



The Referendum on Scotland's Future

Saturday 16th August

**Kirkwall & St Ola
Community Centre, Kirkwall**

“Women need to have their voices heard as part of the debate around Scotland's future. They are the cornerstone of communities – both socially and economically. The campaigns need to engage with women and listen to their concerns and emerging issues. This event has ensured that those attending are able to raise and seek answers to the issues which are important to them.”

Agnes Tolmie
Chair, SWC

www.scottishwomensconvention.org

Introduction

The SWC organised this event in recognition that women from different backgrounds throughout Scotland have significant questions and issues around the forthcoming referendum. Women want to know how this historic decision will impact on them, their families and communities as a whole.

This is the ninth in a series of conferences held by the SWC. Previous events have been held in Glasgow (x2), Dundee Livingston, Aberdeen, Greenock, Inverness and a specific event for young women in Glasgow.

The events are chaired by Agnes Tolmie, Chair of the SWC. Our organisation works with Yes Scotland and Better Together to source speakers and panel members.



Fiona Matheson, Yes Scotland

Fiona is from Stromness in Orkney. She attended art college in Edinburgh and trained as an art teacher. She then attended Jordanhill University in Glasgow where she studied primary teaching. Fiona is currently head of the Orkney Fishing Association and is married with two daughters.

“A lot of the debates that I take part in are very clinical, and are about the facts and figures. I’m involved in this movement because politics, for me, is personal. What has driven me into politics in my life have been the things that I have lived. I have not learned politics out of books. I’m also not someone that’s interested in flag waving or 300 years of history. I come from a different background.

I was born and brought up in Stromness, in an Orkney which was very different and dislocated from the rest of the UK at that time. As a child, I didn’t realise that Scotland wasn’t an independent country until I was about 11, and my father explained the difference between the political power that a country has and the other parts of the country’s make up. I thought that because we had a Scottish flag and a different education system, we were a country. It came as a surprise to me to learn that we didn’t have the powers to make decisions about our political future.

All of that was put into sharp focus for me as a child, when my father was involved in the anti-nuclear movement. My childhood was coloured by the nuclear bomb, and the impotence that we had over that. The realisation that we were growing up in a nuclear world, where a bomb could destroy the entire world. I couldn't factor into my head how big the world was for a start. Just going to Thurso felt like a big journey and a massive city. So growing up in that background I realised how impotent we were against what the State and the desires of the Government wanted were. It was very clear that Orkney and the population here at that time were considered expendable in terms of where nuclear power might be created and what it was created for.

By accident, I'm a woman and luckily for me, I didn't grow up in a household of brothers, so there was never a feeling that we couldn't do what we wanted to as women. I looked on in envy at the boys who got scalextric, because there was still that unwritten rule that girls couldn't play with those sorts of toys. That was the kind of gender climate that I grew up in.

I have spent most of my life trying to keep my own confidence and self esteem at a level that I could function at, and also the confidence and self esteem of other people. When I moved to Edinburgh to attend art college, I found the experience of being someone from a wee island with a strange accent, moving to a place where there were a lot of wealthy people with connections and money and lots of advantages I didn't have, absolutely terrifying. My experience at art college actually did more to undermine my confidence and made me realise that the world wasn't such a level playing field as I had thought growing up here in Orkney, where things were a lot more equal.

By the time I left college, Mrs Thatcher and the Tory Government were coming into power. I had to compete for any job I could scrape to get, and I managed to get a bar job in High Street in Edinburgh. That was the first lesson in inequality for me. I was nothing more than an operative behind the bar to satisfy the customers, most, if not whom all of which were advocates from the courts nearby. I got paid £34 a week and the most expensive cigar on the shelf was also £34. For me and lots of my generation, that was a very similar story. I consider myself lucky as many of my friends succumbed to alcohol and drug addiction, hopelessness and became stuck. A resilience in me helped me to survive, however like lots of women I had periods of severe depression, real self-doubt, absolute black lows and a feeling that I would never climb out of it.

Why I'm relating this personally is because systems can create these feelings and perpetuate them. Unemployment and the economic strategy of the Thatcher Government made people like me believe we were less, it made us lose our self esteem, and we had to struggle harder to survive than we should have through those difficult years. I have always tried to remember that. As a woman leader in fishing, which is very much a man's world, I am party to high level politics, and also a company director in a multi million pound company.

I am all of these things but I remember where I came from and where lots of people still struggle.

I've seen the very real effects of poverty on children. At a playgroup you can see where women are stressed, and they don't have the room or time to accumulate the life skills or the patience to cope with their children, through no fault of their own. I've edited out a lot of the things in my life that are less glamorous, like working as a cleaner and a care assistant. They're all very valuable jobs but they have less status in our society, are low paid and very hard work.

Part of what I've done in my life is worked with troubled teenagers and I have realised that by the time we get a young person aged 14/15 who isn't going to school, who is disengaged, involved in petty crime, we struggle hard to set them on the right path. That is why early intervention and tackling the needs of children early in life is so important.

I'm voting Yes because I see this as an opportunity. I see a lot of things that we have a backlog of difficulties with here in Scotland. We have a lot of big jobs to do in tackling the harm that has been done to people psychologically, physically, mentally and collectively as a population that lacks confidence and self esteem. It can be done but it can only be done by taking the money that makes things work and re-prioritising it to where it's most needed.

For me, a Yes vote is about grabbing opportunity, realising our problems, realising what needs to be done and starting to turn that around. It's a big job and it won't be easy. However, people throughout this debate are starting to realise how things can be done, looking at other countries to see how they do things. The UK is described as a masculine government. That's nothing to do with gender politics, it's about how the UK conducts itself and what it prioritises, such as money over emotional wellbeing for example. If you look at the Nordic countries, they're classed as having feminist models of government that are much more caring and nurturing.

What I would like to see is Scotland, and our population of 5 million people who live here, gaining the political powers to access all of the potential we have, both in terms of money and also in terms of the population. Lots of women can't come to a meeting like this because they're too busy. Women are absolutely subsumed at keeping everything in the background going. I want to see their potential released to the benefit of all members of society.

A combination of people and the levers of money is what will make this country. How we prioritise them is up to the government we elect in 2016, however for me there are two very clear steps. The first is gaining access to the political power and then choosing what sort of political power we want. It's not about the SNP Government's White Paper, that's only one version. Don't be misled by anyone who says it's only about one party. The steps are simple. Achieving independence and deciding what our political priorities are."

Rosie Wallace, Better Together

Rosie is a retired speech and language therapist and a dyslexia specialist. She has two published novels and is currently working on a third. She was brought up in Glasgow but has lived in Orkney for 31 years. She is married with 2 grown up daughters.

“I’m a passionate No voter and I have been since before the referendum was announced. I have a No sticker on my car, I wear my No badge and have given badges to friends. I have hidden posts on Facebook from friends who are voting Yes because I have always known the way I want to vote.

Those of you here who have not decided how to vote can listen to the arguments put forward and make up your own minds. I’m going to tell you how I feel about it, and at the moment I am feeling sick. While that is good for my waistline, continuing nausea is not pleasant. Why am I feeling sick? I see a union which has evolved over the last 300 years. It’s not been static. It gives us the best of both worlds. As a No voter I see that I have everything to lose – the benefits of having a Parliament for our domestic affairs and the benefit of being part of the UK for our armed forces, currency, being in Europe to name but a few.

Better Together has been accused of being negative. The way I see it, there’s a lot to lose, and we have a duty to point that out. The Yes campaign on the other hand has nothing to lose. They pass off opinions they don’t like by calling it scaremongering or accuse the Westminster Parliament of bullying. Why do they want to leave if they still want to make use of what the UK has to offer? There’s a jokey article doing the rounds at the moment which alludes to this, that Alex Salmond is refusing to pay his gym membership, however he intends to come by and use the equipment whenever he wants.

Such is the success of the UK, they want to keep much of it. They want to keep the Monarchy, the currency and the Bank of England. They want the National Lottery, NHS Blood Transfusion Transplant Service, the Royal Mint, Research Councils, and the Air and Maritime Accident Investigation branches. They also intend to keep the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management, the Green Bank, the Met Office, the Hydro Graphic Office, the UK Benefits system and its administration, the DVLA and the BBC as it is. Why, if you’re wanting to go, would you want to keep all of these things?

I know that there has been a lot of back and forward about the currency issue and it’s a switch off for a lot of people. However, numerous academics and numeracy experts have stated that there cannot be a currency union. The Professor of Political Economy at Glasgow University has said that a currency union would collapse within a year. As a consequence, Scotland’s economy would shrink. This would mean loss of jobs and loss of the revenues essential for pensions, benefits and public services.

If Scotland becomes an independent country, it will not have a seat at the table. Yes, it could use the pound, but would have no control over it. It would have a similar status to Panama who use the US dollar. Scotland could apply to join the Eurozone. We could have our own currency – a hundred Sturgeons could make one Salmond. That's flippant, but none of these things are thought to be beneficial options for the country or easy to set up.

EEC Membership won't be automatic. It will have to be negotiated. We would probably get in in the end, but you can be certain that Spain won't make it easy. They don't want to give the Catalans the message that it's ok to break away. Scotland is also unlikely to have the UK negotiated benefits such as VAT exemption on children's clothes.

Freedom of movement between Scotland and England will work fine until Scotland and the rest of the UK's immigration policies differ. Then one side or other is going to feel it necessary to secure the borders. Scottish business needs a stable currency, EC members and free borders to function.

I'm confused as to what will happen with the armed forces. Does the National Regiment of Scotland become President Salmond's bodyguards? What happens to Scottish service people in other regiments, the Royal Navy and the Royal Air force? Is Scotland going to have to pay to set up embassies in every country?

There's also a notion that Scotland will be a Tory-free Nirvana. I'm not a Tory but in Alex Salmond's lifetime, the Conservatives have won over 50% of the vote in Scottish elections. Every population has a right wing and you don't need to have a degree in political science or a particularly long memory to know there are a few Tories in Scotland at the moment. I know some are threatening to move away but I don't think they're going to be wiped out.

Of course Scotland could be an independent country, however I don't think the divorce will be protracted, even on areas of agreements. It will be far more expensive than anyone has proposed, these things always are. Surely this money could be spent now on things that matter to people, such as health, education and jobs. The transition will not all be done and dusted by 2016 either. In order to pay for all of the promises and balance the books, public spending would have to be cut and taxation would have to rise. At the moment Scotland receives more money in the block grant than is generated in oil revenues. If you look to Norway, they have a wonderful welfare state but very high personal taxation. It's very difficult to have one without the other.

I'm a European, I'm British, I'm Scottish and after 31 years I'm very nearly an Orcadian. There's nothing wrong with being all of these things. The Saltire is my flag too and I hate seeing it hijacked. I don't like being told I'm a bad parent if I vote No. I don't like seeing JK Rowling and others abused for putting their head above the parapet and saying they're going to vote No.

I know there are trolls on both sides, but when CBI members are contacted by Scottish Government special advisers and warned off attending meetings with the Secretary of State for Scotland, and a Scottish company is warned by the same advisor it will not be in their interests to have a Liberal Democrat peer as a speaker at their anniversary dinner, that is a little more than someone huddled over a laptop. I know that the Yes campaign is more than the Scottish Government, but this degree of bullying by a major player is really difficult for me to ignore. This is the Government which will undertake the first year of negotiations should there be a Yes vote.

In matters relating to the Scottish islands, some of the things promised could be carried out now if the Scottish Government wished. It is my belief that the SNP never expected to win an outright majority at the last Scottish elections and therefore didn't expect to hold a referendum now. It has been their policy for 80 years but I don't think there was a plan in place. It strikes me that the mechanics of creating a free Scotland have not been fully thought out. How else can there be so many unanswered questions on major issues?

I've never had a head for heights. The idea of a bungee jump, launching myself into mid air to fall and be yanked up to the platform by a bit of elastic fills me with horror. The decision we are being asked to take is similar, except there is no elastic and despite some assertions to the contrary, there is no going back. We're being asked to jump off the platform, on the assurance of the people who have said there may not be a comfy mattress for us to land on. So what are we being asked to do? Is it a leap of faith or an extremely unwise move? I know what I think. In order to keep all that the UK has to offer, I'm staying on the platform."

Question and Answer Session

I want to know if people vote No, what will the rewards be for the island communities? I received correspondence from the UK Government outlining what they will do and I am interested to hear more.

Rosie Wallace (RW)

If there's a Yes vote, the Westminster Government will cease to have an interest because they won't provide anything. However, if there is a No vote, Alastair Carmichael made an announcement yesterday about various things that are going to happen under the current Government. There will be a new islands working group to look at issues, which will be supported by a dedicated group in the Scotland office, covering priorities like island innovation zones, construction costs and community benefits. There will be an oil and gas forum and a framework for renewable energy. Social needs will also be taken into account with regards to issues such as transport, fuel and digital connectivity. The UK Government is committed to ensuring that parcel delivery charges are fair and transparent.

They will also fund a mobile infrastructure project, working to improve mobile coverage in hard to reach areas. As part of the measures proposed, there will also be a dedicated point of contact to offer advice and guidance to the islands within the UK representation to the EU. There is a clear commitment to do more should there be a No vote.

Questioner

Alistair Carmichael's summation of the UK Government document was that it provides 'island proofing' for all policies made at local, Holyrood and Westminster level. Any legislation proposed must first consider the impact on the islands, so that there is no danger of something bureaucratic happening without the impact on the islands being taken into account.

Fiona Matheson (FM)

This is a framework of promises. I don't think it is a manifesto commitment from either the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats. The things that Rosie is describing to you may sound very nice but they are worthless in terms of how politics work. You have to be sure you're going to get the Government that is proposing this for a start. Politics is about probabilities. The likelihood is that there will be no overall Conservative Government in the next election, it will likely be a coalition made up of the Conservatives and UKIP. Boris Johnson is making a return to politics and he has already said he doesn't think it's necessary to give the Scottish Parliament any more powers.

There is a European dimension to this as well. Nothing can be enshrined to protect the islands under the current arrangements. The UK went into Europe and agreed its terms which cannot be re-negotiated. Many countries with island populations who joined the EU recognised that there are different needs and difficulties and wrote those in at ground level when they went into Europe. The UK didn't do that because Scotland and Scotland's islands weren't important at that time. The only way you will get enshrined protection for Scotland's islands is through the accession treaty to Europe that the Scottish Government would negotiate if we were to become independent.

There are two ways of accession to Europe. There are countries who have to gain entry by ensuring that their laws, rights etc meet EU standards, who have never been part of the EU. Turkey, for example, has wanted to join for a long time, however it is very far down the line in terms of human rights, food packaging etc, which are not up to the EU standard. Scotland, however, has been an EU member for 40 years, and we have all of those standards. The Scottish Government will want to take the route which already exists where we match all the tiers of accession but are now a new country. The newly unified Germany, for example, became an EU member practically overnight. Don't believe people when they tell you it's going to be long, complicated and fraught. The politics of Europe are about pragmatism, about doing what's best for the EU as a whole and it's a highly democratic.

With regards to currency, anybody can use the pound. Currencies are fluid. The Bank of England, which is independent of politicians and business, will make whatever happens work. It's in their interests to do that.

Audience

In terms of the EU, is there a precedent for the situation we would face?



FM

No, there isn't. Scotland is supposedly an equal partner with the other UK countries, we're not a region or a colony. We were a country that became united with another country. We're not like Catalonia, we're not a secessionist movement. We're a former country that became part of a Parliamentary Union, incidentally without any consultation of the people of Scotland at that time. They never had a vote on that union. You can't say this is like any other country joining the EU. Scotland has a wealthy economy, that's undisputed. We have fishing, food and drink, digital media, life sciences etc. It's a lot stronger than Norway was when it had its oil and in Scotland we are much more diverse. Because we already meet all of the conditions necessary to join the EU, we are in a good position. There will be UK common assets to sort out, such as fishing, as we are a massive fishing country. Many fishermen would like to see the UK and Scotland out of Europe altogether, however we are where we are, and pragmatism and practicalities and negotiations will take over. Problems will arise, but we know that the capabilities are within us. We will be able to pool resources, intelligence and ability to sort obstacles that come in front of us and that's what this whole process is all about.

RW

All of the No parties have stated that they are in favour of further devolution to the Scottish Parliament. No-one is going to take it away. Boris Johnson may not like it but he's only one person. If Scotland becomes an independent country, we won't have control. The rest of the UK has to look to its interests and it's not in its interests to have a foreign country having all of the benefits Scotland has at the moment. We may still be able to use the pound but there would be no seat at the big table to make real decisions about it. We would still have the same physical money in our pocket, but things like interest rates and mortgage rates – the whole economy – would be controlled elsewhere.

The other potential problem is with the big supermarkets. It costs more at the moment to transport goods from down south to Inverness than it does to transport them to Birmingham, so prices could be even more significantly different. There's no guarantee they wouldn't raise their prices even more so that food would cost more.

FM

The skewing of the economy in so many ways is to suit the London market and that's why all of the areas of the rest of the UK are struggling. The Bank of England manages the economy in the best way possible. The Governor of the Bank of England has been very careful not to raise interest rates even though in London they're shouting for it because it will suit them. The worry for the rest of the UK economy if Scotland becomes independent and is not part of a currency union, is that the Scottish economy becomes of a higher value than the rest of the UK. That would be bad for the rest of the UK. Political parties do not own the currency, it's simply a symbol of the wealth of a country.

RW

There are so many unanswered questions around currency and how it will be used and controlled. Currency underpins nearly everything that we do and we're being asked to trust that it will be fine – perhaps it will but my view is that it won't be fine. If we had been presented with full information about what an independent Scotland would do in order to get into the EEC, or what would happen with currency, it may be different. Instead, the Scottish Government have said what they're going to do without consulting the other organisations and countries that will also be affected. It hasn't been thought out. We're being asked to take a kind of a blind leap.

Audience

My sense is that it's been enormously beneficial to be part of the strong pound while going through the recession. Without it we would have really struggled to get out of the holes we dug.

FM

An economic view was taken on how to deal with the crash, which happened following the deregulation of the banks by political parties involved. We are paying for the mistakes of the banks and the money that was gambled with. Other countries did it differently. Iceland did it differently, they let their banks go bust and are in the process of rebuilding their economy. Why should the working people of this country have to pay to bail out private banks – what is so important about securing that? The UK Government are making working people pay for the debt. It's hitting working people and the vulnerable far harder than it's hitting the bankers. In Iceland they are in the process of jailing the bankers.

RW

Similar things have happened in small nations such as Cyprus and many people lost their entire life savings. The State has a duty to do everything possible to protect the population and their money in the banks.

FM

A great many people in Scotland want to see a different type of economy. However much money we have or don't have, we want to be able to prioritise how that's used. It's not about how wealthy, how big or how great we are, it's about how we target what we have where it's most needed. Scotland's funding comes from the block grant through the Barnett formula, which is like getting pocket money. We pay more in tax receipts than we get back.

RW

We have a Scottish Parliament that looks after all domestic matters, such as education and health, and there are promises for more devolution. We do have the powers to do things for ourselves but we have the full backing of a strong UK.

FM

The money that comes to fund, for example, the Scottish NHS, is still constructed around what goes to the English NHS. As there is less money for the NHS down south then pro rata there will be less in Scotland. One item of prescription in England can cost £8. If you have someone on a long term illness with 5 or 6 items, you can pay up to £40. Not everyone gets it for free and many have to pay. Conversely, we get it free because the Scottish Government has chosen to prioritise health. They're having to damage limit everything that's coming out of England.

Comments from the Audience

The Scottish Government are able to do that because it's within the powers of devolution. I do not see why tampering with the UK as a whole would be beneficial when they can already make this kind of decision.

Free prescriptions are great, and education free at point of use is also great, but of course it's not completely free, because many students have to take out loans to support their education. I see the private sector driving everything. I think it's terrible that people are afraid to make a democratic decision because of the threat of a big business leaving Scotland, that really frightens me. I do not think devolution is enough. Countries like Iceland are a great example to show how things could actually be done. They have a thriving tourist sector, there is very little unemployment. They are a tiny country who are able to say this is how we're doing things. I'm having to self-fund a conversion degree at university through taking a loan and also working for a company on a zero hours contract. I'm not happy about having to do that. I'm not delusional enough to think we are going to see socialism on 19th September but I have not been given enough evidence to rely on for staying together.

I think this conversation has been very helpful for undecided voters.

I don't think we have properly evaluated all of the things that we stand to lose if we become independent. I worry that it will be a case of we don't realise what we miss until we don't have it any more. Things like the BBC are so much part of the fabric of our lives and we don't know what will happen with those if there's a Yes vote.

FM

We will lose things, but we will also have opportunities for liaisons and connections with other countries that we don't know about yet. I think that's a really exciting prospect, in terms of cooperation, from foreign policy cooperation to arts cooperation. I do think that things like the BBC have become very formulaic. The BBC actually commissions very few dramas and documentaries itself and buys them from other companies that make them. Within Scotland, nothing can be commissioned without going through London first and we're not getting a mirror or a window for our culture.

Audience

Everything for BBC Scotland has to go through London because the BBC is a UK-wide corporation and everything is paid for through the central licensing fee. BBC Scotland does have commissioning powers.



It seems to me that there is so much valuable infrastructure that we could lose and I don't understand why we would want to. A lot of it comes down to whether you have a fondness for the UK. I know a lot of people don't, or that they don't like certain aspects, but

I know on balance that I do have that fondness for the UK and the opportunities that provides.

FM

The fondness will still be there, it will stay, but fondness isn't good enough to tackle the problems we have in Scotland and here in Orkney. We have a food bank. We're an efficient, farming community and we're in that situation. In my childhood that would have been unthinkable.

Audience

I think whatever the outcome, I'm going to embrace it – if it's No, we need a much more unifying union and if it's Yes, then we have to embrace it for a lot of the reasons that have been outlined. What worries me is that is it going to be really nasty after the vote.

RW

I have a huge worry at the moment that this referendum debate, that's been rattling on for two years, has cost so much division. We're seeing families divided, and I know I've nearly fallen out with people. Whatever the result, there's going to be a large tranche of people who are very upset, whichever way it is. There has to be something set up for some kind of healing and unification, whichever way it goes. If it's a Yes, there's going to be a lot of people who are going to be extremely upset and worried about leaving the UK. If it's a No, then there's the people that will feel disappointed and may start to work towards perhaps another vote. There is a division in Scottish society now and I think it needs to be addressed after the vote.

Audience

I don't think I would be as pessimistic as that. One thing about this debate is that it's got people talking. One of the best things that was said about it was at a Radical Independence conference. It was said in the context of a Yes vote but it applies to both sides, because I don't think it's right for both sides to have put in so much effort if things are going to stay the same. They said we will become the architects of a new country. That absolutely applies to both sides because it's clear that everyone wants change. The status quo isn't perfect and it isn't working and we really need to take stock of how things are. We need to look at our electoral system and our politics.

Agnes Tolmie

One of the things that's been said by the politicians who have attended some of the other SWC events is that whatever the outcome, they will have to work together. I have an expectation that whatever the outcome, our politicians need to get themselves together – if anyone's been vitriolic, it's them. If you think of something like this, families and friends are split, in another century it could have been a civil war. It's all been in the vocabulary and the words and the leading lights at the end of this process have to demonstrate very good behaviours and show leadership. Whatever the outcome, people in Scotland are looking for change. The status quo just isn't acceptable any more. This has been clear in the events we have held in the run up to the referendum.



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