

Why Clinicians & Students Should Vote 'No'

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Introduction

On 26 November 2013 the Scottish Government published their *White Paper on Independence*, a 670-page book which the Scottish National Party (SNP) called their blueprint for an Independent Scotland. It was expected to include the SNP's detailed answers to the many, varied questions that independent experts, the UK Government and 'Better Together' campaign had raised.



However, it did not meet those expectations because the detailed answers were absent and it was little more than a wish list of what the SNP hoped they could deliver in an Independent Scotland. And this is not just my opinion - Atholl Duncan, Executive Director of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Scotland, said of the White Paper: "It [is] not a business plan; it [is] a political manifesto"¹.

Prior to the White Paper's publication, BMA Scotland's Chairman - Dr Brian Keighley - launched a discussion paper on the Independence Referendum 2014, entitled *Implications for Health*. The BMA are remaining neutral in the run-up to the Referendum in September 2014, but the discussion document offers an excellent and detailed examination of the main issues the creation of an Independent Scotland would generate for the health sector and I encourage all readers to have a look at the full discussion paper, which is available at: <http://bma.org.uk/about-the-bma/what-we-do/lobbying/scottish-parliament/scottish-independence>.

¹ Peterkin, T. (2013). 'Scottish Independence: White Paper like Manifesto'. *The Scotsman*. Available From: [<http://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/top-stories/scottish-independence-white-paper-like-manifesto-1-3218691>]. Last Accessed: 22.04.14.

Universities & Research

For me, there are three main health issues that the SNP has failed to answer. The first is that of the future of Scotland's medical and scientific research. Funding for University research is currently distributed on a UK-wide basis by seven research councils, and the BMA argues that 'Scotland punches above its weight in attracting funding, helping to attract medical academics from across the world to work in [Scotland's] Universities and NHS'². In fact, although Scotland has around eight percent of the UK population, it receives around fifteen percent of UK research funding. So it is essential that these research streams are maintained in an Independent Scotland to keep Scotland's first class reputation.

The SNP answers the question of medical research by saying that it will remain within a research funding system with the rest of the UK (P. 438). There is a major problem with this answer - why would the rest of the UK be content for their research funding to go to, what will then be, a foreign country's University? We do not fund research at French or Swedish Universities now, so why would the rest of the UK fund Scottish universities?

An Unrealistic Proposal

This is a familiar strain of argument from the SNP – that we will be independent but everything will remain the same. But logically this cannot be the case. By leaving the UK the SNP will be leaving the UK, breaking up a 300 year-old union. To think that Scotland will then just be able to choose what it keeps, like the pound and the Queen, is not realistic. Under Independence the SNP will not be able to pick what they can keep and what they will lose, they are leaving the Union and will necessarily have to start afresh.

A second major concern about Independence is that of the future of workforce mobility. While health is devolved to the Scottish Parliament there is the same structure in medical education, training, contracts and pay which enable staff to move easily and seamlessly throughout the UK. The White Paper says they "see the same co-operation on medical training continuing on

² British Medical Association (2013). 'Independence Referendum 2014: Implications for Health'. BMA Scotland, P. 8. Available From: [<http://bma.org.uk/working-for-change/policy-and-lobbying/scottish-parliament/scottish-independence>]. Last Accessed: 22.04.14.

the same four-country basis as today”³, however they give no basis for this assertion, have not attempted to get agreement on this with the other countries and, while it may be their intention, they cannot bind the rest of the UK government’s intentions or those of future Scottish Governments.

NHS patients also currently enjoy the benefits of a UK-wide NHS, travelling to areas of expertise in the UK for specialist treatment, whether Great Ormond Street Children’s Hospital or the Freeman Hospital in Newcastle for lung transplants which are not available in Scotland. Of course the SNP claim that this will continue as now, but while the NHS is devolved; it is still a service with no boundaries. An Independent Scotland would need cross-border agreements such as those between EU states, which are not as straightforward. Furthermore, it is worth nothing that no two separate states have closer integration between their health services as exists within the UK.

A Ticking Time Bomb

The issues that I have discussed so far are the difficulties that the NHS will face under Independence; however there are a number of challenges currently before the NHS in Scotland that will be just as complicated whether we are in or out of the UK, such as the challenge of our increasing elderly population. A recent report revealed that Scotland’s elderly population will increase by 86% over the next 25 years which will be a huge challenge for the Scottish NHS to cope with. In addition there are the financial pressures that are being increased by the SNP’s priorities of free prescriptions, even for those who can afford to pay for them.

For me, all these challenges will be easier to meet as part of the UK. At the moment we have the best of both worlds, with the Scottish Parliament looking after our public services - including the health sector - and all the key decisions being made here in Scotland. But ultimately the reasons for staying in the UK go way beyond a narrow focus on health care. I believe that Scotland is safer, more prosperous and stronger as a member of the UK.

³ Scottish Government (2013). Scotland’s Future: Your Guide to an Independent Scotland. Edinburgh: Scottish Government, P. 439.

We still get the added bonus of being backed up by the strength and security of the bigger UK economy, the UK's membership of International Organisations (such as the EU and NATO) and the UK's armed forces. Independence is not just some theory or vision, and the feedback from the constituents I have spoken to remains robustly in favour of keeping Scotland in the UK family.