



CONFERENCE REPORT

Saturday 15 February 2020

Hilton Grosvenor Hotel, Glasgow

The Scottish Women's Convention

**DO WOMEN IN
SCOTLAND WANT
ANOTHER
INDEPENDENCE
REFERENDUM?**

AGNES TOLMIE, SWC CHAIR

“Decisions over Scotland’s future often do not take into account women’s lived experiences, voices and opinions. That is why we need to discuss if holding a referendum will be a positive or negative experience for communities. Women need the correct information to come to a fully informed decision that empowers them.

Since the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, our country has faced three General Elections and a referendum on membership of the European Union. The results that have come from these events have sparked a different nature of debate when it comes to the decision to hold another referendum on Scotland’s place within the United Kingdom.

Many women now question whether decisions about our country’s constitutional future should really be taken at a Westminster level or here in Scotland. We need to come to a decision given all that has happened in such a short space of time on whether or not a referendum is the best way to decide Scotland’s future. Are we better suited to make the choices affecting us and understand the unique drivers of inequality within Scotland? Or, does a potential referendum mean a splintering of our economy and social security system, pushing our most vulnerable further into poverty? What women need is a wider debate that respects everyone’s views.

The Scottish Women’s Convention wanted to do something different in holding this Conference. We wanted to bring together both sides of the argument to talk about this from women’s point of view.

We are not here to argue for one side or the other. What we are here to do is to argue that the debate has to encapsulate women’s equality. We have been overwhelmed by the number of women attending the Conference and the subsequent evidence gathering in order to express their views.

It is fundamental that we keep the debate around what another potential referendum means for women and women’s equality at the top of the agenda. Whether or not you believe in another vote, we are in a completely different place than we were in 2014. We need to ensure that those that make policy and procedure are aware of how we are impacted both as individual women and as a collective.”



KIRSTEIN RUMMERY

Kirstein Rummery is a Professor of Social Policy and a senior fellow at the Centre on Constitutional Change. She is a member of the national committee of Women for Independence and researches gender and disability equality and comparative social policy.

Her new book 'What Works in Gender Equality' looks at what the UK and Scotland can learn about childcare and social care policy from abroad and how it can help achieve gender equality, available from Policy Press later in 2020.

Kirstein firstly discussed the role she played as part of a commission of academics back in 2014, which was set up to look at the potential outcomes of both a yes and no vote. Kirstein's particular interest is in what Scotland could learn from other countries in terms of childcare and social care policy and what we would be able to do if another independence referendum was successful.

- Scotland is wealthier and fairer as a result of devolution – but we still can't do all the things we need to be able to do. We need to have control over all the legislative and policy levers like they do in countries with better gender equality.
- Not only does this benefit service users, but also those working within these systems. It would mean a higher value being placed on women's labour as well as better jobs for those in childcare and social care services.

"Countries such as the Netherlands and Germany have better equality outcomes whilst being similar to the UK in terms of their economy and social security systems. The one thing that they have in common, however, is that gender equality is embedded within their Constitutions. This is a really powerful lever which enables people to use the constitutional framing to argue against cuts to services which disproportionately affect women such as childcare and domestic abuse services."

- We are better on improving outcomes like poverty and health inequalities, despite not having all the control. This has taken a lot of creativity because of how limited we are, but it has still been achieved.

"We need to be able to control more than local authority budgets in Scotland. We need full control over other levers like welfare benefits, employment conditions, maternity and paternity pay in order to further equality."

- We can argue that we now have much more powerful women in control both in Scottish politics and in civic society. Many of these women will have become politicised as a result of the 2014 referendum. Independence gives us the chance to do things we need to do to address gender equality.
- For every pound we invest in childcare, for instance, we get five pounds back. If we treat childcare as a social investment rather than a cost, it has transformative implications, especially in more deprived areas of our country to narrow the inequality gap.

"You may disagree with me as to how we tackle gender inequality, but I think the key is to be making decisions in Scotland for Scottish people and the evidence on devolution shows we can do it better. I am persuaded of independence as it would give us a chance to rewrite our Constitution and place gender equality at the heart of it."

- The way politics works means we are headed towards a hard Brexit which will harm our economy and which we have no control over. It will be worse than austerity. We need to be able to make decisions for ourselves.
- Of course we want gender equality for the rest of the UK. We need to do things differently, however, and demonstrate these outcomes. We can only do this if we control all the levers to show the rest of the UK it also has to change.

"Finally, I know that another referendum would be decisive, but I do think that those on the Yes side can convince people in a sisterly manner. Unless we actually have a referendum where people can decide on the question, regardless of their actual stance on independence, they should still have the right to be asked."

MEGHAN GALLACHER

Meghan is the Conservative Group Leader on North Lanarkshire Council and the Councillor for Motherwell West. She became involved in politics during the independence referendum and was part of the Better Together campaign.

Meghan started by describing her journey into politics as a young woman during the 2014 Independence Referendum Campaign. She then went on to outline some of the main arguments as to why another vote on independence would be far too decisive when the country is still split over the last vote.

“As a 21 year old woman, I believed that the benefits of Scotland being in the UK vastly outweighed those in an independent Scotland – something I still believe today. The UK is the most successful union in the world. Everyone might not agree with this stance but that’s what makes our democracy so key –everyone is entitled to their views. I don’t believe women do want another referendum but it’s highly important to have an open and frank debate about this issue.”

- Research by the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey before the 2014 vote showed that women were less likely to support independence than men. Taking a look at the current political climate, I think you could argue that this is still relevant.
- Women are more likely to say that they don’t know what the consequences of another independence referendum may be or what the potential impact could be on living standards for themselves and their families.

“There is no real substantial evidence that women have changed their minds and want another referendum. Until this is proven, it would be unfair to say that women do support another decisive vote. If we fast forward to 2020, we are still in exactly the same position as we were in 2014. We still do not know what an independent Scotland would look like and too many questions remain unanswered.”

- Democracy is another reason for saying no to another referendum. Democracy has played a huge part in achieving equality for women. We only have to turn the clock back one hundred years for women securing the right to vote. Now many of the most powerful politicians in Scotland are women.
- Instead of arguing for or against another referendum, women want to see these politicians arguing for equality and championing everyday issues like health and social care, our justice system and local government services.

“Scotland is one of the most devolved forms of government which allows us to bring forward our own goals and aspirations. My concern is now that we are in a new decade, we still haven’t managed to put this subject to bed. There is no doubt that such a contentious issue would harm Scotland both economically and socially.”

- Whatever your views on Brexit, I don’t believe that another independence referendum is the answer. There are too many unanswered questions on finance and the economy.
- This leads me to the conclusion that there is no definitive strategy to answer questions on independence. We have spent the last one hundred years and more fighting for our right to vote. That democratic right should be respected.

“There is also no guarantee that Scotland would be welcomed by the EU. If Scotland voted for independence and then re-joined, we would have a larger budget deficit than any other EU nation. We don’t know what other conditions they would impose on us. What would be our currency or our trade arrangements with the rest of the UK? These issues aren’t easily fixed.”

- This being said, I am delighted the SWC are continuing to promote women’s voices in Scotland and gathering their views on this important debate.
- The contributions have been so constructive, everyone has spoke with passion and from their hearts and this is what’s important regardless of the side of the debate you sit on.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

I'm concerned about finances. We don't know how much another referendum would cost and where this money would be deducted from in running such a campaign.

Meghan Gallacher (MG): This is a really good point. A by-election alone costs around £50, 000. To put this in the context of running a referendum for a full country, the budget would be astronomical. I don't think that this is appropriate and there are other priorities we should really be focusing on. Money could be better spent on public services, for instance.

Kirstein Rummery (KR): All elections cost money - running three General Elections over the past six years in order to settle a political party squabble has cost the taxpayer millions. Running a referendum is the price worth paying for the real functioning of democracy. It would be up to both sides of the debate to make a case for independence or against. The onus is on them to ensure costing is transparent.

I have heard the claim over and over again that the UK is the most successful union in the world and has been for over 300 years. I want to see some proof of that.

KR: There have of course been times where it has made sense to be a part of the broader UK – none of those reasons make sense to me anymore. Disagreements are about our constitutional future, the economics, the risks, etc. Even if Scotland was to get independence, I would hope that a beneficial relationship would remain with the rest of the UK. It is in both England and Scotland's interests for that to happen. It would be a different kind of union but it would be stronger because decisions would be taken as equal partners as opposed to Scotland being seen as a region. We would not even be having this discussion around another referendum if devolution had been respected.

MG: In terms of how successful the union has been, it centres on the shared journey we have had over the past 300 years. We've not only managed to gain women's and LGBTQI+ rights, but also the successful implementation of the devolved governments. This shows the strength of the UK. Scotland has control over health, education, the justice system and certain tax raising powers. This illustrates that Scotland has the power to move its own future forward – working side by side within the UK. It's why we are the most successful union. We have to think about what Scotland wants to look like now. We have got constitutional change in terms of leaving the EU. We need to see what that means for Scotland and see what benefits that may come of this first and then take it from there.

Westminster has said they will assume consent from the Scottish Government post-Brexit no matter what decisions are made for issues that used to be in the realm of the EU. Issues like fishing, agriculture and procurement—which is central to the NHS—will be taken by the UK Government. This is destroying devolution, not strengthening it.

MG: When it comes to the EU Referendum, we did not vote as separate countries but as a single United Kingdom. We knew this was on the cards from the Conservative Party Manifesto of 2015. It was for people across the UK to make the decision to leave or remain. Leaving the EU I think will benefit Scotland in terms of particular things like the Common Fisheries Policy. We can then make our own negotiations on fishing and how we carry out that business within our own waters.

KR: There are so many different ways that devolution post-Brexit could have been played and the relationships with the devolved administrations managed. They could have been directly involved with negotiations, they could have been given a supporting vote. The UK Government chose to take none of these options. I accept that the EU Referendum was a single United Kingdom vote. The decisions made since, however, will have a direct impact on Scotland and it will have devastating economic consequences. If you thought austerity was bad, Brexit will be far worse for the nation's finances and Scotland will be left poorer as a result.

When we sometimes talk about democracy we forget to say that we are from different cultures and backgrounds, and sometimes these debates are not representative of that. We are all women, but from which part of Scotland? We need equality. If there is to be another referendum, does it appeal to everyone in Scotland from these different cultures?

KR: As a country, we need to go beyond simply saying to BAME communities that they are welcome and actually demonstrate that. Words are easy but what's really needed is systems and policies that back it up. I've been horrified by the level of racism and xenophobia that has been unleashed across the UK against ethnic minorities and European citizens. I don't know if this was always there and Brexit made it acceptable or whether Brexit caused it. That level of abuse against anyone who looks like a stranger has been shocking. It is a stain on our country whether or not Scotland decides to take a different path from the rest of the UK.

If we were to get independence, it doesn't instinctively mean that Scotland becomes an all-feminist, anti-racist utopia. We have to put the work in. Having the levers to do that work though at a legislative capacity to tackle overt racism and get to certain groups that are not at present getting the support they need is crucial. I think independence would make this considerably more likely.

MG: When we look at the UK and issues over race, of course we can do better. We need to lead by example and that includes calling people out when you hear racist slurs against anyone. It is completely unacceptable and none of us should stand for that. I think that everyone here would call anything like this out and fight against that. This is what we need to do for a fairer and more equal society.

Do you think that there should be a cap on both public and private funds for the opposing sides in any future referendum campaign and should these only be produced by people taking part in another vote? Could such a campaign really happen without interference from other countries?

KR: It is very difficult to prevent the global media from exerting undue influence on debates happening in Scotland. The establishment will always support the status quo. That's the case whether it be in law, policing or international media. Mainstream media in particular will always support the status quo as it is very much a part of it. We do need a cap on spending. What really needs to happen for campaigners is to get out there, be chapping on doors and making the argument like people used to do before social media. We have to go back to that old fashioned talking in any future campaign.

MG: Old fashioned politics is key, I think. That's something I really took with me during my own local government election. No matter what side you are on, you have to get out there, knock on doors and get that message across in a civilised and fair manner. I do agree about putting a cap on funds. There needs to be a fair and level playing field. We have to make sure the rules are absolutely clear on both sides of the campaign as well as the consequences if those rules aren't adhered to.

It's important in terms of having debates that if we can't get facts then we should extend the offer to provide them. If you are standing on a platform to persuade people to vote your way, the onus is on you to deliver those facts. I do think that we are now having more open and honest debates. It's only right we do get challenged – it shows an energised society that is political and that does have opinions. We might all have different views on whether Scotland should have another referendum but that's a good thing and shows we are engaging with the political process and challenging those standing for office.

COMMENTS ON THE DAY

I have been in this country a long time and there are still certain things that are not fair. When people speak of equality and diversity, I question what they mean by equality. Where are the minority ethnic people? Why are they always thought about at the bottom? We have a duty to open our mouth and report these incidents.

A main argument from unionists is that we are part of a union and voted as a democratic union. I'd say this isn't democracy when Scotland votes time and time again opposite to how England votes. The protests on the streets after the election were not about another independence referendum, it was about democracy.

I think we all want to know the arguments in regards to the future of the union and how exactly it has been so wonderful to us. If we do not have democracy, we should not be in this union and should not be denied a referendum.

When people talk about the Barnett Formula, they always forget to mention just how much money Scotland puts into the UK economy and how little we get back.

An Independent Scotland that goes back into the EU doesn't make sense. Why would you leave one union to join another?

Many women do not want independence due to the uncertainty of the consequences. We don't know enough about currency, trade, economy, defence. That is a wake up call. We need to heed that and do something about it. The main thing to do is to educate ourselves.

We were told five years ago that voting "Yes" would see our pensions depleted. This is why many of us voted against independence the first time round. We deserve another chance without being lied to.

Scotland is always offered the process of democracy but not the product.

We live in a very patriarchal society. We like to say that an Independent Scotland would see more care, empathy, less analytical and clinical policies. Will we be seen as the poor wee "wifey" if we go down that road when actually it should be the basis of our society?

Scotland has no say on how money is spent. How is this a union of equals?

Any referendum inviting huge constitutional change should set much higher ratios in terms of what a win looks like. 50/50 only succeeds in dividing society. The question was not properly equitably managed in 2014 in terms of the outcome. 65% or 70% would be a better level to provide a definitive no or yes. No business would ever make such a radical change unless it was very clear.

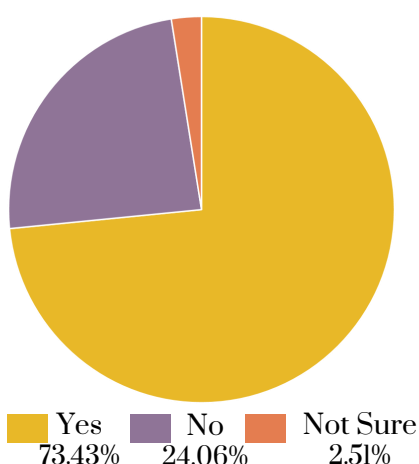
There is also the economic argument. Scottish businesses, in the main, are owned by large organisations or are part of UK companies which are based in England. The risk of job losses and take overs would be huge. There is also no guarantee that a future Scottish electorate would vote for socialist, feminist, disablist, equality driven political outcomes.

People really have to do their research about what the economic consequences are of leaving the UK. I am sick of all the debate and how long this has been going on. You cannot just unravel a 300 year old union.

The SWC released an online survey to find out more about how women across Scotland feel on this subject. We wanted to do this to ensure we heard the voices of as many women as possible, recognising that it is not just the views of the women able to attend the Conference that should be taken into account.

In just 10 days, we gathered hundreds of responses from all over the country. The following is a short overview of these results, covering each of the four questions asked. We have also created a separate document giving a fuller insight into questionnaire responses gathered both online and at our Conference.

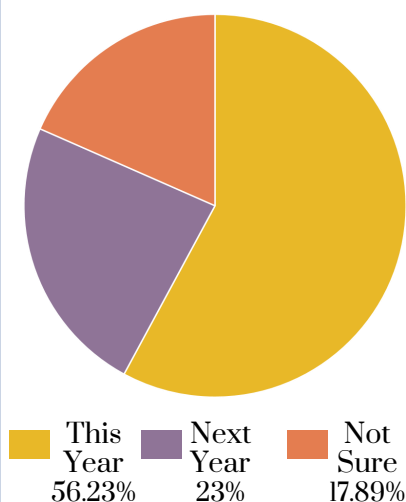
QUESTION 1: Do women in Scotland want another Independence Referendum?



The vast majority of respondents said that Scotland should have another referendum. Comments for included guaranteeing our future and protection of our rights. Comments against a referendum refer to respecting the last result and moving forward.

“For our children and grandchildren’s future, we need an Independent Scotland.”
 “Not this year, after the Holyrood elections.”
 “Disabled and a migrant. I now have no rights and no protection in Scotland.”
 “Respect the result of the last one. Democracy does not always agree with the individual.”
 “Women have had enough of division. Let’s get on with the day job.”

QUESTION 2: If yes, when?



A majority of just 56% of respondents hoped that if a referendum was to take place, it would be this year. People repeated their comments regarding the future of Scotland, and concerns over the current Westminster Government.



“No later than next year.”

“More and more people are recognising Westminster’s bad attitude towards Scotland.”

“Nothing less than independence will protect our country.”

QUESTION 3: If not, why not?

Those against holding another referendum gave a huge variety of views and opinions. Respondents commented on Scotland’s resources if independent, and making Scotland great within the UK.

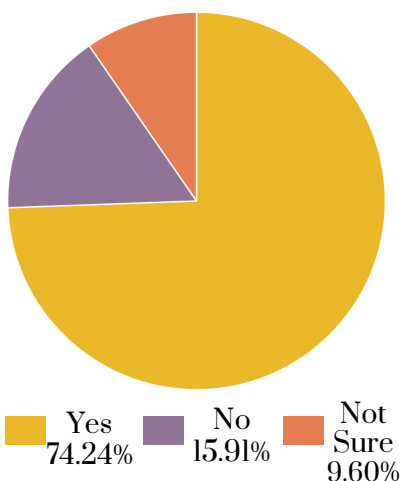


“We have had a referendum. Why don’t politicians listen?”

“Don’t believe Scotland has the resources to be Independent.”

“People are supporting separation because of emotion not common sense. Let’s make Scotland great again within the UK.”

QUESTION 4: Is a simple Yes/No decision the right way to determine Scotland’s future?



When asked if a simple yes or no question should be asked, the overwhelming majority said yes. Some interesting suggestions included requiring a more significant majority to determine the result, and asking a second question around our place in the EU.



“What about requiring a 60/40 vote?”

“Don’t confuse the issue. Yes or No for independence. Simple.”

“Would like a second question; ‘Should an independent Scotland join the EU?’”

Thank You!

The SWC would like to thank all who took part in the online survey!

Your time and contribution helped us to understand the feelings towards another independence referendum. It gave us a clear idea of the perceived benefits and challenges facing women in this decision making process.

Thank You!

The Scottish Women's Convention would like to thank all of those who attended our Conference and contributed to our evidence gathering through the Survey. We would also like to thank our speakers from the Debate for providing clear and informative arguments from both sides. The SWC will use all of the voices gathered to feed back to policy makers regarding this incredibly important topic.

To find out more about the personal views and opinions provided by women across Scotland, you can read our Additional Materials Document, which gives a more substantial analysis of the questionnaire findings.



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