

The morning-after feeling: a dejected Yes campaigner in the Royal Mile after the people of Scotland voted No to independence



CHRISTOPHER FURLONG/GETTY

Now deliver, say the Scots

Will Westminster honour its promises? Colin Fleming reflects on interesting times

Scotland's referendum saw Scots vote to remain part of the United Kingdom with 55 per cent of voters rejecting independence. However, a narrowing of the polls in the weeks leading up to the vote resulted in promises of significantly more powers for Scotland if it decided to stay part of the Union. With one YouGov poll suggesting a narrow win for the Yes movement – 51 per cent to 49 per cent – Britain's three Unionist party leaders promised more powers with a timetable for action to be implemented the day after a No vote. These promises may be hard to keep. Only a few days on, it would appear that agreement on the timetable for change is lacking.

Speaking outside No 10, David Cameron said that the discussion on what new powers are transferred to Scotland must include finding a solution to the West Lothian Question – where Scottish MPs can vote on English-only matters. With pressure from Tory MPs and with an eye on the rise of UKIP, the prime minister's conflation of the issues is understandable. However, it risks derailing the timetable for devolving more power to Scotland. That the Conservatives and

Labour parties are already at loggerheads does not bode well.

The Edinburgh Agreement, which was signed by David Cameron and Scottish first minister, Alex Salmond on October 15, 2012, prepared the ground for the referendum. It set the legal conditions, agreed the question and produced a concord between Edinburgh and London that the result would be respected. This paved the way for the campaign that followed and is testament to a democratic process that can act as a model for others to follow. This being said, the choice between a Yes and No question on independence left the third option of 'devolution max' off the ballot paper. This prevented the SNP from getting what London considered its second prize. The problem with this was that devo-max – where Scotland takes control of the majority of taxes, welfare, and social security, but leaves Westminster in control of defence and foreign affairs – is exactly what most Scots appeared to want. The Scottish Attitudes Survey has consistently shown that this is the preferred option.

With David Cameron, Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband

UK after the vote

promising that a No vote would result in a roadmap to ‘extensive new powers by January 25, 2015, Burns Night, the referendum became a choice between independence and enhanced devolution rather than between independence and the status quo. If powers are not forthcoming, voters will be left sorely disappointed. Indeed post-referendum polling by Lord Ashcroft Polls suggests 25 per cent of No voters ticked that box because of the offer of extra powers

With none of the Unionist parties agreeing on what powers should be devolved, it is clear that some compromise will have to be made. Whether compromise is possible is now the big question. If powers are not forthcoming, it will make next year’s UK general election very interesting indeed.

There can be little doubt that the independence referendum caught the imagination of Scottish voters. Some 84 per cent of those registered cast their ballot and political engagement is more evident today than at any time in recent Scottish political history. The referendum has been a victory for democracy. The past two years of political debate has witnessed a reawakening of political interest that is not going to disappear.

Despite defeat, the Yes movement remains committed to forcing significant constitutional change and bringing more power back to Edinburgh. If anything, it would seem that Yes still have the momentum. Far from being disheartened by defeat, the three parties that supported independence – the Scottish National Party, the Scottish Greens, and Scottish Socialist Party – have all seen a surge in membership. Since the close of polls, the SSP has signed up more than 2,500 members, the Scottish Greens over 5,000, and the SNP 45,000 at the time of writing. The SNP, with a membership of over 70,000, is now the third largest political party in the UK, overtaking the Lib Dems.

With the resignation of Salmond as SNP leader and First Minister, his deputy, Nicola Sturgeon has emerged as the only candidate and is now almost certain to become SNP leader as well as Scotland’s first female first minister. In accepting the result of the referendum, the SNP has already indicated its commitment to enter into cross party talks on what Scotland might get and will enter the general election and Scottish elections on a promise of devo-max, with any failure by Westminster to come good on their promises re-opening the independence question.

While the No campaign won the vote, for the United Kingdom to last there must be a willingness to devolve power. There needs also to be a better narrative of what it means to be British. For the UK’s long-term future to be secured it will need a readiness to listen. With the prospect of constitutional reform across the UK, an in/out referendum on Europe, and next year’s general election still to come, everything is still to play for. The big result of the referendum is that British politics is interesting once again.

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