
Scotland’s Choices is a timely addition, to a very small academic literature, by three authors with impressive CVs in academia, government and the think tank Institute for Public Policy Research. It provides an in-depth discussion of many important aspects of the independence referendum. It focuses in particular on the big economic questions, outlining the possible effects of independence on Scotland’s economy, its fiscal and monetary union with the UK and the role of North Sea oil. It explores key issues in relation to an independent Scotland’s membership of the European Union and other international organisations such as NATO. It also explores a range of voting and policy choices to create a range of scenarios about Scotland’s future in or out of the UK.

There are three main aspects of the book worthy of particular discussion. The first is the role of academic work and the idea of academic neutrality. The book is an important source of information which could be used as an antidote to the tendency, in the current debate, to lurch from issue to issue without considering any issue in great depth (a feature of social media discussions in particular). It is also a welcome source of reasoned discussion. It compares to the tendency in media and social media towards hyperbole and the personalisation of debates. The authors are not quite the neutral figures they would like to be – and they are not a mix of nationalist and unionist commentators together in perfect harmony. They are not dispassionate or uninterested observers. For example, Gallagher played a pivotal role in the production of the Calman Commission’s report, while McLean and Lodge have strong views on the adequacy of the devolved finance settlement (or, at least, the way in which it is calculated). This background has a tendency to spill over into the text, setting the agenda for discussion and interpretation. The authors suggest (p157) that “nationalist and unionist politicians can come to totally opposite conclusions about the same set of facts” – but no-one is immune to this infection. Instead, their argument is that they are not expressing an allegiance to a political party or trying to tell you directly how to vote – which is true. Perhaps more importantly, their approach is a far cry from the more extreme nationalist and unionist voices that often dominate and pollute debate. ‘Neutrality’ can take on a particular meaning and importance during intense political debate, suggesting that the authors have their biases but will not necessarily club you over the head with them. Note that this point goes beyond a focus on this book. More will be spent by the UK Government’s Economic and Social Research Council, analysing a ‘post-referendum’ Scotland (http://www.futureukandscotland.ac.uk/), than the combined total of the official Yes and Better Together campaigns (which can spend £1.5m each). So, the role of the sort-of-but-not-really-neutral academic may yet be an important part of the debate.

The second is uncertainty. In most cases, the role of academic work is to explain the past, not predict the future. One’s experience of the past – or the experience of the policies of other countries – may inform current discussions, but none of us have functioning crystal balls. This uncertainty is reflected in the style of much of the book’s discussion of the future. It is generally in the form: if X, then perhaps Y. If people make these choices, this might be the result. The authors also note (p46) that:
Voters will have to make their own judgements as to how these things might turn out, realising that any politicians who predict them with certainty must surely know they will be wrong.

The approach may be frustrating for the general reader, but it is difficult to see a better one. To paraphrase Lindblom, even policymakers with relatively clear and public aims will not know how they will rank or prioritise their aims until they are forced to make a choice. The independence debate presents more problems, since many policymakers are unwilling to even consider what choices they would make if there was a Yes vote.

The authors’ careful weighing up of scenarios perhaps resembles a less adversarial version of the outcome of current partisan and social media debates. If we follow those debates, and listen to both sides, we end up with the same level of uncertainty (despite the certainty expressed by both sides). Relevant issues include: how will an independent Scotland negotiate its entry to the EU (we know that it is necessary but not how long it will take and how much goodwill there will be)? What currency will it adopt (the Euro is a distant prospect, the Scottish pound has received relatively little attention, keeping sterling entails some form of fiscal and monetary pact with the UK)? What would be the future of Scottish foreign and defence policy (there is particular uncertainty about the maintenance of nuclear weapons in Scotland)? Perhaps the main exception in the book relates to its coverage of ‘Scotland’s Oil’ – although the authors downplay the current economic value of tax revenue on oil (compared to its boom in the 1980s), they are almost certain that an independent Scotland would have the strongest claim to the relevant parts of the North Sea.

The third is timeliness and ‘impact’. Academics are in an unusual situation when they engage with the referendum on Scottish independence. If they want to inform the process or debate, before the votes are cast, they have to engage in a timely way. Academic articles won’t cut it in most cases because they may not be published until it is too late. They are also likely to have minimal impact without some additional form of dissemination and exchange. So, a rash of academics have begun to blog or produce short reports to feed directly into the process. In this context, the book has one valuable innovation: it will be updated regularly, first on EUP’s website and then in a revised edition to be published as close as possible to the vote in 2014. This is a welcome move, because the book already looks dated (albeit only in the context of an impending vote) in some parts. It reads, at times, as if the authors produced a plan in the past and were reluctant to drop certain sections to reflect their rapidly changing environment. For example, chapter 1 explores what Scotland’s Choices might have been in different circumstances, focusing on the ways in which a multi-option referendum could have been designed, if not for the binary choice. The second edition might worry less about explaining the past in some cases – such as in outlining the background to the Calman Commission. This is an interesting account for the academics, but others may be more interested in the implications of the new Scotland Act. It is tempting to suggest that the authors also save some of their thorough discussion of the possibility of further devolution until the third edition. However, they do well to show us that further devolution (beyond that set out in the Scotland Act 2012) is an ill-defined idea that may be more complicated than
independence. It seems clear that most survey respondents in Scotland want more devolved powers, but we can be less sure that they know what could, and should, be done with them.