

THE CONVERSATION

Scotland Decides '14: has Better Together blown up?

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Hawkish? Me? Michael Stephens/PA

Former UK defence secretary and NATO secretary general George Robertson dipped a toe into the independence debate this week and found the water scalding hot.

In return for his comments to hawkish think tank the Brookings Institution in Washington DC that a Scottish yes vote would be “cataclysmic” and music to the ears of terrorist “forces of darkness” around the world, Better Together insiders were soon briefing journalists that this was “hardly helpful” at a time of distinct unease for the campaign.

The yes side remains behind but has been making steady progress, most recently culminating in a poll last weekend that suggested there are now just five percentage points between support for yes and no.

This helps explain why some unionists have been calling for a more positive campaign. While campaign leader Alistair Darling is still insisting that the yes side are the negative ones, we asked our panel whether they thought Better Together should change tack.

John Curtice, Professor of Politics, University of Strathclyde/ScotCen Social Research

My impression is that the no side feels somewhat chastened that its big idea, which was to tell us we could not have the pound, has not worked. And neither has repeating statements of varying degrees of ambiguity about whether or not the financial institutions would relocate in the event of independence.

In the wake of this failure, you are certainly seeing signs of disquiet from parts of the campaign. Liberal Democrats such as Nick Clegg, Charles Kennedy and Willie Rennie have all publicly called for the no campaign to adopt a more positive tone. So we perhaps should not be surprised that George Robertson’s comments were greeted with disquiet by some in the no camp.

My view is that being negative is not necessarily a problem. The problem in the past few weeks has been ineffective campaigning.

Negative campaigning is more likely to work if you are telling people something new. Even before the currency intervention, it was already clear from the polling evidence that quite a lot of people in Scotland had twigged that they might not be able to use the pound as part of a monetary union. Whether or not they thought they would be able to use the pound also seemed not to be making much difference to whether people were likely to vote yes or no, as we saw from the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2013.

The source of the information has to have credibility. Telling people that, “a banker told me this” is not necessarily the most effective way of persuading people given their views about bankers as a class. And though businesses are not as unpopular as bankers, they are not that popular.

Equally, it is unwise to use a Tory to sell a big message in Scotland. They are not the most trusted source north of the border. Meanwhile, your claims should not be challenged by “experts” and quite a few senior economists have disputed George Osborne’s arguments against sharing the pound.

The problem the no campaign now faces is that nearly half of the Scottish population has decided it does not believe the claim that Scotland would not be able to use the pound, And having lost credibility on that issue its other claims about the risks of independence may now be regarded more sceptically too.

To be effective, negative campaigning also needs to be followed by the offer of a solution. But while the no side points to Scotland’s potential future economic difficulties, they are less effective at advising how the union will supply a solution.

Trouble is, the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats do not necessarily agree about how the UK economy as a whole should be run, let alone Scotland within it. Thus the

no side finds it difficult to offer a united alternative vision that could be a vital ingredient of a more positive campaign.

Karly Kehoe, Senior Lecturer in History, Glasgow Caledonian University

With George Robertson, we need to keep in mind that he was speaking in Washington, DC. He was talking to quite a reactionary audience and not to people in Britain. There were specific things that this audience would have wanted to hear from a former secretary general of NATO.

But his speech indicated that he's already questioning Scotland's loyalty to the West. If you suggest that an entire nation can't be trusted, of course that's going to alienate people. It's very condescending. That obviously isn't good for the Better Together campaign and that's probably why they wanted to distance themselves from it.

I can't agree with Darling's argument at the weekend that those in favour of a yes vote are inherently negative in their opinions. To assume that the majority buy in to what the pro-independence cybernats are saying is irresponsible. People are paying more attention to the mainstream media.

Arthur Midwinter, Visiting Professor of Politics, University of Edinburgh

George Robertson's record on these issues is not great. He said before devolution that it would kill off the SNP. I just about choked at the time.

I have never regarded what Better Together is saying as negative. That's a phrase that comes from Salmond. If people regard it as negative to be criticising your opponents, there's something wrong with the quality of the debate in Scotland. You have to make arguments about the weaknesses of the economy and the fiscal position after independence. That's not being negative, but robust and critical.

The notion that Better Together can come up with a plan for after the referendum is silly because it depends on who becomes the government. There will be some form of extra devolution, but not necessarily one that is agreed by all the major parties.

Better Together has probably been affected by the turn in the polls, though it's difficult to tell what the causes are. Appointing Jim Gallagher as strategy director has made a difference to the tone. His advice would be that they should certainly be making a more positive case for the union, which has been a good change.

You have to separate the response to the SNP and the case for the union. The case for the union is now being made more positively, but I don't regard what they are saying about independence as negative.

Neil Blain, Director of Media Research Institute, University of Stirling

George Robertson's comments almost worked as an unconscious satire of the no campaign. It reminded me of websites such as bbcscotlandshire.co.uk that have been inventing scares about alien invasions and such like for months. Talking about forces-of-darkness type stuff at the Brookings Institution is not going to go down well.

It raises the real practical question of how the no campaign goes about being positive. If I was in the no campaign, I would find it incumbent on me to point out real difficulties with voting yes. The currency question, banks and GDP issues are real weaknesses for the yes campaign, so of course you would plug away at them.

I was astonished at Henry McLeish advocating going for more hearts and minds. People are going to decide on the basis of the economy. I would predict scare stories right through to

the referendum.

But when it comes to making the no message more positive, there is a problem that many people think the status quo is not satisfactory. The SNP as a Holyrood party is enjoying sizeable majority support for a reason. When people were asked about devo max without knowing entirely what it was, 70% plus said they would go for it.

But the no campaign has to span everyone from traditional liberal home rulers who had no difficulty with devolution to hardline Michael Forsyth types. It makes it very difficult for them to put a message together about what Scotland will get in return for voting no.

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