SCOTLAND

Scots warm to the power of Yes

Thanks to an energetic and targeted ground campaign, Scottish voters look increasingly likely to ditch Britain

BY ALISTAIR SMOUT
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In late August, Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling shared the stage as part of the push to keep Scotland in the United Kingdom.

The two Scotsmen, Britain’s prime minister and finance minister between 2007 and 2010, often fought each other in office. Darling once described his old boss as “brutal and volcanic.” Brown reportedly wanted to sack Darling during the financial crisis.

But now here was Brown waxing lyrical about Darling, who heads the “Better Together” campaign that is trying to convince Scots to reject independence.

“It’s his expertise and integrity and strength of purpose that is winning this argument,” Brown told the crowd of a few hundred in a meeting hall in the coastal city of Dundee.

“Rubbish!” a heckler in the back of the room shouted. “Absolute rubbish!” The heckler continued to shout criticism of Brown’s Labour government and its policies before officials removed him.

The incident captures a lot about the Scottish independence debate: the passion and even anger of secessionists; the difficulty unionists have in making their argument; even the strange political alliances that have formed, especially as the unionists have grown more desperate.

A week before the referendum on Sept. 18, momentum is with those who want change.

A Sept. 7 poll for YouGov showed support for independence in the lead - 51 percent to 49. Thanks to the Yes campaign’s savvier ground game, the gap between the two sides has tightened dramatically in the past few weeks, down from an average of well over 10 points for most of the year until August. With pollsters expecting up to 80 percent of all Scottish voters to have a say in the referendum – in a general election typically only around 60 percent of Scots vote – the outcome is almost impossible to predict.

For Scots nationalists, a vote for full statehood for the first time since 1707 would be the realisation of what seemed like an improbable dream, one they have worked towards for decades.

For the rest of Britain, a “yes” vote would mean profound change. Scotland, with its $250-billion economy, 5.3 million people, oil industry, and nuclear submarine base, would split away, leaving what’s left of Britain with a $2.25 trillion economy and 58.8 million people.

“ If we lost Scotland, if the UK changed, we would rip the rug from under our own reputation.”

David Cameron
British Prime Minister
That would mark an ignominious end for a geopolitical construct that has, in different forms, spanned the heyday of the British Empire, the U.S. war of independence, and two world wars. It would hurt Prime Minister David Cameron, who would surely come under pressure to quit as the man who lost Scotland, but would also hurt the opposition Labour Party because the loss of Scotland would leave what remains of Britain more politically conservative. That could make it more likely that Britain pulls out of the European Union.

“Together, we get a seat at the U.N. Security Council, real clout in NATO and Europe, and the prestige to host events like the G8,” Cameron said a few weeks ago. “If we lost Scotland, if the UK changed, we would rip the rug from under our own reputation.”

THE ‘YES’ GROUND GAME
If the Yes campaign wins, many will put it down to its ability to get out its message in cities and villages across the country.

“I’ve had two brochures from Yes Scotland last week, two the week before, a van even drove up my street playing ‘Moving on Up’,” said one resident in Edinburgh who supports staying in Britain. “Someone came to my door the other day... it turned out they were from Better Together. I told them ‘you need to step it up!’”

The voter declined to be named, fearing, she said, “a brick through the window” from an angry nationalist. She described some Yes campaigners as “bullies,” but conceded they were doing a better job of mobilising support on the ground. (Despite a lot of online vitriol there have been few incidents of violence.)

The pro-independence camp, Yes Scotland, argues that Scotland, which already has its own parliament with oversight of policy areas such as health and education, would be freer, better governed and wealthier if it went it alone. It would be able to use the revenues from its North Sea oil fields and could raise its own taxes, it says.

Alex Salmond, Scotland’s charismatic and combative First Minister and head of the Yes campaign, calls his opponents’ campaign “Project Fear” because of what he says is its relentless negativity.

At the heart of his campaign has been the paradoxical offering that Scots could keep many of the trappings of the UK while simultaneously leaving it. An independent Scotland could keep the pound, still have the Queen as its head of state, and still build Britain’s warships, he argues.

“Our campaign has been around the idea of a total belief in Scotland,” says Stephen Noon, its chief strategist. “Independence is not going to be a land of milk and honey but there’s no challenge we can’t actually deal with.”

One of the independence campaign’s main tactics has been to target disaffected Labour voters. Scotland mostly votes for left-of-centre parties and resents any national government led by the right-wing Conservative Party. In recent times, that sense of alienation even existed under Labour, which governed Britain between 1997 and 2010.

Labour gave powers to a new Scottish parliament, promising that would remove the “threat of separatism.” But despite their greater autonomy, many Scots felt the Labour government in London veered too far to the right, especially on issues such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In 2011, Scots voting in a Scottish parliamentary election overwhelmingly opted for the populist Scottish National Party (SNP). The surprise nationalist victory gave SNP...
Should Scotland be an independent country?
Scotland will vote on September 18 on whether to become an independent country, ending a 307-year union with England and splitting from the rest of the United Kingdom.

How different groups responded since September 2013
Latest YouGov polls show the gender gap is narrowing. While a poll in August found that 58% of female voters were likely to vote No, the number dropped to 47% ten days before the referendum.
Yes leads across all age groups, except those aged over 60.

Charts show YouGov poll results since September 2013 and include undecided voters.
Source: Poll agencies

M. Ulmanu/Reuters Graphics
leader Salmond a mandate for this year's referendum.

In the Pollok area of Glasgow, where joblessness runs high, some traditional Labour voters now seem more open to breaking away, which is why organisers of the Yes campaign have been pounding the footpaths for months. Pollok has nearly 4,000 unemployed adults, the third most in Scotland, and Labour clung on to the seat by fewer than 650 votes in 2011.

“When we’re on doorsteps, people are saying ‘If we only vote once, it will be in September. This is our chance to change something’,” said David McDonald, a local SNP councillor.

A recent two-hour canvassing session shows how the Yes campaign does it. Half a dozen volunteers garner the opinions of more than 100 residents, who are asked to rate their views on a scale of one to 10, one being completely against independence and 10 being for it.

Nines and 10s are seen as certain Yes votes, while people who rate themselves four are “probably ‘no’ voters who are being polite,” McDonald says. But anyone who rates themselves a five, six, seven or eight is given information about how Scotland would be better off solo and targeted for a return visit.

The idea is to convert these people in the middle one by one. Sometimes, the Yes campaign will even ask pro-independence family members to tackle more sceptical relatives.

Yes campaigners like to play up the notion that they are a big, diverse tent. “It’s not our debate anymore. It’s the people’s debate, and we can’t control it,” Calum Cashley, an SNP activist in Edinburgh, said. “At first, as a political person, I was worried by that. But in fact it’s hugely liberating.”

Door-knocking is not always easy. One Yes campaigner in Pollok was deterred by a bulldog. “He’s English,” the dog’s owner offered by way of explanation. At another house a head appeared over the fence. “Not today guys, OK?” the resident said firmly.

But elsewhere the campaigners were received warmly. One man approached the group for stickers that he could put on the cars of neighbours who were voting “no”.

Joe Docherty, an 18-year-old Yes campaign volunteer, joined the nationalist movement after the SNP’s surprise 2011 victory. This is his first campaign but Docherty speaks eloquently about his hope for an independent Scotland, with a parliament more responsive to Scotland’s needs than Westminster in far-off London.

“When two governments make decisions affecting one nation, policy can’t be consistent. Devolution is fundamentally flawed,” he said, demonstrating an engagement with the issues that is not unusual among Scotland’s younger voters.

That sort of engagement and attention to detail has helped energise the campaign, even if for years polls had shown support for independence to be stuck between a quarter and a third of voters. “The Yes campaign has definitely got anyone who potentially might have been persuadable,” said Rachel Ormston, senior research director at ScotCen Social Research.

“A BIT RUBBISH”

Anti-independence campaigners argue
that Scotland already has the best of both worlds: continued membership of the UK and increasing autonomy. Why would anyone want to risk that, they ask, especially when an independent Scotland would be unable to formally keep the pound and struggle to rejoin the EU.

“If we decide to leave, there is no going back, there is no second chance,” Darling told voters in August.

But despite the fact they started with such a clear lead, the Better Together camp has struggled to motivate voters and defend its majority.

One of the problems has been a relentless focus on the potential risks of separation rather than the benefits of staying united. There have also been specific missteps. Women and older people have expressed consistent support for staying in Britain. But a Better Together campaign video that targeted undecided female voters - and featured an actress complaining “there’s only so many hours in the day” to decide how to vote - ended up backfiring because viewers saw it as condescending and felt it stereotyped women as ditherers.

“Better Together’s patronising woman helped, undoubtedly, because engagement on our Facebook went up 1,200 percent in a week,” Natalie McGarry, a founder of Women for Independence, said.

Better Together defended the video and said it represented concerns regularly raised by voters. The first YouGov poll to show Yes in the lead saw a substantial rise in support from women; experts said that women were simply making their minds up later.

Some pro-union campaigners acknowledged that they had struggled to get across their message.

“The posters, the video, it’s all a bit rubbish,” said Bruce Findlay, the former manager of Scottish rock group Simple Minds, shortly before giving a speech outlining the benefits of the United Kingdom. “It’s hard for the No campaign ... backing the word “no” and trying to put a positive spin on it.”

Findlay felt that the Yes campaign had escaped deep scrutiny; he was angry that some Yes campaigners had invoked the name of Nelson Mandela and suggested it was time for Scotland to throw off their oppressors.

“How dare they?” Findlay asked. “One of his (Mandela’s) greatest achievements was keeping his country together – they’re trying to take it apart, trying to create division.”

Other “no” voters say they have become increasingly reluctant to speak out for fear of being branded un-Scottish. One pro-union Labour MP, Jim Murphy, found his attempts at a grassroots tour of 100 towns in 100 days disrupted when he was egged by an opponent in Kirkcaldy, in what he has described as an attempt to silence him. The Yes campaign says the aggression runs in both directions. Police have investigated online death threats against Alex Salmond, who dismissed those behind them as “cyber clowns.”

The No campaign has also struggled to coordinate the three main national parties – Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. All three parties want to keep Scotland in the union. But while the Conservatives and Lib Dems currently...
govern together, the No campaign has largely rested on the Labour machine in Scotland.

**AFTER THE DEBATES**

Mild-mannered Darling outflanked Salmond in the first televised debate on Aug. 5. Salmond seemed uncertain and evasive and Darling won points by focusing on Salmond’s views on currency. All three national parties say they will not formally share the British pound with Scotland; Salmond says this is a bluff.

The Yes campaign vowed to be clearer on issues such as currency and by the second debate on Aug. 22 a much more animated Salmond dominated.

“If Alistair Darling wanted a joust, then he got one,” a senior source in the Yes campaign told Reuters.

“And Alec is better at jousting.”

Since then, Salmond has emphasised the uncertainty on issues such as Europe or powers for Scotland that would follow a No vote, turning the unionists’ tactic against them. With confusion over key issues, nationalists have sought to simplify the debate: the brave chance of a better future, or the status quo.

That the choice is so stark is mostly down to British Prime Minister David Cameron. He insisted that the referendum question be a simple in-out choice, rather than including the possibility of much greater devolution within the union.

As support for independence surged in the past few weeks, the three national parties promised a new timetable for extra powers and greater autonomy – as long as Scots voted No. London-based politicians headed north to try and shore up the vote.

Critics dismissed the late interest as panic.

“If they’re surprised at what’s happening, it’s because they haven’t been paying attention.”

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