the formal debates that have been

staged. This is the big challenge for us. How can we generate the same mood of excitement in our campaign to leave the EU? "Europe" is seen as a boring subject by many. One reason for the Yes campaign's recent rise is to link independence to other emotive issues – the perceived threat to the health service or the desire to avoid university tuition fees, for instance. Many people in the UK are still unaware of just how much the EU interferes for the worse in their daily lives. If we can generate the same link between independence and the removal of threats from abroad, the battle is all but won. The Yes campaign has sought to emphasise the positive – that it would be an exciting, fresh start for Scotland. We who seek withdrawal from the EU are excited by the prospects for our country, but how do we convey that same sense of optimism?

Of course, there has been an ugly side to the debate – the egg-throwing by some supporters of independence and accounts of intimidation of unionists – which will hopefully be absent when we begin the campaign for withdrawal in earnest, but the final parallel to make is that Scottish independence may ultimately happen by accident. The process that might drive our two nations apart was begun by people who never intended such an outcome. Devolution was meant to be a formula for addressing Scottish concerns within the context of the union. The voting formula for the Scottish Parliament was designed specifically to exclude the possibility of one party gaining overall control. However, things did not run according to the script. One thing led to another and the net result is a cliffhanger which could see the end of the 300-year union in spite of, rather than because of the action of Westminster politicians. While most of us in England hope this is not to be the case, many of the incidents that have led to us becoming semi-detached from the EU have had the same sense of one thing leading to another without our politicians being in control. Black Wednesday, which saw us expelled from the European Exchange Rate mechanism, is a classic example. Likewise, David Cameron's commitment to hold a referendum on

our EU membership came across at the time as the actions of a reluctant leader being pushed from the back. He may, as Douglas Carswell suggests, do everything he can to avoid taking us out of the EU if he remains leader, but the outcome may ultimately be out of his control. A sense of inevitability may overwhelm his best laid plans. We can but hope.