



# DETERMINATION

how Scotland can become independent by 2021

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## Introduction

I rather hoped I could avoid writing this book. I had hoped that, after the referendum, the independence movement would stay connected and coherent enough that we would have a structure and a mechanism which would have allowed us to discuss the way forward. I'd hoped that I could feed my thoughts and ideas into that process. I have no desire to be publicly critical of the campaign we had or the position we have reached today. Nor do I want the future of the movement to be about one person's thoughts or ideas.

For political, cultural, social, economic and democratic reasons, I remain a strong supporter of Scottish independence. As with many other people, I am impatient. I fear drifting into 'if only' territory, that very Scottish mindset which dwells on what might have been if only a historical battle, refereeing decision or vote had gone the other way. It is a comfortable place to be, 'if only'; a place where we can feel sentimental about failure. For Scotland it is and has been a mindset which allows us to gain comfort in the face of defeat and provides an excuse for inaction and lack of progress.

It has an equally Scottish antidote – determination. I use determination to mean both the act of taking control (self-determination, to determine our way forward) and a thrawn, stubborn mindset which refuses to give up. It requires both meanings because we will require both attributes. We need a way forward which places the future in our hands and we need to recognise that we're not going to get there by waiting and hoping.

I have worked in the field of professional political strategy for over 20 years now. In my judgement independence supporters have reached a critical point, one where we will either develop a plan and move purposely forward or we will allow our commitment to transforming Scotland to become a cultural signifier of our Scottishness like a tea towel printed with a list of our national inventors or a reproduction of an oil painting of a romantic reimagining of the Jacobite rebellion which we can hang on our walls. And just now I cannot see a plan.

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So despite my hesitance, I decided to block out my diary for four days in May 2016, switch of phones and email and set out what I think constitutes the outline of a plan for a way forward. My opinions are very clearly not the last word on any of this. It is likely that you will find things in these pages with which you don't entirely agree. You may find yourself agreeing in principle with parts of it but believing there may be a better way. It is simply an attempt to show that it is possible to see ways forward which take Scotland's future out of the hands of fate and places them into our own hands. It is a book which aims to stimulate discussion and provoke other people's ideas. I hope it can achieve that.

And I hope I can be forgiven for being a little critical at times – finger-pointing and blaming will get us nowhere, but we do need to be able to be calmly analytical about what worked and what didn't work. It is certainly not meant to talk down the incredible efforts so many people have put in to getting us here.

I shall argue that we need to understand why our strategy didn't quite work. I'll argue that we need to look more intelligently at who is likely to be the No voters who can be won over to create a strong Yes majority (and spoiler alert – they are neither rich nor Tories and won't be reached via right-of-centre dog whistles). I'll argue that we must dispense of the opinion which seems to have settled around us that somehow you win referendums during referendums. I'll suggest instead that a process of building up confidence in the case through diligent work and preparation is the key, and that we must get people used to change by setting a creative and imaginative domestic agenda. And I'll propose that we must get everyone to look to their own skills so that we can be the best fighting machine possible when that next referendum comes.

Because at the heart of the book I will warn against the idea that an independent Scotland will be delivered by 'triggers', external events outwith our control which will fall in our lap and somehow make everything OK, deliver us a referendum and then win that referendum for us. It's possible that will happen. To me, it just seems both unlikely and an awfully shoogly peg on which to hang our hopes. We have to have a way of creating our own trigger, our own mechanism for ensuring a referendum. For me, by far the best opportunity is the 2021 Scottish Election. That can provide a solid, unequivocal mandate for a referendum. And if we work between now and then to be ready, to win over people, we can hold that referendum quickly. We can have voted to be an independent nation by Christmas 2021. But we need to be sure, to do this right. As everyone knows, we cannot fail again or we really do fail for a generation.

One brief note if you are reading this and are a unionist. You're probably not going to agree with an awful lot of this. In the end, I absolutely respect your view. I perfectly well understand your political, cultural and social



reasons for identifying with Britain. I am a believer in pluralism – it would be a dull world if we agreed on everything. It is a shame that, in the end, one of us must lose. Of course, I hope it is you – but only so we can show you through the way we carry ourselves as a new nation in the world that you have nothing to fear and much to gain. I hope that you can recognise among the many things in these pages you don't agree with that at least it is a constructive and even idealistic plan. It is not about tricking, scaring or bribing people into supporting independence, it is a call for supporters of independence to get their house in order and present a prospectus for an independent Scotland that deserves serious consideration and which makes a credible attempt to answer important questions.

So I may not particularly have wanted to write this book, but now that I have I hope that it can stimulate the debate I believe the Scottish independence movement needs to have if we are to move forward. But the debate must be inclusive and rapid. Time is running out if we want to have a second chance at persuading Scots to vote Yes in the near future. We do not have weeks or months to squander.

The 'Scottish question' remains unanswered. Everyone knows that, whether they pretend that this has been resolved for a generation or not. It will not answer itself. If you believe in independence, now would be a good time to start answering the big questions of what Scotland is and what it will be. Crossed fingers are neither a tool nor a weapon. It will take determination – or our future will be determined for us.

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## One: An autopsy on the living

Something fairly unusual happened after the independence referendum – the losers became stronger, not weaker. It is not unheard of for those who have failed in a contest to emerge stronger because of that failure – it became pretty clear pretty soon after the 1992 General Election that there was a general public feeling that reelecting Tories for another five years had been a mistake. It took very little time to realise that Labour were heading for a landslide whenever the next election was held. But even that offered Labour a five-year timescale for getting over loss and preparing for victory.

In Scotland the loss of the referendum was, within months, followed by a General Election. The timescales for supporters of independence to get over their pain and get back on with the fight was measured in days and weeks, not years. Again, that in itself is not entirely unusual since many losing campaigns face some kind of electoral test rapidly after a serious setback (Scottish Labour has had to drag itself from a catastrophic General Election result into a potentially existential Scottish Election in under a year, spending a chunk of that time electing a new leader).

What is unusual is that the independence movement went from such a disheartening setback to such a resounding victory in such a short period of time. The stirring General Election victory by the SNP was seen by the movement as a collective win. In addition, the incredibly effective grassroots campaign did not dissipate but if anything grew more committed in the months after defeat on 18 September. The widespread awareness that no-one was giving up or behaving as if they were defeated gave a sense of strength to defeated people. It is not entirely unreasonable to argue that the independence campaign was never more alive than after its loss.

There is no question that, for our collective wellbeing, this sense of a kind of victory in defeat was a very great help. This had been a campaign which had pulled in many, many people who hadn't been campaigners before. I'd been involved in politics for a long time and was very much used to losing. Others hadn't. The impact of a final sense of defeat on some who

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were new to campaigning would have been damaging – to them personally and certainly to the movement. So our ability to come together and feel strength in defeat was a very great gift.

But there was also more than an element of curse in it as well. It is an evolutionary principle that we must learn from our mistakes, from our failures. If we do not, we will make those mistakes again. Those who do not learn from error can, in the future, expect to be defeated by those who do. People sometimes talk of introspection after defeat as if it is a harmful or self-indulgent practice. It isn't. It's crucial. It is how we learn to win.

This is a process of learning we have not been able to go through. To reverse the old quip, the operation was a failure but the patient emerged in good health. And there is no medical procedure more difficult than an autopsy on the living.

So very little critical discussion (let alone criticism) took place between 19 September and the General Election. There was much discussion, much debate, much questioning of 'where now'. But it was highly respectful, extremely collegiate and very much focussed on 'OK, no recriminations, but how do we move forward?'. Which was great for morale and for preventing any splintering of the movement as elections approached, but not so good for illuminating the path ahead.

And after the General Election? Well, at that point it becomes increasingly difficult to talk convincingly of either a campaign or a movement. The SNP, in part necessarily, quickly returned to being a government and a political party. So too did opposition political parties. Many individuals were simply exhausted – the campaign, followed by a heroic post-campaign effort to keep the movement alive (achieved by the grassroots, not the parties), followed by election campaigning proved to be some of the most intensive times many people had been through. By June 2015, many people were in need of personal recovery.

But just as significantly, those who wanted to keep going had lost a focal point. There was no shared idea about what should happen next. The population as a whole needed to move on, to stop fighting the same fight that had been fought for three years. And on top of this there was no leadership. Many good things can be said about the way the SNP behaved in the year after the referendum, but claiming that they offered a strong, coherent leadership to the Yes movement, providing them with direction and hope and guidance and vision, is not one of those things. Which is understandable – strategists will have concluded that the party must not be seen to be constantly fighting old fights. Nevertheless, talking about independence was not at the top of the SNP agenda.

And of course, it is only a blink of an eye from that 'summer of recovery' to the unofficial start of the campaign for Holyrood 2016 during the party conference season in the Autumn. Elections are, by definition,

partisan affairs, requiring parties to contest each other and to seek each other's voters. It causes pro-independence parties to be continually critical of each other and encourages them to downplay issues like independence in favour of trying to gather up non-independence supporting voters.

And so we find ourselves in a post-election period. It will soon be two years since the referendum was lost. It is difficult to make a realistic case to argue that we have moved forward in any substantial way in those two years. Some will argue that, by default, success for the SNP is success for independence. It is not. It is perfectly possible for the SNP to mess it up. I'm not suggesting they have or that they will, I'm suggesting that it is perfectly possible. To say 'hey, that's the SNP in complete charge of Scotland for the next five years and so all we need to do now is wait' is a very risky strategy.

It is not my intention to undertake an autopsy on the living in this book. But here and in Chapter Six I want to raise a couple of the more uncomfortable truths about the reasons the Yes campaign didn't win. And perhaps the most controversial claim I will make is that the SNP on its own was not only incapable of winning the 2014 referendum but would have been likely to lose badly enough to have left independence off the agenda for a generation.

As a kind of personal, anecdotal research project I've asked people how many percentage points out of the 45 secured would not have been secured if it wasn't for National Collective, Radical Independence Campaign, Scottish CND, Women for Independence, Common Weal, NHS Yes and all the rest (not to mention the Greens, SSP and Solidarity). So far, no-one has suggested a number less than five.

If that is right, independence would have been defeated 60 – 40 in 2014. That is a 20 point margin and almost certainly enough to have made concrete the No campaign's demand that this was an end to the matter. The original SNP pitch (which was more or less precisely the same pitch as Yes Scotland) was to talk not about visions for a different Scotland through independence but to reassure that Scotland would be much the same after independence. From that point onwards Scots could choose a different Scotland if they wanted.

It was a twin-track strategy. The first part involved a lot of attempts to use accountancy practice to suggest Scotland would not be worse off and the retention of key British institutions (Sterling, the Queen, NATO membership and so on) to suggest that things wouldn't feel any different. The second part was an abstract concept, the democratic message of 'who is best to make the decisions for the people who live in Scotland?'

There were three problems with this. The first was that basing the campaign on continuity offered endless opportunities for derailment. The case study was currency. I always believed that Scotland would have been granted access to Sterling and the Bank of England if it had voted for

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independence (though personally I didn't consider it to be the best option and I feared that the terms negotiated for that access would very possibly have been against Scotland's interests). But it was always clear that it was just too easy to dispute that promise of continuity.

What is difficult about offering continuity is that it is predicating the case on lack of doubt. If you are reassuring people about something they fear (which was the aim), you are involved in an asymmetric battle in which you have to prove certainty but they only have to prove doubt. As we saw, when the big institutions of the British establishment are against you it is pretty easy to sow sufficient doubt to undermine certainty. There is absolutely nothing the SNP or the Yes campaign could have done to prove certainty of continuity in this circumstance. It can do things to reassure or create a 'balance of probabilities' argument. But that's not enough, not nearly enough, if your aim is to reassure the doubt out of the doubters.

The second problem was the abstract pitch. I can see precisely how this would have come about. Some people involved in advising the SNP would have been personally sceptical about the leftwards, transformational pitch that in the end did most to attract converts. I can see how they would favour an apolitical campaign, one based on abstract concepts of sovereignty and democracy.

And I can see how this would have focus-grouped well. To ask 'who should make decisions for you' is a perfectly reasonable question. It is almost certain to 'test' positively. But that's partly because it's a loaded question. And even more importantly, there is a big difference between agreeing with an abstract concept and letting it shape your decision. To demonstrate this, consider another abstract question – do you feel safer in a hardhat? I certainly do when I've got one on. Then another – do you want to feel safe? I certainly want to feel safe. So these two questions will 'test' positively in a focus group. And yet I don't wear a hardhat. Which is the problem with abstraction in political strategy – there is always a big gap between abstract feelings and practical actions.

Which leads to the third problem, which was the 'jumping into a dark hole' problem. A vote for independence was a gateway to a different, better Scotland. Or to a dreadful, horrendous Scotland. The point is that the future is unknown, which has to be paired with the fact that humans are inherently risk-averse. Key to human survival is the evolutionary principle that we are more afraid of potential loss than we are attracted to potential gain. This has been shown over and over again in psychology – if you're offered the choice of losing half your salary or gaining half as much again, all at the flip of a coin, you will not take the chance. In fact, in some cases you need to be offered the chance to gain many multiples of what you will lose if you are to agree to take a chance.

When paired with the inability to eradicate doubt, this meant that

asking people to vote Yes was asking them to take a chance that the future would be better than the present. And since the possibility of a worse future could not be ruled out, the ability to believe in a better future had to be stronger. That cannot be achieved through partial reassurance and abstract concepts of democracy.

Because another rule of human decision-making is that we make our decisions subconsciously much more than we make them consciously. It is our deepest hopes and fears and a lifetime of experiences of risk and reward which guide how we decide, not a rational profit and loss account in the rational mind. So you may well have done all the research in the world on the new product you are considering buying (processor speed of that shiny Apple computer; the fuel efficiency of that cool new car; the likely number of uses of that new item of clothing). But this is nothing more than you giving yourself permission to enact a decision your subconscious has already made.

To make someone jump into a dark hole on the promise of something else at the other side, they have to want to jump. To make them want to jump, they must have some vision of what life will be like on the other side. And that vision will need to be substantially more attractive than their fear of what a bad outcome could look like. And that will need to be a vision which is as concrete as possible, as not-abstract as can be achieved.

This is where another Yes campaign difficulty came about – it based its initial strategy on the established political practices of a general election. With less than 18 months to go, strategists were still claiming that the campaign would be won or lost on the basis of the ‘aspirational middle classes’ (this is verbatim what I was told at the time). This was based on assumptions such as ‘the poor don’t vote’, ‘elections are won in the centre ground’ and ‘people vote out of pure self-interest’.

Thankfully, all this turned out not to be true. The poor voted in numbers unseen in a British election for generations. The narrative which achieved this was heavily influenced by the progressive, creative campaign which emerged. And this narrative was enough to get people past their sense of self-interest (or at least persuaded a lot of people that the status quo was not in their self-interest).

I know that some people will contest this analysis, not least because I come from the political left, and there will I’m sure be charges of ‘seeing what I want to see’. But in the end, I thought then and continue to think now that the numbers strongly stack up in favour of this argument. The ‘aspirational middle classes’ (which is shorthand for ‘Tory-New Labour switchers’) showed very little propensity to switch while those on lower incomes turned out in big numbers.

I’ve heard it argued that the reason for this is that the nature of the campaign ‘scared away’ New Labour-Tory switchers and that’s why we lost.

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I've even heard it said that now that we've 'got' the poor on side we should move to the right to pick up the Tories. Now that really is a case of 'seeing what you want to see' – it was poorer pensioners that lost us the vote much more than middle-aged Tories.

In fact, it has become a knee-jerk trope from some that what we need to do now is just 'bank' all those working class voters by ignoring them and go after the 'middle class voters we need to win over to get independence'. I hear these comments with a degree of astonishment. Because here 'middle class' seems to be defined as those with an income over £40,000 or so a year (apparently 'middle class' people pay upper rate income tax). Except that only applies to less than 15 per cent of the population.

I simply cannot understand what people mean when they say this. Is the strategy to win 100 per cent support for independence? As an aspiration it's highly unrealistic. As a strategy it's nuts. We need 60 per cent, 70 if we can get it. So if you really believe that the future of independence relies on upper-rate taxpayers, could you please supply some verifiable data to support your claim? Because everything I've seen – literally everything – suggests that the very last group of people in Scotland who will vote for independence are high-income, Daily Mail-reading Tories or Tory-New Labour switchers.

About four out of five working-age voters live on less than £35,000 a year. All the data I have ever seen makes it clear that it is them who are by far the most likely people to switch from a No vote to a Yes vote. There are more than enough people who do not respond to low tax dog whistles in Scotland to give us an overwhelming victory. (And let's be clear, plenty of people with incomes over £35,000 voted yes – but they're neither Tories nor Tory-New Labour switchers and they, like everyone else, are voting Yes because they're sick of Westminster's anti-social democracy). I can't count the number of times commentators, who are basically Tory sympathisers, inform readers that only Tory-lite can win elections. I then watch as time and time again, people who play Tory-lite politics in Scotland are punished, from the Tories to New Labour – to the 2003 SNP which tacked to the right and was soundly defeated for it.

There are few myths more resilient but less well-founded than the 'Scottish middle-class-upper-income voters are the ones that decide things'. There is almost literally not a shred of evidence to support this. It was only when this misplaced opinion was ignored by campaigners in the last referendum that we turned the corner. I remember people telling us that RIC's 'Britain is for the Rich' leaflet was a mistake, that the 'schemes' didn't matter and we needed to focus on Edinburgh's New Town. Thank your lucky stars we didn't listen. And express hopes that no one will listen this time. Scottish independence is not a centre right cause and never will be (or not in any foreseeable timescale). We won't win 100 per cent, and the 30 per cent we need to accept will not come over are precisely the 30 per cent who will



say things like ‘tax is the state taking my hard earned money’ and ‘why can’t the poor get off their arses and work’. Let’s stop making eyes at them and instead focus on people who might actually want to vote for independence.

As I shall discuss in Chapter Three, much more important than whether Tories were ‘wooded’ is whether a sufficient sense of security and confidence was given to people who felt vulnerable or who were sympathetic but worried. It is confidence and not ‘triangulation’ which in the end was the campaign’s problem (triangulation is the process of trying to be everything to everyone by sounding both rightwing and leftwing at the same time).

A large chunk of this book will focus on how to create that sense of confidence, the sense that the leap of faith is sufficiently safe to be worth it. But it is worth exploring very briefly why that wasn’t achieved. And the simple answer to that was the lack of opportunity to prepare.

Here I want to defend the SNP and the Scottish Government. Prior to the 2011 Scottish Elections, no-one was anticipating an imminent referendum. While there had been some cross-party pro-independence forums they had not been planning for the reality of independence in a timescale of a couple of years. So a lot of the basic preparation and research had not been done.

When the Scottish Government was re-elected, this time as a majority government, it had the difficult task of securing a referendum. That took some time. And then, once this happened, we were virtually into the campaign. This meant that big, crucial questions such as currency and pensions were unresolved by the time the campaign was just round the corner. I most certainly do not blame the Scottish Government for what it did as a result. It had no option but to ‘piece together’ answers to these questions quickly and basically in private. There was absolutely no opportunity for a proper debate about how to answer these questions – it would have taken much more time than was available and would have required much more disagreement and resolution than is feasible in the face of an election. (As I shall discuss in Chapter Four, the Fiscal Commission was much more PR than serious policy.)

So the Scottish Government did what it could do and patched up semi-policies, semi-soundbites as a solution. That was all it could do. In some cases I think it got it slightly wrong, in some cases it couldn’t do more than it did even if what it did was insufficient – but overall it did a not unreasonable job.

But if anyone told you that the White Paper was a really serious response to really big questions (like how to put in place a brand new pensions system in an independent Scotland), they were pushing their luck. It was a pitch, not a plan. All that could be done but not enough.

I raise these issues (and others in Chapter Seven where I’ll look a little at the technical elements of the campaign) not to be divisive but to tease out issues that we are going to have to address. We, between us, will need

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