

**SCOTLAND UNITED FOR INDEPENDENCE:**

**THE CASE FOR A SCOTTISH  
INDEPENDENCE CONVENTION**

**BY**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Two stark facts emerge from the Scottish Parliament election results in 2003.

Firstly there are now three significant pro-Independence parties represented in the Parliament – the Scottish National Party, the Greens and the Scottish Socialist Party, in addition to other individual Members who support Independence. Indeed, despite the fall in SNP representation, there are actually more pro-Independence MSP's in this Parliament than were elected in 1999.

Secondly, not only does support for Independence amongst the electorate exceed support for the SNP, according to the opinion polls it actually exceeds the total support received by all three pro-Independence parties in the 2003 election. This suggests that there is a need to look at new and novel ways of mobilising the pro-Independence forces within Scotland to convert this latent support into actual votes for Independence.

But the biggest challenge remains of persuading more than half the Scottish electorate of the merits of Independence and their need to make it their top priority in terms of voting. John McAllion, the former and highly respected Labour MP and MSP, estimates that up to 40% of Labour voters support Independence but don't vote for it. If even half of these pro-Independence Labourites were persuaded to vote for Independence, combined with those who already do, then Scotland would be well on its way to national freedom!

While the pro-Independence parties differ on many, if not most, other areas of policy and will rightly want to maintain their own separate ideologies, organisations and identities, there is a strong case for them to work much more closely together on the single issue of Independence, both to maximise and mobilise support for Independence and to prepare the way for an as-smooth-as-possible transition to it, once the Scottish people have given it the green light at the ballot box.

But the level of co-operation needed between the pro-Independence forces in Scotland cannot happen willy-nilly. It has to be properly organised and facilitated through an appropriate mechanism. An Independence Convention is that appropriate mechanism.

## 2. POLITICAL CONTEXT

Since the Scottish Parliament elections on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2003, a number of commentators, not all unsympathetic to the cause of Independence, have started to write off the cause of National Freedom just because the SNP had a poor election result. That, they say, spelt the death-knell, at least for the time being, of the prospect of further constitutional change, let alone any further moves towards Scottish Independence.

The paradox of the election was that while the SNP lost 8 seats, the number of MSP's who nominally support Independence rose from 37 in the last parliament to 41 in this one. There is, therefore, greater scope for advancing the cause than many thought on the day of immediate analysis following the count.

This new mix of "Independistas" don't see eye to eye on many, possibly most of the big political issues facing Scotland. But on one really big issue – the most important of all – they are agreed upon, i.e. the need for Scotland to be free, independent and sovereign as a nation state.

Their election has changed the political map of Scotland and presents new challenges to the SNP, the leading party of Independence in Scotland:

- Firstly, it means that the Independence cause is no longer the sole prerogative of one party, the SNP.
- Secondly, the new situation, with this new mix of "Independistas" in the Scottish Parliament, requires an imaginative and innovative response from the SNP.

Just as the Labour Party had to adapt in the late eighties and early nineties to recognising that although it was the leading party on devolution it didn't have majority support and therefore had to join forces with others to make it happen, so now the SNP also has to adapt to a similar situation if we are to make real progress towards achieving Independence.

The proportional representation method for election to the Scottish Parliament makes it very unlikely that any single party can gain an overall majority. The SNP and others in favour of Independence have to take account of this fact in assessing future strategy.

To achieve Independence, we need to work with others of like mind, whatever other ideological differences there may be on economic and social policies and assist them to move up Independence in their list of priorities; and to do so through dialogue within the framework of a Convention.

We have to work towards building an Independence Alliance or Coalition in the Scottish Parliament, which can at some future date, hopefully not too long from now, command the overall majority needed to achieve our aim of national freedom.

To do otherwise and allow the potential offered by the now wider pro-Independence forces to dilute because of factionalism, will diminish the cause and enable Unionist parties in both Holyrood and Westminster to frustrate our objective.

It is the duty, in particular, of the SNP as the leading Independence party to try to unite all the democratic forces behind the drive for national freedom and sovereignty in Scotland. The cause is far bigger and more important than any single party or individual.

We should also be prepared to learn the lessons of history.

The first lesson is that when the Scots are divided that is when they are conquered. That is as true today as it has been throughout our history.

The 1979 devolution referendum is a classic example of the success of the Unionist ploy of “divide and rule”. It largely failed because the political leadership of Scotland wasn’t united behind the campaign for an Assembly. The Labour Party was split. Even many of those within it who were nominally in favour of devolution didn’t bother to campaign actively for a Yes vote.

Thanks to the political sectarianism of people like Helen Liddell, who was the Labour Party Secretary in Scotland at the time, those within Labour’s ranks who were in favour of a Yes vote, stupidly, weren’t allowed to work with the SNP, the SLP and others to deliver the main plank of their own government’s policy!

The result was defeat.

But Labour learnt its lesson. That’s why it eventually took part in the Devolution Constitutional Convention in the late 80’s and early 90’s, along with the other pro-devolution parties, albeit it took a pasting from the SNP in the 1988 Govan by-election to force it to get serious.

That Convention united the diverse and divergent pro-devolution forces in Scotland, making the chances of success in any future devolution referendum that much greater.

The price Labour had to pay was that of compromise on some key issues, such as proportional representation. But for them that was a small price to pay compared to the prospect of getting hammered at some future date by the SNP, because Labour had again failed to deliver on its promise of a Scottish Parliament.

But even on the issue of proportional representation Labour was able to turn the appearance of compromise and reasonableness to its own advantage, by ensuring that

the system of PR adopted by the Convention was the one best suited to the electoral needs of the Labour Party.

Labour used its position as the leading party of devolution to shape the Constitutional Convention and to help guarantee the support it would need at a later date to be able to deliver on its stated aim of setting up a Scottish Parliament.

**The SNP should learn the lessons.**

If, despite the new situation we face, the SNP pursues a policy of political isolationism we could destroy our chances of being able to deliver Independence within our lifetime. The new political map of Scotland, with three pro-Independence parties now represented at parliamentary level, demands a new approach and a new attitude from Scotland's leading Independence party.

The lesson of today, with more than one party in support, is that we need a dual approach, not mutually exclusive. Of course the SNP must maintain the thrust of its Independence campaign, and seek the maximum support for itself as the leading vehicle for Independence. But, there is wisdom in embracing an alternative strategy of trying, through the creation of an Independence Convention that welcomes all shades of democratic nationalist opinion, to create more unity amongst the diverse Independence mood and forces across the spectrum of political views within Scotland.

Having a "Scotland United for Independence" Convention is the best way to maximise support for Independence, as well as, incidentally but not unimportantly, demonstrate that an independent Scotland will be a plural, multi-faceted and politically diverse nation; thus making the prospect of Independence much more appealing to a significantly broader spectrum of Scottish society than perhaps we have done hitherto.

### 3. OUTDATED CONCEPTS - GRADUALISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM

As well as shedding political isolationism to further the cause of Independence, the SNP also has to banish the banalities, unfortunately too often spoon fed to the media by some within our own ranks, of “gradualism” and “fundamentalism”. This kind of language degrades the Nationalist debate and damages the Independence cause.

What is meant by these descriptions anyway? (Incidentally, none of the journalists who use them are able to explain what they mean.)

I don't associate myself, or any of those who share my views about the best way to achieve Independence, with either of these shibboleths.

For example I want to see Independence happen at the earliest opportunity. Does that make me a fundamentalist? But I believe that it can only happen and would only be worthwhile achieving when a majority of Scots support it. Does that make me a gradualist?

Similarly I believe that the National Movement has to have vision and inspire the Scottish people about Independence by keeping it uppermost in their minds at all times. Does that make me a fundamentalist? But, in addition to the vision thing, I also believe that the SNP needs to use a combination of pragmatism and perfidy in outmanoeuvring our Unionist opponents. Does that make me a gradualist?

I believe we should use constant pressure to enhance the powers of the Scottish Parliament. Does that mean I am a gradualist? But, I also believe that we won't have the Scotland Act Schedule 5 powers transferred until Labour is under real threat from the SNP and others demanding Independence. Does that make me a fundie? It is neither gradualist nor fundamentalist impulses that make me cautious about endorsing the as yet ill-defined calls for fiscal autonomy. It is recognition that fiscal autonomy as defined in the Unionist lexicon, can entrench devolution at the expense of Independence.

I believe in having the people's approval for Independence in a referendum (gradualist?) but that such a referendum is better to be held when people know what they are voting for, rather than asking them to sign a blank cheque. Does that make me a fundamentalist?

I have never taken the view that devolution of itself would act as an *inevitable barrier* to Independence. Is that gradualist? Neither have I ever regarded it as a *guarantor of the inevitability* of Independence. Is that gradualist or fundamentalist?

**This is a sterile debate and should be put behind us.**

The key issue for every nationalist in Scotland isn't to try to outdo each other in predicting when Scotland will become independent. There are no reliable clairvoyants within the Nationalist Movement! Rather our real task is to do everything within our power to persuade the majority of people in Scotland of the need for Independence and for them to vote for it as their top priority.

Sometimes what happens outside our control will help the cause, other times it will hinder it.

For example, if the Scottish Assembly had been set up in 1979 before Mrs Thatcher was able to abort it, it is reasonable to assume that Scotland might well have opted for Independence during the eighties or early nineties, to free ourselves from the worst ravages of Thatcherism.

Conversely, the experience of the first four years of the existing Scottish Parliament has almost certainly undermined people's confidence in self-government and potentially their willingness to support Independence.

Under these two different scenarios the '79 Assembly might have acted as a catalyst for Independence while the existing Scottish Parliament, because of its current unpopularity, may well be a hindrance to it, i.e. devolution then was a plus for Independence; now, for different reasons, it could be a negative.

There is no iron rule in politics which states that devolution must or must *not* lead to Independence. While the existence and performance of a devolved Parliament will influence the debate about Independence, it may not be – indeed is unlikely to be - the deciding factor.

There are many influences other than devolution, which will decide Scotland's constitutional destiny. As Harold McMillan famously said "Events, dear boy, events." Other key determinants of whether or when we become independent will include the state of the economy, people's living standards, what is happening (or not) at Westminster, the EU and the United Nations.

Gathering the forces of Independence, and seeing them translated into seats, even if still short of an absolute majority, can make substantial gains for Scotland. As history has shown, with each rising tide of Independence manifest in political power won, Westminster, the seat of Unionism, can be forced to concede more powers to our nation. A movement united across parties can use any additional powers, as stepping-stones to Independence.

The Labour Government would never have set up the Royal Commission on the Constitution in the late 60's if Winnie Ewing hadn't won the Hamilton by-election. Labour would never have been committed to setting up a Scottish Assembly in the 70's if the SNP hadn't done so well in the two General Elections in 1974. Nor would it have felt the need to actively participate in the Constitutional Convention in the late 1980's had the SNP not won the 1988 Govan by-election.

The only language the Unionist parties understand is the threat of losing their parliamentary seats and all that goes with them. History shows that posing that threat on the back of an Independence campaign is the only way to force them to concede further, real constitutional change. Therefore the more people there are on the Independence bandwagon the better.

No matter what individuals used to label himself or herself, gradualist or fundamentalist, the only tag that matters now is that of Nationalist.

#### **4. THE PURPOSE AND ROLE OF AN INDEPENDENCE CONVENTION**

An Independence Convention sounds right in principle but what is it meant to achieve?

I suggest that it should have two strategic aims:

- To provide a platform for co-operation and co-ordination between pro-Independence parties and others;
- To promote and mobilise support for Independence within Scotland.

Each of these aims is discussed in the sections below.

##### **Providing a Platform for Co-operation and Co-ordination**

At present there is very limited co-operation between the pro-Independence parties in the Scottish Parliament and indeed outside it. Even when co-operation takes place it tends to be on issues not directly related to the constitutional one and is of an opportunistic and sporadic nature. There is no cohesion to the relationship between the pro-Independence parties and specifically on the constitutional question there is hardly any dialogue, let alone something more productive.

The result is a fractured Independence movement weaker than it should be. This can change if key players at national level, and party members at local level start talking to each other, exchanging ideas, campaigning together in a co-ordinated manner on something they are agreed upon. The challenge today is how to unite Scotland behind a popular demand for national freedom.

That doesn't require these parties and individuals to dilute or compromise their ideological beliefs on any of the other big issues in Scottish politics. The SNP would retain its identity and moderate left of centre position. The SSP would remain as a revolutionary left wing party and the Greens would continue to pursue their philosophical stance and priorities in relation to the environment, now and in a post Independence situation.

Ironically while the Independence Movement in Scotland is fragmented the Unionists are anything but! Labour and the Liberals are united against the forces of nationalism and are not shy about using, and abusing, their power within the Scottish Executive and at Westminster to re-enforce Unionism at every opportunity.

Similarly the Scottish Tories have made it clear that their priority is to save the Union, even if that means using their own votes at Holyrood to keep Labour or the Labour/Liberal Democrat Coalition in power, to stop a Nationalist grouping from taking over.

Unionists are not unaware of the potential that could flow from a Convention, and their need to strengthen devolution as a precautionary measure. The rumblings we have heard from their ranks about fiscal autonomy, about which I warn above, have to be vigorously analysed when they bring any plans forward, and ruthlessly exposed to a wide Scottish audience when compared with the full economic advantages that Independence would bring.

But if the Unionists are, as usual, speaking with a united voice in defending the Union, surely it is not only sensible but it is essential for the Independence parties to counter-attack and also to speak with a united voice?

The question is how can that be best achieved?

As past experience shows informal or casual arrangements don't work. We need a properly organised platform for co-operation. The primary role of an Independence Convention is to provide that platform.

Through time, hopefully months rather than years, co-operation will lead to co-ordination. Because it is only through co-ordinated activities that the pro-Independence forces will be able to effectively stave off the inevitable Unionist onslaught when it comes.

We should never forget the two main strategies, which our Unionist opponents will employ, are fear and division. They will try to generate fear amongst the Scottish people about the consequences of Independence through the use of words like "divorce" and "separation". They will also seek to wreak division within Scotland, as they did so spectacularly in the run-up to the '79 referendum; trying to divide the central belt from the rest of Scotland, setting urban and rural Scotland against each other, etc.

If an Independence Convention only achieves this first objective of co-operation and co-ordination it will have been worthwhile. But if it can achieve more, and we must hope that all those who participate in it are "big" enough to make sure that it does, then it could be the catalyst, which leads to Independence in our lifetime. Let us not forget the Scottish people like it when their politicians work together for the sake of Scotland. That is what an Independence Convention is all about!

### **Mobilising Support for Independence**

Although support for Independence in Scotland has, according to opinion polls, been somewhat erratic over the past thirty years, peaking at 50% in the run-up to the 1992 Westminster election, academic studies show that there is probably a baseline support of about 30% to a third of the electorate for Independence, a figure which has remained reasonably consistent over the last decade or so.

Given that at the end of the day more than half the Scottish electorate have to support Independence and be prepared to endorse it at the ballot box for it to happen there is

clearly still a lot of work to be done by the pro-Independence parties in Scotland to achieve it.

But it's not just support in principle that is needed. As referred to in Section 1 there are many Labour voters, for example, who believe in Independence but don't regard it as a high enough priority to be prepared to switch their votes from a Unionist Labour Party to a pro-Independence party. There are even some Tories who believe in Independence but continue to vote Tory.

So the challenge for nationalists isn't just to persuade many more people of the case for Independence but to get them to realise that it should be their number one priority. We must get them to realise that without Independence Scotland will not be able to fully realise her potential. But to achieve Independence they have to vote for it!

It is unlikely that any single party will be able to achieve the requisite level of support or votes in a PR election to the Scottish Parliament to be able to obtain either a mandate for Independence negotiations or for an Independence Referendum on its own.

There are two scenarios to be addressed. One is that the SNP can win an absolute majority on its own; something the present PR system is designed to prevent. The other is that the SNP and other parties join forces in the parliament to assert their mandate for negotiations or for an Independence referendum before negotiations. It is surely sensible to prepare for this, with discussions well before the election, rather than trying to cobble together an agreement in the wake of an election, when Unionism will use all its wiles and not inconsiderable ability to obstruct any agreement. Scotland's independence movement cannot afford the old, and tragic, propensity to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

There are several thorny issues to be examined by the pro-Independence parties before the next election, which reinforce the need for a Convention in which discussions lead to an agreed definition of Independence. Major ones are: our position within the EU, the nature of the new Scottish Constitution post-Independence, the size of the new Independent parliament and what PR system should be used, and the length of any transition period before these elections take place.

Such agreement will actually make it easier to build up support for Independence, as the Scottish people see that there is a consensus amongst the broad spectrum of support represented by the pro-Independence parties about the meaning and shape of what an independent Scotland would look like. Of course, each party would still present its own distinct economic and social programme for an independent Scotland. It would be for the electorate in an independent Scotland to decide which of these it found most appealing and which party or parties should form the Government in an independent Scotland.

Each of the pro-Independence parties represents a different constituency within the Scottish electorate, albeit there is probably some crossover of support at the margins.

The SNP has probably got three main sources of support. Firstly it has the loyal, traditional Nationalist vote, which it has built up since 1945 throughout Scotland. Secondly it vies with the Labour Party, particularly in urban Scotland. Thirdly the party has been extremely successful in garnering the anti-Tory/radical vote in areas of Scotland previously held by the Tories.

The SSP and the Greens, the two other parties committed to Independence, have different constituencies; the former appealing to people further to the left than the SNP and the latter to those whose primary concern is the state of the environment. Unlike the SNP there is probably a limit to the breadth of support these parties could muster in Scotland but they still managed to obtain 13.6% of the regional list vote between them in 2003. If that support can be channelled into supporting Independence then it is worthwhile having.

By working together in an Independence Convention, the pro-Independence parties could use their appeal to their own supporters, actual and potential, to unite Scotland behind the demand for Independence. United we progress, divided we stagnate.

In campaigning on a jointly agreed basis five of the key messages we have to get across are that:

- Independence is a prerequisite for economic success and the elimination of poverty and deprivation in Scotland.
- Fiscal autonomy is no substitute for Independence.
- The current developments within the European Union make Independence an urgent necessity if Scotland is not to become a provincial backwater.
- Globalisation makes Independence more not less essential.
- It's not enough just to support Independence, it has to be the number one priority and people who support it in principle have to vote for it in practice to make it happen.

Our goal should be, ideally by the time the next Scottish General Election takes place in 2007, **to make Independence the settled will of the Scottish people.**

## 5. WHY THE SNP SHOULD TAKE PART IN AN INDEPENDENCE CONVENTION

Let us not kid ourselves. The election results for the SNP on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2003 were a real disappointment. For a party that was promising to fill the lead role in the Scottish Executive on 2<sup>nd</sup> May losing a quarter of all our parliamentary seats was a severe setback and one from which we need to learn lessons.

Despite these setbacks, however, the SNP remains the best hope for the future of Scotland. Although there are now three parties represented in the Scottish Parliament who favour Independence, the SNP is the only one with a broad enough appeal to make it a reality.

It is no accident that the very name of the party emphasises this broad appeal, being the Scottish **National (and not Nationalist)** Party. In other words it represents all the geographies of Scotland (urban/rural, east/west, north/south, islands/mainland), and is neither confined to any narrow class interests or honed to a minority ideology; its moderate left-of-centre position reflects the traditions and beliefs of most people living in the community that is Scotland.

If the SNP didn't exist the Independence Movement would have to invent it. It is a vital ingredient in delivering Independence for Scotland.

Despite the selfless efforts by the party and its members, we have to acknowledge that so far we have not yet convinced sufficient numbers of people in Scotland, including many Labour supporters who believe in it, to vote for the SNP as the vehicle to achieve Independence. This is the case despite the justification for staying within the United Kingdom becoming weaker every year. I see the Convention as a means to help achieving breakthrough.

And although the chattering classes are paying lip service to fiscal autonomy the Nationalist Movement has so far failed to benefit from the deep-seated wave of discontent with the devolved Parliament and turn people's anger, disappointment and disillusionment with it into a popular demand for more independent powers, let alone full-scale Independence.

No doubt there are many reasons why this is so. The key question for us as a party is what are we going to do about it?

While there is no single panacea, which will overnight double the SNP's ratings in the opinion polls or ensure that the next Number 9 bus will deliver Independence, active participation by the SNP in an Independence Convention could make a significant contribution towards the achievement of our primary goal, Independence.

## **Unity instead of Fragmentation**

Prior to 2003 the SNP had an almost total monopoly in terms of parliamentary representation for those parties committed to Independence for Scotland. Clearly that situation changed on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2003. There are now three parties committed to Independence as well as at least one of the Independent Members, Margo MacDonald.

Leaving aside George Reid, who as Presiding Officer is no longer counted as an SNP MSP, there are currently 40 pro-Independence MSP's, of whom 26 are SNP MSP's. That means that the SNP is now the leading but not the only Independence party in the Parliament.

Of course there are suspicions amongst SNP members about the true motives of the SSP in what appears to many as its sudden conversion to Independence as a key plank of its policy.

Similarly many question the extent to which the Greens are committed to Independence or how high they place it up their list of priorities.

These worries and suspicions naturally make some SNP members ultra cautious about "getting into bed" with these other parties, even if it is to promote Independence.

But fear of the consequences of the Independence Movement being fragmented and disunited when faced with the full might of the British state should far outweigh any hesitations about working with the SSP, the Greens and others to try to unite the pro-Independence forces in Scotland.

SNP members should also recognise that there are risks for these other parties in participating in an Independence Convention. Just as some of our people have some reservations about them, so some of their members have concerns about us. If any of us, in any of the parties, allow these niggles to stop us from co-operating in a Convention to bring forward Independence Day for Scotland then the only beneficiaries will be our Unionist opponents.

Also we shouldn't forget that a primary function of an Independence Convention is to provide a vehicle for those in other parties, such as the Labour Party, who disagree with their own party's policy to join the wider Independence Movement; as well as provide a home for those individuals who are not and who do not want to be associated with any single party organisation.

All of these forces have to be united to be effective.

Unity is strength and the best way to unite what is currently a diverse and diffuse Independence Movement is through a Convention, with the SNP as an active player in it.

## **Enhanced Campaigning Support for Independence**

We shouldn't forget the old proverb that "The whole is greater than the sum of the parts". In terms of effective campaigning for Independence, the very establishment of a Convention will of itself provide hope for those who have lost faith or become disillusioned with the inadequacies of the devolved Parliament as well as providing an added stimulus for all those who believe that Independence is the way forward for Scotland. This will be particularly true if the SNP agrees to formally join the Convention.

The combined forces of the pro-Independence parties coupled with the mobilisation of those who want to see Scotland free but whose energies are currently lying latent would help put the drive for national sovereignty from its current state of neutral into fifth gear.

As long as the Unionists have the majority in the Scottish Parliament that institution is never going to be allowed to lead a nationalist rebellion in Scotland. An Independence Convention could and would. It could provide a magnet around which all those demanding freedom could rally and thereby lift Scotland out of its current constitutional slumber.

Particularly if the SNP played an active role the Convention could reach parts of the Scottish electorate no other organisation could and energise people into standing up for their country, knowing full well that there were many more standing beside them.

The Convention could also help restore confidence amongst the Scots, the lack of which has been the Unionists' single biggest asset every time we go into battle with them. The peer support which being part of a National Convention can provide would not only provide encouragement it would help build up the courage of the Scots to face up to the challenges which lie ahead. It would help greatly in uniting the nation behind the demand for constitutional change.

Numbers provide strength and the Convention could play a crucial role in providing the critical mass of supporters for Independence needed to persuade the doubters and bring them along too.

The Scottish people love it when they see their politicians putting aside their partisanship and political differences for the greater good of Scotland. The SNP should lead by example and demonstrate that it truly is the National Party of Scotland. There would be no better way to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the party's creation than by helping to set up an Independence Convention.

Alex Neil, MSP  
November 2003