Yes Scotland and Better Together - Mobilizing and Neutralising National Identity for the 2014 Independence Referendum

Kevin Adamson and Peter Lynch, History and Politics, University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA.


Abstract

Drawing on concepts from discourse theory, this paper analyses the evolving discursive strategies of key political agents, focusing on the use of discourse to define political frontiers in the referendum campaign. This paper will examine the discursive strategies adopted by the umbrella campaign groups Yes Scotland and Better Together in their campaigning in advance of the 2014 independence referendum. It will look at how they use discourse to both mobilise and neutralize the positives and negatives associated with Scottish and British identity, whilst also looking at how the political parties contribute to this process through their construction of national identity and reshaping of concepts like independence and the Union.

Introduction

The issue of a Scottish independence referendum was propelled onto the political agenda following the 2011 Scottish election. The independence referendum had been SNP policy since 1998. The policy sought to use the platform of the devolved parliament to conduct the referendum. Two obstacles stood in the way of this policy. First, the electoral system for the Scottish parliament made majority government very difficult and coalitions the likely norm. The SNP would need to form a majority coalition of pro-independence parties or win a majority itself to trigger a referendum. This latter scenario was what transpired at the 2011 election, as the SNP won 69 of the available 129 seats. Second, there was the question of the constitutionality of independence
referendum – given that the UK constitution was reserved to the UK government in the Scotland Act 1998, was it legal for the Scottish parliament to hold a referendum on independence? The SNP had argued that the Scottish parliament could hold a referendum if the question was legally formulated within the confines of the Scotland Act as a consultative referendum [see MacCormick 2000].¹ In the period from January 2012 onwards, the UK and Scottish governments contested the legal and procedural issues around the independence referendum before coming to the intergovernmental Edinburgh Agreement of 15th October 2012.² This agreement proposed that Westminster would ‘lend’ the Scottish parliament the power to hold an independence referendum through a section 30 order passed at Westminster. Intergovernmental bargaining provides benefits for both sets of government actors – the SNP got an independence referendum at the time of their choosing, which could not be legally challenged under the Scotland Act 1998 with a franchise extended to 16 and 17 year olds. The UK government gained a one-off single question referendum with Electoral Commission oversight, with a sunset clause of the end of 2014 and that no other referendum could be held on the same day. Following this agreement, the Scottish Government sent its proposed referendum question for testing to the Electoral Commission,³ which was tested and amended by the Electoral Commission and included in the Scottish Independence Referendum Bill published on 21st March 2013.

As we shall see, the Edinburgh Agreement was highly significant for the referendum but it did not mark the start of the referendum campaign. Rather, the campaign had officially begun following the Scottish local authority elections of May 2012. Both umbrella campaign groups launched following the local elections, though the SNP campaign had effectively begun in October 2011 with a launch at its party conference

1. The MacCormick question was ‘Do you advise and consent to the Executive opening conversations with the United Kingdom government to agree terms for Scottish independence on the basis of the constitution envisaged, or on such other basis as the people, by then, choose to put in place?’ [MacCormick 2000: 726].
2. The Edinburgh Agreement is at http://www.scotland.gov.uk/About/Government/concordats/Referendum-on-independence
3. The Scottish Government’s question was ‘Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?’. The actual referendum question will be ‘Should Scotland be an independent country?’
in Inverness followed by regional campaign meetings. It’s also worth pointing out that though this is the first independence referendum, it is actually Scotland’s third constitutional referendum following on from the devolution referendums of 1979 and 1997. Each of these events saw the formation of umbrella campaign groups and importance of political party activities [and inactivity] as well as the development of discursive strategies towards the issues around Scotland and Scotland’s future. In 1979, it was opponents of devolution who produced the more coherent campaign platforms through Scotland is British [formed in 1976], which became Scotland Says No in 1978. This organisation was aided by Labour Vote No, which contained a number of prominent Labour MPs and party activists. The Yes campaign meantime was bedevilled by poor organisation, too many different campaigning organisations, last minute planning and cross-party infighting between Labour and the SNP and also within Labour itself so that there was no coherent Yes campaign [Denver, Bochel and Macartney 1981]. The 1997 experience was very different. Here the Yes campaign was coordinated effectively through Scotland Forward, which began in 1996 and involved a Labour, Liberal Democrat and SNP truce whilst the No campaign Think Twice was limited to a weak Conservative Party that had lost all of its MPs in Scotland at the 1997 UK general election. Think Twice decided it would not be the ‘No’ campaign, but it was late to the battlefield in being formed in late May 1997 [Denver, Mitchell, Pattie and Bochel 1998: 58]. There are parallels to be drawn with these two different referendums and the strategies employed by the umbrella campaign groups - and also parallels in the discursive strategies employed by the different political actors which we will explore below. However, significantly, unlike the two previous referendum experiences, the independence referendum is a long campaign in which the umbrella organisations were established very early on.

**Discourse Analysis and the Referendum**

The method adopted for this study is discourse analysis. Drawing on concepts from discourse theory, the aim of the research is twofold:

i) To examine the construction of competing discourses on the constitution of Scotland and the UK.

ii) To show how these discourses have evolved over the time period in
Discourse analysis has therefore been useful for this study in helping to map party ideology, the formation of group identities and political mobilisation. Several concepts from discourse theory have been important in the construction of our research question and in building a viable and consistent methodological framework. While utilising a range of these concepts, the study is designed around the focus on three particularly important categories, namely 'political frontier', 'empty signifier', and 'nodal point'. Through the operation of discourse analysis based on these concepts, we can identify the principal 'empty signifiers' (understood as contested political concepts) that are used in the campaign, and which are heavily contested by the participants, concepts such as democracy, fairness, sovereignty, unity, and the like. These concepts are organised within rival discourses around what is termed in discourse theory as 'nodal points' (privileged empty signifiers that have a capacity to provide structure, purpose and a measure of overall meaning to a discourse) the most important of these being 'Independence' and 'Union', which both 'sides' aim to construct and subvert at the same time. Therefore, the political terrain is marked out by competing 'discursive strategies'. This leads us to the concept of 'political frontier'. A political frontier is produced as a result of the political terrain being populated with more or less coherent competing discourses about the same thing that shape the terms of a political debate in such a way as to produce a political mobilisation and collective action around polarised political narratives about the past, present and future.

This leads us to consider one further concept from discourse theory, that of ‘chain of equivalence’. A chain of equivalence is a feature of a political discourse that sees the arrangement of a series of empty signifiers within a chain of signification whereby they give meaning to a nodal point, in our case the nodal points are ‘Union’ and

‘Independence’. It is the construction of chains of equivalence in the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ discourses that we will focus on later on in this paper.

It is widely recognised that during recent years, political debate in Scotland and about Scotland and the UK has to a significant extent become structured according to identifiable, but shifting, positions on the constitutional question. The majority of studies to date look at the constitutional politics of Scotland and the UK from the point of view of public opinion, or other ‘demand side’ factors, such as socio-economic change, cultural development, or globalisation and deindustrialisation, in the search for explanations of political change. What discourse analysis offers is the opportunity to analyse how the meaning of constitutional positions has been formulated, and how dividing lines, or ‘political frontiers’, have been established by means of the discursive strategies of important political and societal actors, or in other words, ‘supply side’, focusing therefore on the nature of the messages that reach citizens and voters. It is important to bear in mind that these dividing lines have not remained fixed in time, but have evolved over the years. If discourses are the result of a process of the articulation of signifiers, the shifting boundaries between positions comes as a result of repeated re-articulation of signifiers.

It is within this context that each side deploys discursive constructs that are composed of both positive and negative chains of equivalence, making up to what they hope will become the dominant structure of ideas for the debate. How they seek to do this will be discussed for each of the campaigns in turn in the following sections. These discursive structures that result from this constant process of articulation are flexible, and are based on a battle to control the meanings of signifiers in public discourse. They are important in terms of the reservoir of ideological resources that are available for political actors when engaging in a fairly structured rhetorical contest, such as a referendum campaign. In using discourse theory and analysis to begin mapping this terrain, we are guided by the ideological morphology analysis of Michael Freeden, which highlights the importance of the relations between concepts within ideologies, and the notion of “conceptual competition”.

Yes Scotland

Yes Scotland Formation and Activities

Yes Scotland was officially launched on 25th May 2012 at an event in an Edinburgh cinema. The event featured celebrities and politicians making brief speeches in favour of independence interspersed with short videos from supporters. The organisation began to be established in the months following the launch, with the appointment of a chief executive [on 27th June], advisory board and staff and the rolling out of local Yes groups across Scotland in the late summer and autumn of 2012. This formation process has been slow and incomplete however, the organisation opened offices in Glasgow on 20th August, appointed key staff to senior and middle-level positions on 3rd September and had most of its launch meetings across Scotland’s 32 local authority areas completed by November 2012. An additional set of staff were appointed in late December 2012, with plans for opening offices across different parts of Scotland in 2013. In terms of campaigning, Yes Scotland has facilitated national campaign days as well as local events across Scotland as part of a determined effort to build a grassroots organisation of local campaigners. Some of this campaigning had already begun before Yes was fully established and before local groups were officially created though, as campaigning began early in some areas across the summer of 2012 with a national Yes campaign weekend on 23rd June.

Yes is attempting to build a new non-party and cross-party network of campaigners across Scotland, using a combination of traditional organisational techniques as well as social media to create local networks. It isn’t just relying on the political parties. – though some of their structures and personnel are vital. Its grassroots focus also has a DIY element to it. Yes centrally has finance and resources from prominent SNP supporters but its aim is to provide the tools for local campaigners to generate interest - providing campaign materials, logos and designs online with supporters able to download a community activist kit. The organisation is also keen to differentiate from the SNP and the SNP Government – with leading figures in the organisation not associated with the SNP but from the Greens, Scottish Socialist Party and non-party figures like Dennis Canavan and the organisation’s chief Executive Blair Jenkins. Yes is also running ‘community ambassador’ training programmes in order to create a network of local, self-
resourced campaigners for Yes – again, outside of the political parties. Much of the national and local efforts so far have been focused on getting people to sign the Yes Declaration, accompanied by leafleting, canvassing and events. Signatories of the Declaration become potential campaigners and recruiters as Yes Scotland seeks to build a series of community activist networks to undertake campaigning.

The Pluralism of Yes

Yes Scotland is very much an umbrella organization for supporters of independence and these are quite diverse. We can explain this in three ways. First, there are moderate and radical views of independence – meaning proponents of change who are comfortable with the Queen remaining as head of state as well as the social and currency union but also radicals interested in using independence to transform fundamental power structures in Scotland and inequalities of wealth. Second, there are official and unofficial parties supporting independence. The SNP and Scottish Socialist Party were first into the field officially, with the Greens joining after their party conference on 6th October in Glasgow. However, there is also a Labour for Independence group that has been active in the campaign [formed on 27th July 2012], a Liberal Democrats group for independence as well as a group of non-aligned voters [VASI]. Third, there are also a range of other organizations and groups involved in the broad Yes campaign that sometimes overlap with Yes Scotland and the other organisation. Prominent amongst these are Women for Independence, the Radical independence Conference [which held its inaugural meeting on 24th November 2012] and the National Collective [a pro-Yes group of writers, directors and film-makers from the creative sector]. These sit alongside sectoral Yes Scotland groups for students, young people, LGBT, teachers, Labour Movement and Eco-Scots.

So far, there are three narratives advanced by Yes Scotland and also the parties that support Yes.

First, there is the Democracy narrative of independence. This narrative was Yes’s starting point in 2012 - not national identity - and central to its political appeal. Its importance is twofold. Not only does it play into a general support for Scottish self-government that is popular across supporters of devolution and independence but it also raises a question over the desirability of allowing UK institutions to govern Scotland. This
builds on survey evidence that finds that Scots want their devolved government to have more powers and is a position reminiscent of the Doomsday Scenario of the 1980s – why do Scots vote Labour and get a Conservative government?

Besides general awareness-raising and publicity, Yes Scotland’s foremost activity to date has been the publication of the Yes declaration. Local groups are collecting signatories to the declaration across Scotland to build a base of committed activists in support of independence. However, for our purposes it is the ‘Democracy’ content of the declaration that is important and is quoted in full here:

I believe it is fundamentally better for us all, if decisions about Scotland's future are taken by the people who care most about Scotland, that is, by the people of Scotland.

Being independent means Scotland's future will be in Scotland's hands.

There is no doubt that Scotland has great potential. We are blessed with talent, resources and creativity. We have the opportunity to make our nation a better place to live, for this and future generations. We can build a greener, fairer and more prosperous society that is stronger and more successful than it is today.

I want a Scotland that speaks with her own voice and makes her own unique contribution to the world: a Scotland that stands alongside the other nations on these isles, as an independent nation.9

In essence, the declaration presents a ‘sovereigntist’ discourse over independence, that presents a position that is also open to supporters for further powers to the Scottish parliament – a considerable electorate. The declaration itself has considerable antecedents such as the Claim of Right of 1988 and the National Covenant of 1949. The Democracy narrative was also a central part of the 1990s devolution campaigns, with an emphasis on the positive gains of a Scottish parliament in its own right as it would be concerned with Scottish issues and elected locally – but also on making the parliament more

democratic, responsive, accessible, etc. Research undertaken for devolution campaigners in 1996 determined the main political driver of support for Yes was governance whilst the main political driver of No was economics [Denver, Mitchell, Pattie and Bochel 1998: 54]. Scotland Forward therefore focused on autonomy, national identity and the return of decision making to Scotland not on issues like taxation and the proposed 3p tax powers for the Scottish Parliament.

Second, there is the fairness narrative. Both Yes and its component parties argue for independence as part of developing a fairer society and economy for Scotland. Given the three main parties involved in Yes are social democrats, Socialists and Greens, this is not surprising. However, this narrative dovetails with the devolved powers and competencies of the Scotland Act as well as some of the policies pursued by different governments at Holyrood – meaning the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalitions from 1999-2007 as well as the subsequent SNP administrations. The Fairness narrative seeks to mobilize national identity through social democratic values – meaning Scottish values of fairness and looking after the disadvantaged in society. The Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond has given speeches identifying Scotland as a ‘progressive beacon’ within the UK for its policies on education and health and this type of narrative has resonance because of UK austerity measures and spending cuts and the role of the Conservatives in the UK government. The Fairness narrative does not just seek to draw a line between a social democratic Scotland and a Conservative United Kingdom though, it also address recent shifts in Scottish Labour’s position on devolved policies and universal benefits.

Third, there is the Devolution narrative, which has the intention of explaining independence as a development that is building on the gains of devolution such as free personal care, free higher education and free bus travel. Significantly, these are linked directly to the Fairness narrative and the Democracy narrative. It is intended to make voters see independence as the natural extension of devolution and link it to a series of policies and values that are popular, that will be threatened by remaining in the UK.

10. A Panelbase poll for the Sunday Times on 21st October 2012 found that support for independence rose from 37% to 52% if voters thought there would be a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition after the 2015 UK election.
Yes Scotland Discourse

In this section, we discuss briefly the nature of these narratives, based on ‘chains of equivalence’, and show this working ‘in practice’. By looking at examples from keynote speeches delivered in the last year by Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon, we can see that what Yes discourse does is to build two sets of chains of equivalence. (As we will see later, the Better Together discourse engages in a similar discursive strategy.) One of those is associated with the nodal point of ‘independence’. However, as political actors, their discursive opportunity structure is dominated just as much by battles for control of the nodal point of ‘Union’. Therefore, the second chain of equivalence that the ‘Yes’ campaigners focus on, is the construction of a negative chain of equivalence associated with ‘Union’, which sometimes uses a replacement signifier as nodal point, namely ‘Westminster rule’ – as sometime equivalent to ‘Union’, thus one of the means used to contest the opposing chain of equivalence and its nodal point.


Let us consider the recent (2012) speech of Nicola Sturgeon, the Deputy First Minister and ‘the minister for the referendum’. The discursive strategy, and the importance of this type of chain of equivalence within it, is clear. Her vision of independence involves ‘Bringing the powers home to build a better nation’ in order to forge:

“A country with a stable economy that works for the many and not just the few; one that knows it must create the wealth it needs to support the strong public services we value; a country that manages our vast resources responsibly, with an eye to the future; a country that gets the
government it votes for; a country that has fairness at its core and allows all of us as individuals to reach our full potential.”

Articulating this chain of equivalence as part of a narrative explaining the political development of Scotland since devolution, Alex Salmond, the First Minister, used an interpretation of the 2011 election result as an opportunity to set out elements of that chain:

“My view is that the election result in 2011, in particular, reflected a recognition of the achievements of the first SNP administration; a vote of confidence in its optimistic view of Scotland's potential; and a desire among people in Scotland for their Parliament to have significantly greater powers than at present.”

However, by the same token, the same speeches contain chains of equivalence that subvert the claims of the principal supporters of the Union. In this quote from Alex Salmond’s lecture, ‘Westminster’ features as an alternative signifier to ‘union’ in a critique of Westminster rule, effectively outlining one reason for the failure of the union for Scotland, not to mention England:

“The unpopularity of Westminster leaders in Scotland is largely based on their hamfisted interventions in the debate on Scotland's future. Their unpopularity in England is based on their inability, in these tough times, to present a positive vision for the future of England.”

Similarly, Nicola Sturgeon contrasts the meaning of independence with the negative chain of equivalence relating to the union:

“Our referendum may be asking only one question, but in truth Scotland faces two choices – the first is whether to bring the powers home to govern ourselves, rather than stick with UK governance. And the second

is – what kind of society do we want to be? But we don’t get to make the second choice without being prepared to make the first. The powers of independence are the tools we need to build the country we want to be. The challenges we face as a country today are real - and they are not just short term effects of the recession or global problems shared by all other countries. The poverty and inequality that is a scar on the face of our nation, the lag in economic growth, the flow of our brightest and best out of Scotland – these are not recent problems. These are long-standing and long-term challenges that UK governments of whatever colour have failed to address. The UK today is the 4th most unequal society in the developed world. 1 in 5 Scottish children live in poverty. 800,000 Scots live in fuel poverty.”

Thus a political frontier – essentially offering to voters an explanation of where the dividing line is in the matter that they must make a choice upon – is built between an ‘independent’ Scotland that can progress, guarantee equality and economic development, as opposed to a Westminster-led ‘Union’ that is ‘uncaring’, ‘unpopular’, ‘hamfisted’, that produces ‘poverty’ and ‘inequality’.

As the Yes campaign has launched and developed, one of the key figures in the Yes campaign, former MP and MSP Dennis Canavan has echoed this negative chain of equivalence, in explaining why he supports independence:

“We also know that the UK is one of the most unequal societies in the West – according to Professor Danny Dorling of Sheffield University, the fourth most unequal. So when it comes to envisioning the kind of society Scotland could become, we should focus on what needs to change to make that vision sharper. Does the Trident nuclear arsenal, for example, sit comfortably within our national outlook or is there, as I believe, a growing consensus in Scotland that nuclear weapons are both immoral and increasingly irrelevant? How else, as an independent nation, would we decide to spend the billions currently being squandered on nuclear weapons?”

15. Dennis Canavan, ‘Dennis Canavan challenges pro-union parties to set out their vision for independent Scotland’, The Herald, Friday 7th December 2012.
Better Together

Better Together Formation and Activities

Better Together has its foundations in a series of informal talks between the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats. These talks were held at the home of Alistair Darling in Edinburgh, with media coverage of these talks from February 2012 onwards with discussions over a ‘rainbow coalition’ against independence featuring Conservative David McLetchie, Scottish Liberal Democrat leader Willie Rennie and Labour’s Scottish deputy leader, Anas Sarwar. In time, Better Together became a formal organization, with Darling, McLetchie and Craig Harrow of the Liberal Democrats as directors of a registered company, with an office in Edinburgh and a campaign director in former Labour advisor Blair McDougall. Whilst the organization is up and running, the funding of Better Together remains opaque and may remain so for some time given Electoral Commission rules on registering donations to such campaigns [rules over donations and spending limits only begin in the 16 weeks before the actual referendum].

Better Together was formally launched at an event at Napier University in Edinburgh on 25th June 2012. This event was quite different to Yes Scotland as it eschewed celebrities. It featured politicians more – to accommodate its cross-party dimension – but sought to focus on ordinary people and why they thought the Union was important through a series of short films and through politicians interviewing them to ask them their views on Scotland in the United Kingdom. One key point to make about Better Together from the outset is its name. It is not Scotland is British or Scotland Says No from the 1970s anti-devolution campaigns nor Think Twice from 1997. It has deliberately sought to prevent being styled as the ‘No’ campaign and its title reflects that. The organisation also reflects a certain Morenoisation in relation to its treatment of national identity by focusing on the overlapping national identities of the Scots [Moreno 1986]. Rather than be cast as anti-Scottish [a perception that has bedeviled the Conservatives in recent years], Better Together has sought to stress its Scottish and British facets

16. The Scotsman, 28th February 2012.
17. See www.bettertogether.net
through its name, logo, publicity material and narrative and turn these into positives in its campaigning.

Since its launch, Better Together has operated at a number of levels and some of its activities and approach are similar to Yes Scotland – meaning involving grassroots campaigners, social media and volunteer recruitment. It has held a series of campaign events and sought to build a grassroots network of sorts. It has echoes of Yes Scotland in seeking to empower local campaigners and provide them with resources to assist their activities, realizing that it’s local parties on the ground who will really determine the level of political activity. It also invites its supporters to design and circulate leaflet ideas and materials. Better Together has organized a petition in support of Scotland in the UK, which allows the organization to collect email and contact addresses to generate a database of supporters [this ran into trouble as the organization has failed to ask the Electoral Commission for permission to do this], with the petitions administered by street stalls at events across Scotland.

Politically, Better Together has a mix of advantages and disadvantages in its composition and campaigning. The fact it needs to combine the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats places limits on its campaign messages, meaning it has a lowest common denominator approach to support for the Union – often broad, fairly vague and general statements on Scotland’s role in the UK. In practice, this means the parties and the Better Together can be fairly coherent in the substance and frequency of their negative attacks on independence but much more limited in their ability to make a positive case for continued Union. More specific political messages might undermine the unity between the three Unionist parties. The role of the coalition government and the Conservatives are obvious problems here – where the reality of austerity policies clash with positive arguments about Scotland in the UK economy. On the other hand, the numerical superiority of Better Together – effectively 3 parties to 1 – allows the No campaign to outnumber Yes in its political attacks, though this involves some careful management as some political attacks [from the Conservatives say] can be counterproductive.
The Better Together narratives are related to chains of equivalence that operate in a similar way to those informing the political rhetoric of the Yes Scotland campaign. We take two examples from prominent Better Together campaigners, Alistair Darling MP, the former Chancellor and leader of the Better Together campaign, and Douglas Alexander MP, currently the Shadow Foreign Secretary. As with Yes discourse, the Better Together campaign is based around the construction of two chains of equivalence. One of those is associated with the nodal point of ‘Union’. The other chain of equivalence is built around the contestation of the Yes Scotland nodal point of ‘Independence’, which the BT campaign replaces with the proxy nodal point of ‘separation’, used as a means of subverting the nodal point of independence.


If we consider a recent article by Alistair Darling, the narrative is based around the hypothetical question of what would have happened to ‘Scottish Banks’ had the ‘calamity made in Edinburgh’ taken place in an independent Scotland, and what did happen given that Scotland is part of the United Kingdom.18 This article is a good example of the operation of construction of positive and negative chains of equivalence within the same rhetorical artifact. With regard to the crisis at RBS, Mr. Darling stated that: “Gordon Brown and I knew we had to do what was needed, but we were only able to do so because of the financial strength of the UK.” He goes on to articulate within the logic of the two opposing chains of equivalence thus:

“That day will live with me for the rest of my life. The fact that the UK was there to stand behind a failed Scottish bank – and this was a calamity made in Edinburgh – is only one example of the strength of sharing risks. We are part of a social union, underpinned by an economic and political union. We share opportunities as well as risks. All parts mesh together. I joined the Better Together campaign because I value our links with the other parts of the United Kingdom, through families, friendships, through trade and shared political, economic and cultural institutions. After centuries of common endeavour, we should value the ties that bind and celebrate the diversity that exists around us. It is artificial to create separate states within our small island.”

This is effectively an elaboration of the Better Together core message which is based on a limited articulation of the two opposing chains of equivalence. What is interesting about Alistair Darling’s intervention is that it shows how this basic political frontier can operate with extended chains of equivalence arising from the core positive and negative political frontier, correlating the Union (United Kingdom) with the empty signifier of ‘strength’, with the variant ‘stronger’ positing the possibility of ‘weaker’.

‘Our case is not that Scotland could not survive as a separate country - it is that being part of the United Kingdom is the best possible choice for our future. We can have the best of both worlds - a distinctive Scottish Parliament without losing the strength and security of the United Kingdom. We believe that Scotland is stronger as part of the United Kingdom and that the United Kingdom is stronger with Scotland as a partner.’

If we turn to the recent speech of Douglas Alexander MP, we can see in more detail the strategy of the Better Together campaign to promote its ‘political frontier’ through the further extension of the positive and negative chains of equivalence, and how this involves the direct contestation of the opposing chains of equivalence and the re-articulation of the empty signifiers they contain. Douglas Alexander contests from the start that the Yes campaign is a positive one, contesting their use of the empty signifier ‘Yes’:

“Tonight, I want to suggest that the narrative that nationalists are using to respond to their current difficulties is much more one of ‘No’ rather than ‘Yes’. And I want to suggest that the nationalists’ approach creates an opportunity for those of us who believe our Scottishness is best expressed within the United Kingdom to counter that nationalist negativity with a different, and a more hopeful, story about Scotland’s future.”

Conclusion

What we can glean from the discursive production of both sides in the referendum campaign are the operation of discursive strategies that aim to impose their own version of where the ‘political frontier’ lies, primarily, though not exclusively, in Scottish and UK politics. Let us consider the example of ‘social union’. This is an empty signifier that is deployed in both the Better Together and the Yes Scotland campaigns. It forms part of the positive chain of equivalence supporting the nodal point of ‘independence’ in Yes discourse. In an interview with Holyrood magazine in 2011, Nicola Sturgeon gives an indication of importance of the concept of ‘social union’ in the Yes campaign was already apparent:

“I believe in Scottish independence, I don’t believe it is separatism. I think the social union that we have with other parts of the UK is valuable and we are not trying to break that social union but we do believe that political and economic independence for Scotland is necessary for our interests.”

Two years later, Alistair Darling has appropriated the same signifier, subverting an element in the Yes campaign’s chain of equivalence, and placing it in the Better Together campaign’s discourse – evidently its meaning changed as a result of an entirely different articulation of ‘social union’:

“We are part of a social union, underpinned by an economic and political union. We share opportunities as well as risks. All parts mesh together.

joined the Better Together campaign because I value our links with the other parts of the United Kingdom, through families, friendships, through trade and shared political, economic and cultural institutions.”

There is one further strand that is worthy of note, and one that both campaigns build into their discursive strategies – that of equating the Union with ‘poor governance’, particularly of the Tories (for the Yes campaign) and independence with the ‘poor governance’ of the SNP at Holyrood (for the Better Together campaign). Let us look more closely at Better Together’s construction of a negative chain of equivalence regarding independence, one that seeks to challenge the positive chain of equivalence of the Yes campaign. In a speech by Scottish Labour leader Johann Lamont MSP in 2012, she sought to build a negative chain of equivalence around ‘independence’ by tying it closely to a critique of the SNP in government. For example:

“As the nationalists try to find the question to which independence is the answer, fundamental questions go unaddressed. We saw that in the budget last week. Nothing for jobs. Nothing to boost the economy. No tough decisions made. If Alex Salmond is like George Osborne when he gets booed at Olympic events, John Swinney is, as the unions have said, ‘Osborne in a kilt.’

Of course, the Yes Scotland campaign does this too. Let’s return to the Nicola Sturgeon’s recent speech, where she challenges the positive chain of equivalence of the Better Together campaign for the ‘union’ with an accusation of poor governance:

“Our referendum may be asking only one question, but in truth Scotland faces two choices – the first is whether to bring the powers home to govern ourselves, rather than stick with UK governance. And the second is – what kind of society do we want to be. But we don’t get to make the second choice without being prepared to make the first. The powers of

independence are the tools we need to build the country we want to be. The challenges we face as a country today are real - and they are not just short term effects of the recession or global problems shared by all other countries. The poverty and inequality that is a scar on the face of our nation, the lag in economic growth, the flow of our brightest and best out of Scotland – these are not recent problems. These are long-standing and long-term challenges that UK governments of whatever colour have failed to address.”

Incumbency is therefore part and parcel of the discursive opportunity structures available to both sides. In the 18 months to come, the referendum campaign will revolve around this constant battle of articulation of signifiers about it as well as other issues.

**Bibliography**


Howarth, David [2000], *Discourse*, Open University Press.


Laclau, Ernesto [1996], *Emancipation(s)*, London: Verso.


---


Salmond, Alex [2012], ‘Scotland’s Place in the World’, Hugo Young Lecture, 24th January 2012.


Yes Scotland [2012], *Yes Declaration*, Edinburgh.