

SCOTLAND IN A ZOOM

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Our
Scottish Future



“Even though he was a No supporter and I’m a Yes, we both agree on so many things. I was glad to hear the thing he was pissed off about were the same things I was pissed off about. Everybody just wants everyone to grow up a wee bit.”

Participant, East Kilbride.

INTRODUCTION

Seven years on from a referendum that was intended to resolve our constitutional position in the United Kingdom, Scotland remains stuck.

Polls tip one way or the other, but the broad picture is of a country split down the middle on whether or not to leave the United Kingdom. And just as the public is divided on what to do next, so too are our politicians.

If they win a majority of seats in the forthcoming Holyrood elections, pro-independence parties in the Scottish Parliament have made it clear they will propose another referendum in as little as two and half years’ time.

Pro-Union parties do not agree, and the UK Government is expected to oppose one too. The matter may end up not with the people, but in the Courts.

Scotland thus faces the prospect of a lengthy period trapped at the constitutional crossroads. The binary choice that faced Scotland in 2014 has not moved Scotland on: it has ossified our politics.

“We all agreed that whether you support remaining in the UK or leaving, you have to be open to the fact there is another opinion out there and that other people won’t necessarily agree with you. No matter what comes in the next referendum, we need to push Scotland forward and agree that whatever the outcome is we need to be proudly Scottish and make the most of it.”

Participant, Glasgow.

The question turns to how, or whether, it is possible to find a solution that might un-stick Scotland from this impasse. Our Scottish Future believes we can, not by choosing one of two binary choices, but with a third option – the creation of a renewed and refreshed United Kingdom. We believe that this process begins by holding a deeper public conversation across the country than the one our politics has permitted these last few years.

“Part of the problem in 2014 was that if you were a No supporter and Salmond was on the telly you switched over and if you were a Yes voter and Ruth Davidson was on, you switched over. No one actually listened to the other side. It’s dead easy as a Yes supporter to ignore the concerns of people who vote No, and it’s dead easy if you’re a No supporter to ignore the ambitions of people that vote Yes.”

Participant, Stirling.

This deeper, more reflective, conversation has been largely missing in Scotland since the 2014 referendum. Our politicians in Scotland can hardly be blamed: no fewer than five major elections have taken place since, putting them on a constant war-footing. If this were not enough, the 2016 Brexit referendum then layered division upon division, creating a political cacophony silenced only by the enormity of the pandemic.

Amid that chaos and confusion, there has been little opportunity for Scots to talk or listen to one another on the constitutional choice we face.

The danger is that our discourse is dominated by online partisan bickering, and by political forces which want only to feed on division, not seek to manage it in a constructive manner.

“I was surprised that people with completely opposing views could agree on a lot of the same points. There was a consensus that we should wait a while to have a referendum. I just enjoyed listening to what everyone had to say and to speak to people about independence, whether it is for or against.”

Participant, Inverness

It was with this in mind, that last year we decided to set up Scotland in a Zoom.

We began before lockdown with two face-to-face sessions in Paisley and Edinburgh. The pandemic then brought those sessions to a firm stop. But over recent months, we took the conversation online, with eight Zoom events across the country.

“It would be a very good idea to get Boris Johnson and Nicola Sturgeon to come into this chat...”

Participant, Inverness.



The basic idea was simply to bring together Scots who disagree on the constitution and to facilitate a conversation about the country's future.

We sought to encourage people to lower their defences and to listen to each other's point of view. This report sets out what happened in each session, what they agreed about, and what disagreements still linger. It provides a snapshot of what Scotland looks like when it gets the chance to talk.

“This has made it clear to me that we all have the same goal whether we support independence or not. We all want a healthy, sustainable and happy Scotland whether we're part of the UK or not. It's made me see that the end goal as Scottish citizens is the same whether we support independence or not.”

Participant, Inverness.

The picture is complex and messy, but two main takeaways emerged from our events, which figure prominently in our recommendations to this report.

Firstly, for all the claims that Scotland is a nation divided, with two sides facing each other in a culture war over our country's future, our events suggest this is far from the case. The people in our groups discovered they had far more in common with one another than they expected. Their priorities were remarkably similar. Our events suggest that Scotland is broadly united in its aims; it is simply divided over the best way to achieve them.

“I don't think anyone wants harm on the other side. That is a massive change from 2014 when you couldn't sit in a room with someone who was Yes and someone who was No. There seems more unity now on both sides that actually the answers are a little grey and we all need more information and to try and listen and understand other people's point of view.”

Participant, Aberdeen

And secondly, our events suggested that, across Scotland, there is a huge thirst for a more consultative, less confrontational way of doing politics. Far and away the clearest message we received from all those who participated in our sessions was how much they appreciated and valued the chance to listen and talk to fellow Scots of a different viewpoint in a respectful and non-judgemental space.

The conclusion we draw is that whatever steps our politicians take over the coming years, they must find ways to bring people of different political views together to discuss their differences.

The Scottish Government's recent Citizen Assembly programme provided a model for this way of working, but largely ignored the big constitutional questions that face Scotland. It should now go further and ensure that “the elephant in the room” (as we termed it) is front and centre in future events. At the same time, any future Scottish Government of whatever political persuasion must accept it cannot both be a player and referee of this process. Both the UK Government and the Scottish Government jointly need to show leadership and find ways to get Scots of different political views to come together, to air their differences, and to discuss how they might be resolved.

“It would be a very good idea to get Boris Johnson and Nicola Sturgeon to come into this chat. Maybe then they'd start doing their job in the correct way and understand what the people of this country want.”

Participant, Inverness.



Whatever choices Scotland takes over the coming years, we share a common interest in maintaining the country's essential unity of purpose.

After a decade where politics has too often fractured that unity, our political leaders must act to preserve Scotland's most valued and treasured asset.

WHAT WE DID

In his recent book “Love Your Enemies”, American writer Arthur C. Brookes sets out a call to action to save America from what he described as the “culture of contempt” which has so damaged its political culture over recent years. Brookes argues that the way forward for the US’s fractured public discourse is not to tone down the immense disagreements felt across the States or to avoid confrontation, but to “disagree better”. People need to stop questioning the motives of their political opponents, he argues. They also need to step out of the social media hornet’s nest which serves to widen division.

The way forward, he argues is simple:


“Go find someone with whom you disagree; listen thoughtfully; and treat him or her with respect and love. The rest will flow naturally from there.”

The political divisions in Scotland are not as deeply ingrained as those which afflict a country the size and variety of America, but they are intense all the same. And while the “culture of contempt” which Brookes warns about has so far remained mostly in the on-line world, concerns about potential civil unrest in Scotland have been aired and are possible. As Brookes suggests, we need to find a way to improve our public discourse and better understand the reasons and motives of people who hold different views to our own. From this better place may flow a more productive conversation about the future direction of Scotland.

It was in this spirit that, last year, we decided to launch a series of Community Assemblies to bring together people from different perspectives on Scotland’s constitutional future. We wanted to get Yes voters and No voters in the same room, and to encourage them to listen and talk to each other. We wanted to see what would emerge from a conversation that promoted respect and empathy for each others’ views, and sought to minimise confrontation. After lockdown, the programme moved online. In total, we held eight virtual sessions across February and March this year where, typically, twelve people – six Yes supporters and six No supporters – were brought together for a two hours long conversation session.

The sessions were designed consciously to try and promote the value of listening and respectful conversation, drawing on the expertise of professional facilitators such as Laurence Shorter. Participants were assured at the beginning that nobody was seeking to change their minds, and that we would seek to avoid heated arguments, or personal attacks. At the same time, we urged people to speak freely and honestly about what they thought and felt. As a warm-up exercise, participants were broken up into pairs. They were then asked to talk uninterrupted for three minutes about their hopes and fears both for themselves and for Scotland. Their partner was asked to listen without interruption. Later in the session, Yes voters were paired off with No voters. Each person was asked to explain how they felt about the prospect of Scotland becoming an independent nation. Their partner was then asked to “play back” what they had heard. In this way, the programme was aimed at both highlighting the value of listening and getting people to understand and empathise with somebody of a different political perspective.

With these principles established, the sessions then asked people to focus on a series of tasks. Groups of four were asked to set out their key priorities for action in Scotland. Finally, groups of six – made up of equal numbers of Yes and No voters – were asked to see if they could reach agreement on how to resolve Scotland’s constitutional dilemma. Should independence be an issue? Should another referendum be held, and if so, when? What would be a fair process that would bring people along with it? In the time allowed, questions of such complexity are unfair, of course. But we wanted to find out how people would interact when their defences were down.



Finally, we brought the entire group together, and held a broad discussion about how Scotland should manage political disagreement.

WHAT WE FOUND

PRIORITIES

Participants were asked to spell out the top three issues they wanted government to focus on over the coming decade.

The participants expressed significant consistency in their priorities, with the majority understandably focusing on how Scotland will successfully recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Investment in the NHS, economy and education were the agreed priorities of the vast majority of the participants with climate change also frequently mentioned as a priority. Independence was mentioned as a priority by 10% of groups, the same number as Brexit.

“We’ve got a beautiful country and a great country and I wish we could just stop going on about independence. We’ve gone through a horrific year – there’s going to be so much to sort out – that we really should be focusing and concentrating on sorting that out.”

Participant, Edinburgh.

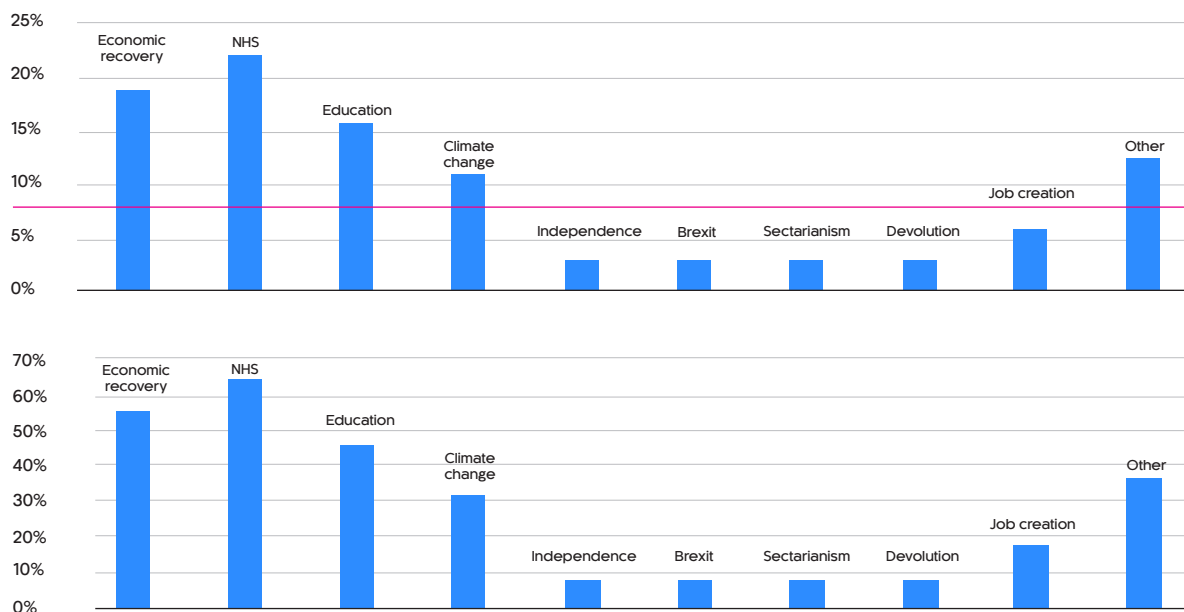
“We need to get COVID back in place, we need to help the poor and get Scotland back to where it was pre-pandemic before we have it. We need to get Scotland back and that recovery has to take priority.”

Participant, Stirling.

“I thought I was going to be arguing with people tonight, but everyone so far has been on the same page. I’ve got all my facts and figures written down here waiting for it, but everyone seems to want to move in the same direction. Everyone wants to help the lost generation – the younger people – improve equality and invest in the NHS.”

Participant, Inverness.

The People's Priorities



Investment in the NHS was cited as the most popular single priority (67%)

with participants agreeing the need to both reward health service staff but also tackle the backlog of other treatments necessarily delayed over the previous 12 months.

Additional funding for mental health treatment

was also mentioned as part of an overall desire to prioritise the NHS, with participants suggesting the sustained lockdown is likely to have impacted Scotland's mental wellbeing.

"All this money has appeared to get the country through the pandemic so the money is there and it now should be spent on the NHS to help it cope over the coming years. We have to build on the recognition that the NHS has got in the last year."

Participant, Aberdeen.

More than half (57%) of participants also agreed the economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic should be prioritised over the next parliament.

Groups were particularly concerned about job creation – essential for "a brighter future" – but also ensuring the economic recovery is a crucible for creating high-skilled, environmentally sustainable work. Fairness – particularly a desire to ensure the burden for funding the recovery is spread equitably – and a concern for the future of the high street were also regularly mentioned.

"I was surprised that 100% of the group wanted to prioritise getting out of the pandemic completely rather than independence. That for me is very encouraging as we need to get the economy back on the level."

Participant, Inverness.

"You walk along Princes Street today and see the number of shops shuttered up – that's sad to see. Money will have to be pumped in to protect Scotland's capital. We need something to kick start the economy, particularly given everything that has just gone on [COVID-19]."

Participant, Edinburgh.

The final overwhelmingly popular policy priority was investment in education (48%)

Participants expressed concern about the disruption the COVID-19 pandemic had caused to young people's education in Scotland and agreed the government should prioritise helping pupils to "catch-up" given the lost classroom time. There was also a collective desire for civil servants to learn the lessons of the current pandemic and ensure that pupils never again have to miss out on their education. A number of participants also mentioned their hope that additional support would be provided to teachers.

“

We agreed that we wanted to live in a fair Scotland, particularly in relation to education. Education isn't great at the moment and we want to make sure that everyone is getting the most out of it.

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Participant, Edinburgh

Among the other popular policy choices, climate change was ranked by more than one third (33%) as a priority.

While the upcoming COP26 climate conference in Glasgow and international efforts to tackle climate change were mentioned by some participants, there was a shared desire for the Scottish government to do more to create green jobs and lower pollution. A number of participants suggested that the pandemic had helped cut the use of non-green transport, such as private cars, and that the government should look to maintain that trend.

“We used the phrase ‘a Scottish Green New Deal’ and I think that was something that everyone agreed with.”
Participant, Edinburgh.

“We need to save our country for the future. We have a beautiful country and it is important that we protect that.”
Participant, Stirling.

In contrast, 10% of groups agreed independence for Scotland should be a priority over the next five years.

Brexit was identified as a key issue for the next five years by 10% of groups, with those who did agreeing it was a mistake to leave the EU and that Scotland or the UK should seek to rejoin, by independence or other means. A number of participants expressed concern about “lost opportunities” as a result of Brexit, while concerns about the impact of tariff barriers on Scottish industry – particularly fishing – were also mentioned.

PROCESS ON THE CONSTITUTION

Ahead of devolved elections on May 6, all Scotland in a Zoom participants agreed that independence is an issue that should be paid attention to over the next five years.

However, opinions differed substantively on if and when a second independence referendum should take place.

In line with a majority choosing recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic as their policy priority, one third (31%) agreed a referendum should not take place for at least five years, while a further 38% agreed one should not take place for at least three years.

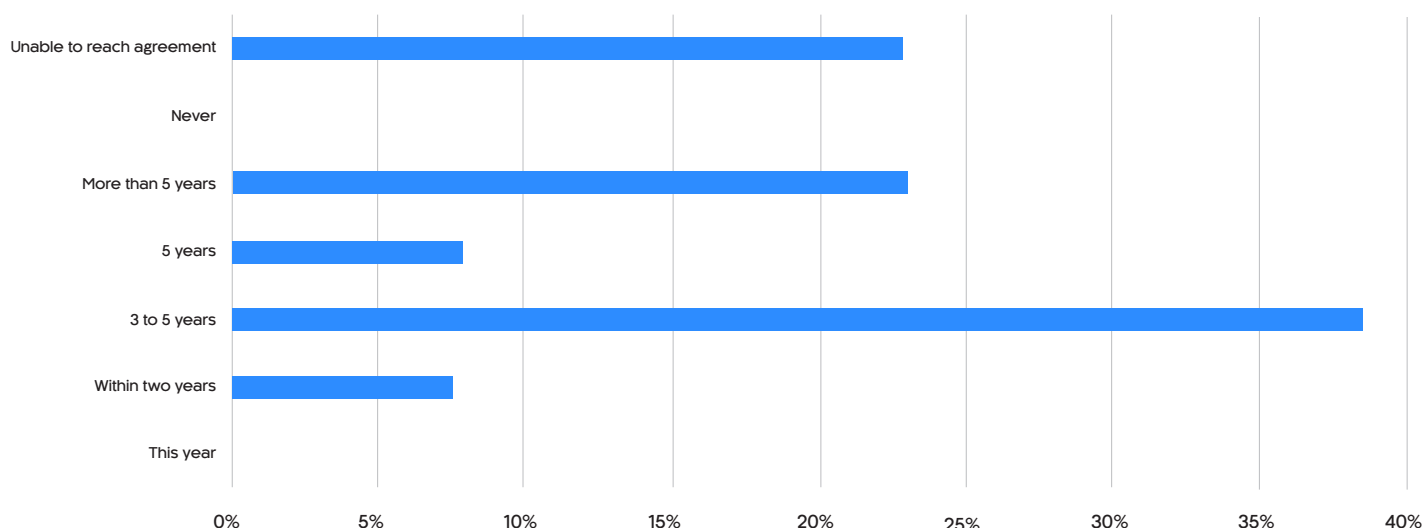
Less than one in 10 (8%) agreed with Nicola Sturgeon’s timetable for a referendum before the end of 2023.

Almost a quarter (23%) were unable to reach agreement on a timetable at all.

“I think we should get COVID by first before we start thinking about independence again. We need to sort out everything that has been going on – I want another referendum, but not in the next few months or the next few years. I want council services back up and running, I want things back to normal before we do it. But I want a vote and I want my say.”

Participant, East Kilbride and Coatbridge.

Proposed Timetable for a Second Referendum on Scottish Independence



“ There’s a lot of uncertainty not just in the UK but the whole world. It is not fair to put such a big and important decision on people – especially people with families – who have been through so much just now. It needs to be at least a few years’ time – you can’t be making a Yes-No decision overnight when people have been through so much trauma. ”

Participant, East Kilbride and Coatbridge.

As well as division over the timing of a referendum, participants shared significant concerns about a lack of impartial information on the case either for or against Scottish independence.

Both politicians and the media could not be trusted to present things truthfully and objectively, according to a number of participants. Many shared a perception that the 2016 EU referendum had been mired by dishonesty and that voters had therefore found it difficult to make an informed decision. Some participants also highlighted how the terms of the UK's exit from the EU differed markedly from some of the promises made during the 2016 referendum campaign; they therefore expressed a desire to know what the "final deal" on independence would look like before being asked to vote.

"It is hard to make a decision now because there hasn't been a laying down of facts. It is not clear what independence would look like and I think there was a desire for more facts before we make a decision. The experience of Brexit has tarnished people's perception of how decisions are made. Going into a second independence referendum we need these questions answered a lot more clearly. We need to pin it down and delve into things more."

Participant, Edinburgh.

"If we had someone independently giving you the data, that would work. I would trust the Money Saving Expert guy."

Participant, Stirling.

"We had a vote on Brexit, we didn't know what it meant, and we had a vote on independence, and we didn't know what it meant. I would like to have a vote where we do know what it means. If we do have to have a referendum, let's have economic policies, social policies, laid out from both sides rather than just a concept or a wish."

Participant, Edinburgh.

There was also a shared apprehension about whether a second referendum on independence might divide Scotland.

Participants agreed there was "an awful lot of division" during the 2014 independence referendum, which could shatter the budding community spirit that has emerged following the COVID-19 pandemic. Voters need to be able to "exercise and share their views in a more respectful way," participants said, in order to maintain the newfound "unity" in Scotland.

"I firmly believe in independence, but one thing we certainly agreed on is how divisive the issue is, how painful negotiations will be. You've seen how painful the negotiations were with Brexit and it will be painful process, even though I firmly believe it's going to happen. There will be a lot of anger and abuse... and it's an incredibly divisive issue. It won't be an easy ride, no matter what the result is."

Participant, Edinburgh.

“

For me [Brexit has] been probably the biggest single factor because it shows how divisive and uncertain a referendum can be, and how much negativity it can stir up. I think also that we're still living with the fallout of Brexit, so why should we force another crisis of faith and crisis of democracy on the UK when we're already dealing with the consequences of one? I think that would be very short sighted.

Participant, Edinburgh.

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PEOPLE

As well as specifically engaging people on their priorities and process, Scotland In a Zoom encouraged people with strongly differing views on the constitution to actively listen to each other.

Proponents and opponents of Scottish independence were given an uninterrupted two minutes to tell the other person how they felt about the prospect of Scotland becoming an independent country. Their partner then had two minutes to relay what they had heard back, showing they had listened to – and understood – their partner’s position. While many expected this to result in conflict, the process of listening often helped participants to better understand their political opponents’ perspectives, as well as find surprising levels of commonality.

“It’s good to listen. Obviously, we voted differently in terms of independence and we feel differently about the debate that’s continuing just now but neither was insulting – and it’s good to listen to people from a different persuasion.”

Participant, Edinburgh.

“Although we didn’t see eye-to-eye it was a nice discussion to have. It wasn’t someone who completely opposed my point of view but someone who just doesn’t see things in quite the same way necessarily. There wasn’t disagreement but it wasn’t completely eye-to-eye. There was definitely a common ground.”

Participant, Inverness.

“Even if people had strong minded views, they kept an open mind and that helped make it smooth. I was really surprised with the similarities everyone had whether you’re Yes or No, which was nice to hear. But it is also good to have the chance to be listened to too.”

Participant, East Kilbride and Coatbridge.

In particular, many felt that encouraging people to listen to each other fostered a better and more respectful level of political debate, which many noted was largely absent from political discourse in Scotland.

“This has been very educational. Previously I had negative connotations with politics – I feel like people are always arguing. But this has been very helpful, particularly hearing others and having people get where I am coming from.”

Participant, Stirling.

“This meeting has opened my eyes in terms of what normally happens in parliament with opposing sides. But it has also left me with a lot to think about as well because I’m not sure we as ordinary people are considered in these parliamentary debates... This has definitely opened my eyes to how differing sides can air their opinions and come to a consensus moving forwards.”

Participant, Inverness.

Noting how the tone of their discussion differed from typical political discourse in Scotland, a number of participants suggested politicians themselves should join similar discussions to Scotland in a Zoom.

Participants also hoped the concept of actively listening to your opponents could be exported and expanded to engage more voters across Scotland, with some participants pointing out their political engagement otherwise only took place in an emotionally disconnected online environment.

“It would be a very good idea to get Boris Johnson or Nicola Sturgeon to come into this chat. Maybe then they’d start doing their job in the correct way and understand what the people of this country want.”

Participant, Inverness.

“For all the talk of division, when you give people a framework to discuss the issues that concern them you get surprisingly thoughtful comments and views.”

Participant, Edinburgh.

“This was a very helpful forum, a very useful place to have this conversation. You can have these conversations online and they can turn quite hostile with faceless people behind a keyboard. So, it was nice to have a civil conversation between people with opposing views and reach an agreement.”

Participant, Inverness.



WHAT WE THINK ON THE CONSTITUTIONAL PROCESS

As our groups mostly agreed, a rush towards another referendum on independence is not supported – most Yes and No voters in our groups wanted the country to focus on recovery from the pandemic.

Nor did they want to go through another Brexit-type experience, with little public understanding of the facts.

At the same time, even ardent No voters agreed that the question of independence could not be buried or wished away, particular if pro-independence parties win a majority in the coming Scottish Parliamentary elections.



Our recommendations are therefore as follows:

- 1. We should keep talking about our constitution:** Whatever the result of the May 6th election, the issue of independence is not going to go away, and it is right and proper that our politics covers that debate. If the pro-independence parties fall short of a majority, pro-Union parties should not use this as a pretext to “close down” the debate. Equally, if they win a pro-independence majority, the SNP should examine inclusive and conversational ways for people to examine constitutional change.
- 2. But both sides need to be more patient:** The near unanimous view from all our participants was a belief that we should not rush into another referendum, and that we should pursue a process that strives for the maximum possible buy in from all sides. Many of our participants were scarred by the experience of a decade of constitutional conflict and do not want to see Scotland go through more, unnecessary division.
- 3. Our politics can’t be frozen until this is resolved – we need to make progress on what we agree on now:** Our participants were agreed on the key priorities we face: fixing the NHS, tackling climate change, giving young people hope for the future, providing better quality housing. Scotland is not divided on ends, but on means. Whether there is a referendum or not in the coming years, governments at all levels must respond to the public thirst for progress in what are deemed to be neglected areas of public policy.
- 4. We need the facts from both sides.** The shadow of Brexit loomed large for almost all our participants and both No and Yes voters were united in wanting to avoid a repeat. People were adamant that any further process of constitutional change must be based on agreed facts and impartial evidence. Both pro-Union and pro-independence sides must heed this message. The SNP’s plans for Citizens Assemblies ignore the issues on independence that people want to talk about – this needs to change.
- 5. Our governments should co-operate in everyone’s interests, not compete:** Most of our events took place during lockdown when people were looking to their governments to provide practical support to communities. This must continue. It is especially relevant for the UK Government which needs to do more in the eyes of our participants to build trust and respect.

SCOTLAND IN A ZOOM – WHAT PEOPLE ACROSS SCOTLAND SAY

The following summaries contain the location and date of the session, a summary of the general discussion, the agreed priorities and the agreed process, along with key quotes from participants.

These quotes are verbatim but have been anonymised in order to encourage a free-flowing and honest discussion among participants. The summaries close by highlighting the final reflections of participants.

ABERDEEN

DATE: 01/02/21

General Discussion

The event took place with Scotland still in lockdown. Group members felt there was “now light at the end of the tunnel” and that Scotland would come out of the crisis “stronger”. Asked about their hopes and fears, they mentioned jobs, employment, business and the future for young people.

- “I worry that it will be a real struggle for a lot of youngsters going forward.”
- “My fears are about children and what it will be like for them and their future.”
- “We want to come out of this stronger, but there’s a fear about how businesses are going to come out of this, and I think that’s shared between all business owners.”
- “Aberdeen used to be really multicultural, but now a lot of people have left, particularly those who aren’t from Aberdeen or Scotland.”
- “I worry about Aberdeen. We were beginning to recover after the oil shock and now Covid struck.”

Priorities

Groups were divided into three and asked to agree on their top three priorities.

Group 1: tackling climate change; investing in the economy; investing in education.

Group 2: NHS, particularly to keep it in public ownership; job security; tackling climate change.

Group 3: Investment in the NHS, with a particular focus on mental health; tackling climate change; investment in the economy and industry.

- “The economy and education were the ones that people kept mentioning. The NHS was spoken about a lot, but it was the economy and education that people mentioned the most.”
- “We found it easy to reach agreement. I started off suggesting a few things and found other people agreed with me.”

- “We all felt it was hard to pick just three. If we had been given four choices, then we would also have mentioned healthcare.”
- “We all spoke about what was most important to us. We all agreed that we didn’t want to see the NHS privatised in any way. That is a real concern for the future that that could happen.”
- “On job security, we are all concerned about our jobs and we want to see that prioritised by government. That would give us a brighter future.”
- “On the environment, Joe Biden is now taking a different line that Trump and that is a good thing. We need to protect the environment. North America is one of the big polluters of the world and we need to protect the environment as a whole, not just one region or one country.”
- “As a fourth priority, we agreed on education – it is high up on the priorities of us all; it is hard to pick three.”
- “All this money has appeared to get the country through the pandemic so the money is there and it now should be spent on the NHS to help it cope over the coming years. We have to build on the recognition that the NHS has got in the last year.”
- “This is about how people cope after the pandemic and that is about mental wellbeing as well.”
- “On climate change, nobody can ignore and there are lots of things we can do – here in Aberdeen, we have a great opportunity to be part of the effort. It can become a renewable energy centre and that should be at the front of everyone’s minds.”
- “The pandemic has helped with climate change. We’re using cars less, we’re walking more, we’re travelling on planes less. That is a great start, but we need to do more and make it work in the longer term.”
- “On the economy, it’s tied into climate change – and we are all under no illusion about what’s going to happen post-pandemic. We need to build back up industry in particular.”

Independence and the Union

Yes and No voters were paired off and asked to talk to each other about their views.

- “We both had different perspectives, but I felt both were valid.”
- “Discussing it made a difference to what I understood of the other point of view.”
- “They brought up something that I’d never really thought about before. They mentioned the impact on the Armed Forces which I hadn’t thought of, to be honest, even though I voted Yes last time.”
- “We had a really good chat. We agreed that there was not really much information out there. We felt that there was this massive cloud over Brexit and we would need more information about what happens after independence. We feel we still don’t have enough information and we didn’t feel that we had that clarity. We agreed that there are things for and against.”

- “I obviously choose independence, but I heard some valid points that I hadn’t thought of. It was interesting to hear somebody else’s point of view because you usually just stick to your own. There was a lot she said about why she didn’t want to leave that actually made sense to me.”
- “We had a difference of opinion and I completely understand that he was worried about opportunities. I am at the stage where I am expecting independence is going to happen so for me it’s about embracing it and let’s get on board.”
- “Nicola Sturgeon’s leadership and dictatorship and the shortcoming of the opposition in Scotland means that we can’t have a good debate about this in Scotland. So, for me it’s not just about what the SNP are doing it’s about what others are not doing. You just have to look at how Boris Johnson has handled the pandemic.”

Making a plan

Participants were divided into two groups of six, divided evenly between No and Yes, and were asked to come up with a plan for how to manage the independence issue.

Group 1

- “We had a discussion around who should vote and we felt everyone in Scotland should get the chance to vote. There are a lot of people who live and stay in Scotland who should definitely get to vote as well.”
- “We definitely thought it shouldn’t be a generation for another vote. We thought about having MPs do the vote instead of the vote, but it has to be the people really.”
- “As to timing, we felt five years from now should be sufficient. I’m a Yes voter, but I’m not 100% stuck to Yes now. No offence to Scottish people, but it can be a bit like Braveheart; people saying, ‘we’ll get our freedom’. But it’s about so much more than that.”
- “We need everything laid out so that people will know what will happen after the vote.”
- “We also discussed that we need more clarity and transparency than we are getting. When we get the information and clarity, we will find it easier to vote. Once we get past COVID, it could be that things will be clearer and things will get explained properly so everyone understands what way we are going to go.”

Group 2

- “We all felt that it has got to be talked about and we spoke about Boris Johnson being an embarrassment when he comes to Scotland.”
- The big thing that we are on edge about is the financial stability of being on our own. That was very much at the forefront. That needs to be talked about and if we don’t speak about it then we are in denial about something so important.”
- “We were all in agreement that the people of Scotland should decide on this, not Boris Johnson. We think that is making the difference greater – this is something that the Scottish people should decide, not be dictated by Boris Johnson. That’s just creating further division.”

- “We were all in agreement we should have a referendum but none of us wanted it in the next year. We wanted to see the pandemic out and take stock – it’s too soon to do it this year or next year. We didn’t want it next year however the May rests cold decide that.”
- “Basically, keep Boris out of the decision, and yes let’s have a referendum again but once the pandemic is sorted.”

Final reflections

- “It has brought a lot to my attention that I hadn’t thought about before. Discussing stuff that is in the background but has come forward. It’s opened my eyes to stuff I didn’t think about going for a vote before.”
- “I feel a lot more educated in our choices.”
- “Hopefully one thing that comes out of the pandemic is that we respect and appreciate people more. I don’t think it’s been intense or heated – we need to respect people and hopefully that’s a good thing that will come out of the pandemic. Respect and appreciating others are really significant.”
- “There would’ve been a time when you couldn’t have done this, getting Yes and No voters together and getting them to agree. That’s a really good thing and it’s good to see there’s progress being made in people taking an interest in their future, whether they’re for or against independence.”
- “I feel knowledge and information is power, and it’s good to have people sharing information and sharing facts. That makes me feel much better and we’ll be able to make a better decision next time whether it is Yes or No.”
- “I’ve noticed my fears are the same fears as other peoples. There’s no definite answers to these questions that I’m asking and it’s good to hear other people feel the same way.”
- “This has opened my mind to asking questions if I don’t know answers.”
- “It’s good to hear lots of conversations going on and respecting different points of view.”
- “I think it is really interesting to have had these conversations with both Yes and No. Everyone seems to have the same consensus that there isn’t enough information, whatever side they’re on. I don’t think anyone wants harm on the other side. That is a massive change from 2014 when you couldn’t sit in a room with someone who was Yes and someone who was No. There seems more unity now on both sides that actually the answers are a little grey and we all need more information and to try and listen and understand other people’s point of view.”
- “We all need better information to make a proper decision in the years to come.”
- “I wish politics when it’s discussed by MPs and MSPs was half as nice and productive as this.”

DATE: 25/02/21

General Discussion

The event took place with Scotland still in lockdown and the participants all expressed a common hope that the COVID-19 pandemic would soon pass. The group expressed surprise at the number of hopes and fears that were shared among participants.

- *"I was surprised by how much commonality there was between us, particularly in our hopes and fears."*

Priorities

Groups were divided into three and asked to agree on their top three priorities.

Group 1: Economic innovation, in particular on renewables, offshore wind, and the green revolution; Investment in young people; independence, with a focus on rejoining the EU.

Group 2: Recognising the value of public services; rejoining the EU; working collaboratively to ensure higher standards in public life.

Group 3: Investment in the economy, with a particular emphasis on job creation; investment in education; development of a proper trade policy, with an emphasis on building Scotland and the UK as an international hub for trade.

- *"Scotland should reflect friendly values; we need to be welcoming and show respect for peoples' beliefs."*
- *"We all felt it was important to work together to get us out this crap show. We need to try and help each other to try and get out of this. And we need politicians to be held accountable."*
- *"We felt education was most important – both getting a high standard but also helping with young peoples' mental health. We also agreed that independence shouldn't be a priority just now."*
- *"We are a nation of innovators and we've lost our way on that a little"*
- *"The youth are a bit disillusioned and we need to support them. We believe that keeping free education at University is very important."*
- *"We feel we have lost a lot of opportunities as a result of Brexit."*
- *"We'd like to see more job prospects for people and less infighting among politicians."*
- *"The constitutional question shouldn't be dominant."*
- *"We wanted to see more in the way of social equality and more focus on education coming out after the pandemic."*
- *"We also agreed that we should recognise that Scotland is a country that is very diverse, and very distinctive."*

Independence and the Union

Yes and No voters were paired off and asked to talk to each other about their views.

- *"Sometimes it can be pro-independence at any cost and it's nice to hear from both sides. It's really eye opening for me."*
- *"I feel a lot of the time with pro-independence supporters that it is all about independence and at any cost. But it was really nice to hear from someone who supported independence but was still open to all sides and wasn't about independence at any cost."*
- *"I hadn't realised quite what an emotional discussion this was. It revealed deep emotional connections I hadn't realised I had."*
- *"I forgot there are people who see other UK nations as their cousins. It seems there's a lot of people who value what other people think about us."*
- *"With Brexit and independence, it can often seem to come down to the financial implications. But speaking with my partner I realised that for a lot of people this is a really emotional issue. I thought the conversation had risen to another level."*

Making a plan

Participants were divided into two groups of six, divided evenly between No and Yes, and were asked to come up with a plan for how to manage the independence issue.

Group 1

- *"We felt a majority for the SNP, or a pro-independence majority would be a democratic mandate for a second referendum."*
- *"The neverendum and the language around a neverendum is a false narrative – political differences are a natural thing."*
- *"We were split between having a referendum as soon as possible and taking maybe four or five years to recover from the pandemic first before we start thinking about it."*
- *"If we do have a referendum, we need to stick to it. We need to be open to the fact people are Yes and No and that needs to be respected."*
- *"We all want to be proudly Scottish whether we are Yes or No."*
- *"My question would be that, if you don't want another referendum, are you happy with the status quo? The English government has proven to be a shambles on every single thing."*
- *"A lot of people in Scotland – particularly young people – only have experience of Westminster governments being Tory. But that's a pretty new phenomenon. I am not saying that before the Tories got in Westminster was perfect, but I do remember the absolute depths of depression that fell across Scotland when Thatcher got in and people saying that was the end. Since then, there's been a steady erosion of how Scotland is seen and perceived. But I want to remain and I want that to be fixed – and I worry that people who haven't seen how it*

was before just want independence because they don't know what it's like to have Scotland respected."

- "Scotland has tremendous talent and character and that needs to be properly represented in Westminster."

Group 2

- "We all agreed that whether you support remaining in the UK or leaving, you have to be open to the fact there is another opinion out there and that other people won't necessarily agree with you. No matter what comes in the next referendum, we need to push Scotland forward and agree that whatever the outcome is we need to be proudly Scottish and make the most of it."
- "We agreed independence is a big issue in Scotland and that we can't ignore it, so we need a referendum or something to move on."
- "Some of us wanted a referendum right now, but others wanted one in the next five to ten years."
- "Whatever is agreed on has to be a democratic decision – we had a democratic decision five years ago, but the pro-independence people put it to me that we'd had a lot of change in the last five years, which is also true. But we can't keep having them every five years."
- "We need to include every Scottish person in this decision."
- "People are less scared."
- "Younger people now have greater access to technology and can go and research things on their own."
- "We need to start feeling good about being Scottish. It's not about feeling sorry for Unionists – that's boring as well. We need to think about how we can make the best and do the best for Scotland – and that includes every person that lives in Scotland."
- "Maybe ten years ago there could have been reform within the UK. Something like a federal UK might have satisfied Scotland. But it doesn't seem that enough of England is interested now and I think that ship has sailed now. I don't see any real opportunity to reform Westminster."

Final reflections

- "While there was a difference of opinion, everyone wanted to make Scotland a better country for people living in it. I'm proudly Scottish and whether you're on either side of the camp we all need to work together to make Scotland the best it can be."
- "I liked hearing different opinions and the different priorities everyone had."
- "I have my anxieties and I liked having the opportunity to air them with people who listen."
- "I was surprised by the appetite for change but agree it's important to respect everyone's point of view."
- "It is refreshing to hear different opinions."

- "People in Scotland can be really negative about Scotland and it is good to hear people saying positive things about it."
- "It made me really miss going to the pub. These are the kind of conversations I normally enjoy having over a pint."
- "Speaking to Unionists I realise there's still an emotional case for the union among a lot of people."

EDINBURGH

DATE: 04/03/21

General Discussion

The event took place virtually with Scotland still in lockdown. The group shared a common hope that the COVID-19 pandemic would pass and that life would return to a pre-pandemic normality soon. A number noted as part of the general discussion how they appreciated the opportunity to be listened to, as well as their surprise at how much they had in common with people they had only just met.

- "It was like you're meeting a new friend in the street for the very first time."
- "We mostly shared the same concerns – it is as worrying time."
- "The pandemic is a concern, but also the mess they have made of Brexit. It is troubling to be leaving something at a time like this."
- "We both immediately agreed we just want the pubs to reopen."

Priorities

Groups were divided into three and asked to agree on their top three priorities.

Group 1: Tackling sectarianism; addressing pollution and climate change; ending poverty, particularly food poverty.

Group 2: Greater cooperation between the Scottish and UK governments; investing in the NHS and social care; tackling climate change.

Group 3: Investing in education; investing in the NHS; ensuring the taxation system is fair, particularly in relation to larger/offshore corporations.

- "A few of our group have kids and another is a teacher, so we all agreed that education was really important going forwards."
- "We all wanted to speak about the same things and so it wasn't too difficult to reach an agreement. We have all spoken about climate change, investing in social services and education. Each group has mentioned similar goals so for me it was somewhat easy to talk and share my vision."
- "As I was hearing what the other groups were prioritising, I found myself agreeing with that as well. So, it is quite easy to prioritise, and I think we all seem to agree on what

would work for the best for the country. The difficult thing is narrowing it down into three priorities.”

- “Listening to the priorities of others made it simple to come to an agreement. We all had a common goal of what we want Scotland to look like.”
- “We all seemed to have a pretty shared vision.”
- “I found myself agreeing with others. We all share these common goals and there’s a general sense of being positive.”

Independence and the Union

Yes and No voters were paired off and asked to talk to each other about their views.

- “I didn’t realise we were on opposite sides [of the independence debate]. It was a very civilised conflict.”
- “I was surprised that we generally want the same things but have different views [on independence].”
- “I thought it was interesting that our opinions have both changed in opposite directions based on the same facts. It was a very amicable discussion.”
- “We both agreed that in 2014 you were either on one side or the other and that that does cause conflict.”
- “I would have to be utterly sure of something to make a decision, so it was interesting to speak to someone who was unsure about an outcome, but still very much for it. It was new to want an outcome but be uncertain about aspects of it.”
- “I am hopeful about Scottish independence, but we both agreed that there was an awful lot of division in the first referendum as you’re either on one side or the other. That does cause conflict, but I was trying to impress upon her that no one has voted for the Tories, but we’re still run by Boris Johnson and his cronies.”
- “I feel we’re just on different spectrums. I have my views and I would have to be pretty sold on something that is going to cost so much and that we’ve already discussed. There is very little chance it would lead to us coming together – it would divide us further. We have spoken about coming together tonight and I don’t see how another referendum would achieve that.”
- “Empathy, absolutely. This is really a nice way to discuss things – it’s just people talking. You watch so many debates where people are shouting at each other and trying to win one over. This is just listening.”

Making a plan

Participants were divided into two groups of six, divided evenly between No and Yes, and were asked to share their thoughts on how to manage the independence issue.

Group 1

- “The consensus was we need to pay attention to independence because we don’t this question carrying on. Otherwise, every major decision – whether it is made by the Scottish or Westminster government – is going to be underpinned by the question of whether this should be done.

- “The population is generally split and there’s a question of leadership. If we did end up with an independent nation, who is going to lead us? We don’t know who our leader might be and if they would have the same abilities as Nicola Sturgeon. And that would go the same way for the leadership of the UK as a whole as well.”
- “This is about democracy and that’s how it should be resolved. It has to be a democratic process we go through and it has to be about the will of the people.”
- “We don’t want this rumbling on in the background, otherwise every political division is based on this dynamic.”
- “We need consenting parties. It is definitely the case that the losing party didn’t accept the result as gracefully and as quietly as they could have the last time. If we do go ahead just now, we need it to be put to bed this time. We need the consent of all parties, either way.”
- “There’s a perception that if it doesn’t go for independence again there might be calls for a third referendum and the question would never be answered.”
- “This isn’t just something that’s going in parliament, it’s going on in the minds of the people as well. We can’t let it fester – it needs to be a medium-term thing – but it needs to be done for the good of the nation.”
- “You need to wait at least three to five years to get answers to key questions. We particularly need clarity not just on the pandemic but where we will be financially, especially given that everything has gone on.”

Group 2

- “We were agreed it shouldn’t happen immediately. There are too many things we need to get sorted at the moment to do it now. Some people said two to three years and others said five to 10.”
- “If we wait, could Scotland be given more power or a stronger voice in Westminster. It seems there is a lack of respect for the Scottish government in Westminster at the moment.”
- “It is hard to make a decision now because there hasn’t been a laying down of facts. It is not clear what independence would look like and I think there was a desire for more facts before we make a decision. The experience of Brexit has tarnished people’s perception of how decisions are made. Going into a second independence referendum we need these questions answered a lot more clearly. We need to pin it down and delve into things more.”
- “Luckily, we didn’t get independence, even though I did want it. But in a way I’m glad that we didn’t because now we want to know now what we’re going to have deal with. I want to see the deals that will have to be made before we make that agreement [to go ahead with independence] and I think that is something the majority of the UK population wishes they’d known before they’d decided on Brexit.”
- “For me [Brexit has] been probably the biggest single factor because it shows how divisive and uncertain a referendum can be, and how much negativity it can stir up. I think also that we’re still living with the fallout of Brexit, so why should we force another crisis of faith and crisis of democracy on the UK when we’re already dealing with the consequences of one? I think that would be very short sighted.”

- “I think we were really lucky in seeing Brexit going through. They [Leave campaigners] won... but we didn’t the first time round with independence. But now we are seeing what could have been. With Brexit the people that wanted to leave the EU were faced with the consequences of all these deals that had to be made, but we now see that we’re going to have to go through that if we go through with independence.”
- “I think everyone needs more clarity; I think that is the thing going forward for any referendum. You have to have more clarity of what is ahead, what deals are getting made – not retrospectively like what has happened with Brexit. I think that’s given a lot of people in Scotland pause for thought in the way they would vote now.”
- “Brexit showed how divisive referendums can be and we’re still dealing with the consequences of that.”

Final reflections

- “For all the talk of division, when you give people a framework to discuss the issues that concern them you get surprisingly thoughtful comments and views.”
- “It was surprising to hear people that are very in favour of Scottish independence recognising that it’s not the best idea to do it now and that we should wait. I think that shows a foresight and self-reflection that is reassuring.”
- “We need to get over this state of uncertainty and not knowing what’s going on. If we’re going to unite as a nation, we need to move on from this.”
- “This has made me realise how fickle I am, not that I was set in stone. But we’re being undermined by the uncertainty of not knowing what is going to happen. A generation is 25 years and it should happen within that time – but I’d like it to happen sooner to end the uncertainty, as long as it was done sympathetically.”
- “We’re in the early stages of Brexit and plus we’ve got the pandemic, so it would be stupid to have it immediately.”
- “If Brexit hadn’t gone ahead, how quickly would we be looking at this again? I wanted independence but now I am not sure given what I’ve seen with Brexit. It would make me very hesitant.”
- “It has been really interesting to hear what others have to say.”
- “It’s great to be able to chat with people about these issues and not have people get angry.”
- “This was a split group between people who voted Yes and No and there is clearly an appetite for the discussion on independence still to be had.”
- “A lot of people have been disturbed by Brexit and the disinformation of the campaign. I think there was a general consensus that we need more information.”

STIRLING

DATE: 11/03/21

General Discussion

The event took place with Scotland still in lockdown.

- “Our shared concern was for our children in terms of what’s in store for them, not just in relation to the pandemic but other things as well in the next 10 years.”
- “It was great to recognise that other people have their own views and opinions and that’s alright.”

Priorities

Groups were divided into three and asked to agree on their top three priorities.

Group 1: Investment in the NHS; investment in local government; investment in education.

Group 2: Investment in education; investment in social services, particularly mental health; employment, particularly job creation.

Group 3: Investment in education; health and wellbeing, particularly mental health and the recovery from COVID-19; tackling climate change.

- “You see pictures of people queuing up for soup and a roll in Glasgow and if it wasn’t for the Saltire in the background, you would think it was Soviet Russia.”
- “We agreed that we wanted to live in a fair Scotland, particularly in relation to education. Education isn’t great at the moment and we want to make sure that everyone is getting the most out of it.”
- “The fallout from COVID-19 in terms of mental health will be huge and that should definitely be prioritised.”
- “We need to save our country for the future. We have a beautiful country and it is important that we protect that.”

Independence and the Union

Yes and No voters were paired off and asked to talk to each other about their views.

- “I am very sceptical about independence, but we were both hopeful about the future.”
- “It is always interesting hearing other people’s opinions and, if you think back to 2014, the country is split down the middle so it’s important to listen to that other side.”
- “Of course, I would have levels of anxiety myself – an independent Scotland would need to increase taxes and that would impact my bottom line. So, there’s definitely reasons to be sceptical and I think the older you get there’s probably more reasons to be sceptical when you start looking at your pension and things like that.”
- “My partner was excited about independence and was excited to push Scotland in a new direction. I am a lot more sceptical, because there are big questions that need answered and weren’t answered in the last referendum.”

- “It feels like after devolution, independence is a natural step.”
- “The last time around it really divided people; friends, people arguing in pubs. It shouldn’t be like that. It should be people sitting around having a general chat rather than being about who is right and who is wrong. If we do go independent, I don’t want to be sitting there saying ‘I told you so’, we need to get it right before.”
- “I don’t think we can depend purely on oil to be independent.”
- “I definitely understand the pension point and took that opinion on board, but there’s no reason why we shouldn’t be as successful or more successful than other small European countries.”
- “We felt there would be a mixture of happiness and nervousness whichever way a vote went. The words happiness and excited came out if there was a vote for independence, whereas it would make me feel anxious.”
- “I do see some of the benefits of independence, but ultimately I just think there’s an awful lot of unanswered questions.”
- “We would have higher spending and lower tax in the UK, but the other guys were all about independence and would be happy with the outcomes from that.”
- “I feel like I get all my political education from my parents and it’s been very interesting to hear other points of view, but I don’t know what independence would be like. So, I am kind of in the middle at the moment.”
- “I think we got some facts in 2014 but the media spun a lot of it. There were a lot of lies so you had to go to lots of media outlets to get a whole view.”
- “For every person on one side saying here is a fact, there will be someone on the other side to counter that fact. There will be someone that will argue and tell you a different story. If we could find a difference between fact and fiction that would be very helpful.”
- “If we had someone independently giving you the data that would work. I would trust the Money Saving Expert guy.”
- “We need to get COVID back in place, we need to help the poor and get Scotland back to where it was pre-pandemic before we have it. We need to get Scotland back and that recovery has to take priority.”
- “I don’t think it’s a bad thing if it’s not over and done within a year or two years. I think that will work to the SNP’s advantage because of the youth vote.”
- “The SNP has been in power in some shape or form for 14 years, either as a minority government or a majority in 2011. If the SNP do return as the Scottish government on May 6 by the time of the next election, they’ll have been in power for almost two decades. It does seem like we’ll then get to a point where naturally support for the SNP will just start to dwindle because they have been in power for so long.”
- “We can’t bank on Scotland being in the same place electorally in five years’ time.”
- “The onus is on the opposition parties in Scotland to find themselves good credible leaders to offer opposition to the SNP. Unchecked government in Scotland is not a good thing right now.”
- “Sturgeon – like her or loathe her – she’s a great leader, a great debater and she comes across very well in Scotland and across the UK. There’s a lack of credible leaders in the opposition parties.”

Making a plan

Participants were divided into two groups of six, divided evenly between No and Yes, and were asked to come up with a plan for how to manage the independence issue.

Group 1

- “We were a mix of pro-independence and anti-independence supporters, but there was a general consensus that should the SNP win a majority at the Scottish elections it means that independence is inevitably going to be an issue in the next five years, never mind the next 10 years.”
- “If there’s legislation for another referendum and it passes, there’s no getting away from another referendum.”
- “At the end of the day, the fairest process is to listen to the vote of the Scottish people. It would be untenable if the Scottish people return a majority of SNP MSPs and 50 of 59 MPs who all believe in independence [to say no to another referendum] – that’s not a credible position.”
- “We agreed that it should have the approval and the nod of the UK Government – there’s no point having a referendum if it’s not going to be legally binding.”
- “It should be in the lifetime of the next parliament if that’s what the people vote for on May 6. It should be between then and the election in 2026.”
- “We were all in agreement that an SNP victory provides a mandate for another referendum and that is inevitable. But we thought it was more inevitable rather than anything else.”

Group 2

- “The group was quite clear we need to pay attention to independence, whether you’re pro or not.”
- “If the SNP are in power in May, the No voters agreed independence is something we need to look at.”
- “This process is never going to be fair just because of the split of the country. But there’s a general consensus that we need to look at that.”
- “Some people said in the next five years – some in two years’ time – but we were talking about the situation with COVID and how we’re going to come out of it. To do independence now just seems a bit too soon. Actually, we need to focus in on something else at this time and then look at it.”
- “It is important that independence is paid attention to just as it is important that pro-UK sides have attention paid to them as well.”

- “How can you make the process fair? The country is pretty much at an even split and therefore it can’t be fair for one side and fair for the other side.”
- “We need COVID to be done and get a bit of normality back.”
- “If we wait three or four-years people’s views on Brexit might change. It gives people more time to get over this initial Brexit period and figure out how it is looking and whether we want to go back in or not.”
- “It is hard to think of a fair way to do it. There’s always going to be someone against it. Everyone has their own opinions and not everyone is going to be happy. It is very, very hard.”

Final reflections

- “In British politics at the moment everyone is told to dig a trench and pick a side and I think that part of the problem in 2014 was that if you were a No supporter and Salmond was on the telly you switched over and if you were a Yes supporter and Ruth Davidson was on it you switched over. So actually no one listened to the other side and it’s dead easy as a Yes supporter to ignore the concerns of people who vote No and if you’re a No supporter it is dead easy to ignore the ambitions of people that vote Yes. It’s a useful lesson that our political leaders could take something from.”
- “I voted No the last time and this has swayed me to a possible – in the middle – [for independence]. But hearing other opinions has made me more hopeful about it. It’s taught me a lot.”
- “I didn’t know much coming into this but this whole session has been more like people listening than having an argument. That’s a lot more enjoyable.”
- “When I first saw it was two hours long, I was worried, but it’s passed in a flash. It’s great to hear other people’s opinions.”
- “It’s been great to think about the future. We’ve been stuck thinking month by month with COVID but seeing different faces and speaking to different people has been really, really nice.”
- “Just before COVID you used to go to the pub and people would talk about football but now it is all politics. Everybody goes on about politics and COVID – it is mad hearing everyone’s opinion and I’ll always be a Yes man but it’s great to hear other’s thoughts.”
- “It’s great to have your views valued by other people – that’s really constructive. When it comes to having a politics discussion it is very easy to put your guard up but with a group of strangers it counts and it’s easy to let your guard down and take in what other people are saying.”
- “I agree with a lot of the SNP’s policies, but I’ll still vote No. I feel that’s very much a generational thing – I’m thinking of my pension and retirement.”
- “This has been very educational. Previously I had negative connotations with politics – I feel like people are always arguing. But this has been very helpful, particularly hearing others and having people get where I am coming from.”

EDINBURGH

DATE: 18/03/21

General Discussion

The event took place virtually with Scotland still in lockdown. The group shared a common hope that the COVID-19 pandemic would pass and that life would return to a pre-pandemic normality soon. Others mentioned concern that, with devolved elections coming in May, the question of independence was distracting from other policy concerns.

- “I’m sure everyone is the same. We just want the pandemic to be over with and life to get back to normal.”
- “There’s an awful lot happening in Scotland, but everything seems to return to the agenda of independence. Whether or not you are pro or anti-independence, there’s a lot of other things to talk about as well.”

Priorities

Groups were divided into three and asked to agree on their top three priorities.

Group 1: Affordable housing; investing in the NHS; revitalisation of the High St.

Group 2: Education, with a particular focus on STEM; affordable housing; investment in health care, with a particular emphasis on care homes after the pandemic.

Group 3: Strengthening of the welfare state; a closer relationship with the EU; climate change, with an emphasis on creating high-skilled, ‘green’ jobs.

- “We are all from different backgrounds and political persuasions – particularly in relation to independence or not independence. But what surprised me was the commonality of the discussion that we had.”
- “Independent of where you were coming from [politically], most people were coming down the same road.”
- “We used the phrase ‘a Scottish Green New Deal’ and I think that was something that everyone agreed with.”
- “One of the things that surprised me was actually the amount of agreement as we went through the conversation. There was nobody who jumped up and said, ‘oh no, that’s not the way we should be going’. Everyone was looking at the same concepts of society, economy and environment.”
- “You walk along Princes Street today and see the number of shops shuttered up – that’s sad to see. Money will have to be pumped in to protect Scotland’s capital.”
- “We need something to kick start the economy, particularly given everything that has just gone on [COVID-19].”
- “Care home workers have been through a lot in the pandemic and deserve our support.”
- “It shocked me the amount of agreement given we have such different backgrounds and political philosophies.”

Independence and the Union

Yes and No voters were paired off and asked to talk to each other about their views.

- “I firmly believe in independence, but one thing we certainly agreed on is how divisive the issue is, how painful negotiations will be. You’ve seen how painful the negotiations were with Brexit and it will be painful process, even though I firmly believe it’s going to happen. There will be a lot of anger and abuse – there was fighting in Glasgow after the last vote – and it’s an incredibly divisive issue. It won’t be an easy ride, no matter what the result is.”
- “Even though we’re coming from different points of view, we both agree in terms of Westminster’s governance and that the parties in power over the last 10 years have done a terrible job.”
- “These things can be made even more divisive when there’s a sense that they’re being rushed through or that it’s point scoring in some way – and we agreed that if it is to happen soon it will be divisive and painful, just like Brexit.”
- “The prospect of independence absolutely terrifies me to the point that we’ve actually talked about leaving the country if it happens.”
- “We had different views, but the common theme was that Scotland isn’t ready and there’s no means of doing it fairly.”
- “We’re both pretty emotional and I was talking a lot with my heart, rather than my head, but [my partner has] clearly looked into the issues and done a lot of research.”
- “It’s good to listen. Obviously, we voted differently in terms of independence and we feel differently about the debate that’s continuing just now but neither was insulting – and it’s good to listen to people from a different persuasion.”
- “I can understand why she wants to move on from the whole question of independence and doesn’t believe that Scotland could manage on its own.”
- “I believe [a referendum] should be once in a lifetime but [she] argued that because things have changed it shouldn’t be once in a lifetime.”
- “It was really interesting to listen to someone else’s point of view. Even though we have different views we were along the same lines eventually about how things should maybe go.”
- “It is quite difficult when you’re really listening to someone and you’re trying to feedback all the points that they’ve said and that gave me a great insight into their thoughts on it as well.”
- “It was really interesting to hear another point of view and her reasons, some of which I understand entirely – they are perfectly rational and understandable. There were other things that we agreed on but from a different perspective, but I could still understand the sentiment of it.”
- “It’s getting to a point where it almost seems like independence is going to happen in the next 10 years.”
- “For me it is about being realistic and not all the propaganda about how great it’s going to be. She knows it’s going to be a

struggle but wants to confront that.”

Making a plan

Participants were divided into two groups of six, divided evenly between No and Yes, and were asked to share their thoughts on how to manage the independence issue.

Group 1

- “The next election is maybe a method to see if another referendum should take place. If the SNP win a majority that provides the mandate for another referendum.”
- “We were split in terms of some people wanting to vote for the SNP but not necessarily in favour of independence. They just wanted to vote for them because they feel they have done a good job over the last few years, not necessarily to give them a mandate for independence.”
- “We felt there hasn’t been as much devolution as there should have been from where we were after the vote in 2014. There was a sense of are we ever going to see more devolved powers in Scotland’s politics that allows the country to decide its own fate on some aspects.”
- “There was a consensus that there hasn’t been enough devolution and that is something more we would like to see.”
- “Some people would like to see a referendum now and asked what’s the problem with having multiple referenda on things if that’s the will of the people and they want to express their opinions on it. But others of us were of the mind that there’s a lot that’s happened recently and therefore is it a good time to have something that’s going to split and divide at this time?”
- “We couldn’t come to a consensus, but we talked about instead of going down a blanket Yes-No referendum, there has to be an evolution into that position and maybe a soft-start approach that allows more conversation to occur. So, it would be a 10-year plan where there is an independence referendum at the end so we can see if politicians in Scotland can run the devolved powers in the way that we all hope.”
- “The bone of contention for me is that we are having to go through an election and get a majority, but that still might not be deemed enough. That is a democratic event and how many times do we have to keep voting for a particular party and things just keep going back to square one. We are supposed to be in a union through consent and it seems that when we vote one way it just gets ignored.”

Group 2

- “Those that were pro-independence were saying we should have another referendum in about five years. Whereas others were more in the 100-year time frame because it was a once in a generation vote. But the people who are Yes were thinking between next summer and five years.”
- “I find it impossible to put a timeframe on it. I would need to really see a strong vote in favour of independence coming out at the Holyrood election.”
- “If we keep talking about independence, no other policy areas

get discussed at the election and that terrifies me.”

- “I definitely agree that this year is too soon for an independence referendum, which is what the SNP is suggesting, which is why I suggested summer next year. But the other pro-independence people were even longer than that – three, four, five years.”
- “We’ve got a beautiful country and a great country and I wish we could just stop going on about independence. We’ve gone through a horrific year – there’s going to be so much to sort out – that we really should be focusing and concentrating on sorting that out.”
- “My real concern is watching the world get further and further apart. I think Brexit was a terrible idea – if you want to change a system you have to be part of it. But we’re in a similar situation now with the UK. People in Scotland say, ‘we don’t vote this way, we don’t vote that way’, which is fair enough, but if you then only vote for the SNP because of its stance on independence, you are ignoring other policies. There’s no accountability for things that have gone wrong in Scotland. There’s a lot that we need to hold our politicians to account for.”
- “The SNP often seems the best of a bad bunch because none of our politicians are accountable. If there’s no other party people feel they can vote for then that is really troubling because people feel let down and we’ve got to a point where it is a one-party thing and they are allowed to say this is the issue we’re focusing on [independence]. I feel really let down because in the last 14 years we could have been somewhere better – and that’s a let down from both Westminster and the Scottish government and I’m really angry about that. But I feel a referendum and splitting people – we’ve seen it with Brexit and other things – is just a terrible idea at the moment.”
- “I don’t think independence is the only conversation. The other policies are still there and I don’t think it’s a detraction from them. It’s not a distraction from the running of Scotland.”
- “I’m going into it with my eyes open. If there is a Yes vote, it will be just as bad as Brexit – there’s some things you can do to mitigate them but not very many. But the central point is that I feel the Conservative government has put more obstacles in the way to Scotland becoming a better country. The SNP has made a lot of wrong decisions, but I feel there’s more gone wrong because of the Conservatives. In comparison to that independence would be less problematic.”
- “We had a vote on Brexit, we didn’t know what it meant, and we had a vote on independence, and we didn’t know what it meant. I would like to have a vote where we do know what it means. If we do have to have a referendum, let’s have economic policies, social policies, laid out from both sides rather than just a concept or a wish.”
- “As a Yes voter, I accept we’re interlinked and it’s a point that is often missed that this needs to work for both sides.”

Final reflections

- “Maybe if Westminster had a more credible opposition to end the constant tenure of Conservative cronyism that would make a difference.”

- “Getting the opportunity to speak to others helped me to understand their point of view and in another time or maybe another era I might have agreed with them.”
- “It was really interesting to hear other people’s opinions and it’s great to see so much informed debate. I still want us to be independent, but it’s come to light tonight that it’s not fair that people only have the SNP to credibly vote for but maybe don’t support independence.”
- “We’re still in a pandemic and the last thing we should be talking about is independence.”

INVERNESS

DATE: 01/04/21

General Discussion

The event took place with Scotland still in lockdown and the COVID-19 pandemic dominated the group’s hopes and fears for the future. There was a shared concern both about how the pandemic is likely to have impacted young people – particularly their education – and the likelihood of a post-pandemic economic recovery.

- “We are both on the same page and it was good to hear other people’s impressions.”
- “There were a lot of commonalities in our hopes and fears for the future.”
- “We had a lot of common about what’s going to happen in the future and the harm that has been done because of lockdown. The next few years will be a bit of a struggle – we agreed on that.”

Priorities

Groups were divided into three and asked to agree on their top three priorities.

Group 1: Investment in the NHS, particularly to tackle waiting lists for elective surgeries; investment in education; economic recovery.

Group 2: Investment in education, particularly to pandemic-proof schools to ensure classroom time is not lost again; economic recovery, with an emphasis on fairness; ensuring access to sports, arts and culture for young people.

Group 3: Investment in healthcare; economic recovery, with a particular focus on tackling unemployment and poverty; greater devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament.

- “I thought I was going to be arguing with people tonight, but everyone so far has been on the same page. I’ve got all my facts and figures written down here waiting for it, but everyone seems to want to move in the same direction. Everyone wants to help the lost generation - the younger people - improve the equality and invest in the NHS.”
- “I thought everyone would be very pro-independence and anti-Westminster and anti-England but I’m shocked that so far everyone is moving in the same direction – it doesn’t matter whether you are pro-Scottish independence or pro-UK. Everyone still wants to invest in education and the NHS.”

- “We asked everyone in the group for their three priorities and everyone was pretty much the same. Maybe there was a shift in one or two, but we were all of the same view at least on what the top one or two priorities should be.”
- “We were all like-minded and just bounced ideas off each other.”
- “It was an easy chat.”
- “I thought we were all coming from the same page. We were slightly different but at the end of the day we all want basically the same thing.”
- “I was surprised we agreed because we’re all different people, we all have different job roles and family lives, and overall, each person thinks ‘what do I want for me and my family’, but then I think we all get to the same point.”
- “We all agreed straight away and 100% that education needs to be looked at.”
- “We need an action plan for future pandemics, so we don’t repeat ourselves in how we dealt with this.”
- “Yes, the government has spent a lot of money, but we can’t put tax up so much that people can’t afford to live. We can’t hurt people on low incomes – it’s about fairness.”
- “We need to be considerate of other people’s needs, not just in a healthcare perspective, but for everyone to have a fair share.”

Independence and the Union

Yes and No voters were paired off and asked to talk to each other about their views.

- “I think with us having opposing views it was a really respectful conversation, which was really positive. I respected his views, he respected mine, and we both perhaps thought about things we hadn’t previously as well. It was a really good conversation and I think moving forward – if there is going to be another independence vote – it would be quite good to have this across the board. So, people can exercise and share their views in a more respectful way than perhaps what we had last time in 2014.”
- “Although we didn’t see eye-to-eye it was a nice discussion to have. It wasn’t someone who completely opposed my point of view but someone who just doesn’t see things in quite the same way necessarily. There wasn’t disagreement but it wasn’t completely eye-to-eye. There was definitely a common ground.”
- “He agrees that he would like one thing and I agree that I would like another, but at the same time there were a lot of things in between that we agreed on. In a lot of cases, we wanted the same thing, but I still want to be part of the UK because I believe we can’t survive on our own financially. If we had more powers, which we were promised last time, we would probably be better placed.”
- “We both agreed Nicola Sturgeon was much better in handling the pandemic than Boris Johnson, particularly in explaining the various lockdowns and things.”
- “We both shared a concern about how Scotland was going

to develop its economy sustainably, particularly given the oil sector is offering zilch at the moment. We also both agreed we wanted people in Scotland to be able to take more decisions themselves.”

- “We shared our own opinions, but we came together and decided a collected view.”
- “We just talked about the support we would get if we stayed in the UK versus were independent. That is a big worry. In the last vote there was a big reliance on oil but that’s dried up.”
- “We disagreed in our stance, but there were some things we agreed on. I understood his point of view.”

Making a plan

Participants were divided into two groups of six, divided evenly between No and Yes, and were asked to come up with a plan for how to manage the independence issue.

Group 1

- “We were all in agreement that another referendum shouldn’t happen for five years. I put down the proposal that if it doesn’t happen in the next five years it should be a longer timescale and the consensus was that if we do have one in five years and it’s a No, we should wait another 25 years at least.”
- “We need to educate people and speak out, letting everyone have their say. We need to find out why there is division before we go into another referendum.”
- “There’s an issue about information. The younger generation aren’t interested in leaflets, but the older generation are still very analogue.”
- “It was interesting, given we’re all different ages, because I’m young and focused on the digital, but others pointed out older people don’t do that. So, we need to balance it out and still use the analogue for those who use it.”
- “Education is definitely key moving forwards. We need to give people the resources – digital and analogue – to make a decision. People need the ability and resources to make an informed decision.”
- “If you look at the EU referendum, it is about factual information about what is going to happen and politicians being clear and concise and telling the truth. A lot of them haven’t told the truth over the years.”
- “We’re all like-minded even though we have different opinions. I wasn’t surprised we were able to come to an agreement.”
- “I found we were more geared towards the when and how but didn’t focus as much on the division.”
- “I threw out a thing saying it should be 100 years before we have another referendum, but that brought everyone into a 25-year timeframe.”

Group 2

- “We all agreed on five to ten years for another referendum. I said it should never happen ever, but we were able to agree on five to ten years.”

- “We want to use technology to make sure that everyone is involved in the decision, such as an app, like track and trace. You need to make sure there’s still other resources to help older people who perhaps aren’t used to that.”
- “We were all pretty much on the same page. We all came to an agreement on five to ten years. I said towards the end of this coming parliamentary term, but the general consensus was five to ten years, so the next parliamentary term after that. It was a good conversation with people with opposing views – it felt like a safe space, so to speak.”
- “It was interesting that the things we were saying were pretty much the same. There was definitely a consensus that technology can help everyone participate and get the information and the facts. I know politicians aren’t going to tell the truth but that would make it easier too.”
- “A lot of us were on the same wavelength.”
- “We need truth from government and the parties – it’ll never be done, but it is what should be done.”

Final reflections

- “This has made it clear to me that we all have the same goal whether we support independence or not. We all want a healthy, sustainable and happy Scotland, whether we’re part of the UK or not. So, it’s made me see that the end goal as Scottish citizens is the same whether we support independence or not.”
- “I knew that everyone had a different opinion and it is nice to hear them. Most of us are looking for the same thing – a better Scotland – so I think a lot of us were going from the same page. I expected a bit of division and a ‘agree to disagree’ but we didn’t have that so much.”
- “We just want the best and it is how we go about that that is the difference. Politicians offer you the world but who knows if it will ever happen.”
- “I was surprised that people with completely opposing views could agree on a lot of the same points. There was a consensus that we should wait a while to have a referendum. I just enjoyed listening to what everyone had to say and to speak to people about independence, whether it is for or against.”
- “This was a very helpful forum, a very useful place to have this conversation. You can have these conversations online and they can turn quite hostile with faceless people behind a keyboard. So, it was nice to have a civil conversation between people with opposing views and reach an agreement.”
- “I was surprised that 100% of the group wanted to prioritise getting out of the pandemic completely rather than independence. That for me is very encouraging as we need to get the economy back on the level.”
- “It would be a very good idea to get Boris Johnson or Nicola Sturgeon to come into this chat. Maybe then they’d start doing their job in the correct way and understand what the people of this country want.”

- “This has really given me an opportunity to start thinking about the election coming up next month. I don’t normally start thinking about politics until the election. But we’ve all managed this in a very respectful way.”
- “This meeting has opened my eyes in terms of what normally happens in parliament with opposing sides. But it has also left me with a lot to think about as well because I’m not sure we as ordinary people are considered in these parliamentary debates. How can citizens contribute to the debates at parliamentary level? This has definitely opened my eyes to how differing sides can air their opinions and come to a consensus moving forwards.”
- “I was surprised at how well we’ve all got on, particularly given how it can normally go when you talk about politics. I guess when it’s face to face it’s not so easy to be quite so abrupt with people. It has been very worthwhile.”
- “There’s definitely a provision for this type of debates and to have a politician in with you as well would be even better. We were polite and courteous.”

EAST KILBRIDGE AND COATBRIDGE

DATE: 06/04/21

General Discussion

The event took place with Scotland still in lockdown. All participants expressed surprise at how much their hopes for Scotland were shared by others in the group. In particular, people of different ages remarked on how much their aims aligned, with a desire for an end to the COVID-19 pandemic and a return to normality.

- “I was surprised that we shared many of the same views given we’re different ages.”
- “We had pretty much the same thoughts, so it was good to have a back and forward when you’re on the same page.”
- “It is easier talking to a stranger about these things than it often is a lot of your friends.”

Priorities

Groups were divided into three and asked to agree on their top three priorities.

Group 1: Rebuild the economy, with an emphasis on job creation; refocusing the health service, particularly so it can pivot back to addressing routine surgery post-pandemic; investment in education, with an emphasis on supporting teachers and other staff.

Group 2: Scottish independence, particularly so an independent Scotland can rejoin the EU; investment in the NHS, particularly given its contribution to fighting the pandemic; tackle sectarianism.

Group 3: Investment in health care, with an emphasis on mental health support; tackling youth unemployment; investment in local and community services.

- “We approached things from different angles – for instance, some people were talking about mental health in relation to investing in the NHS, others were talking about care for the elderly – but we all agreed on the same broad areas.”
- “As soon as he said the three things he wanted to prioritise, I knew that is what I had already noted down as well.”
- “I feel with the SNP the whole independence question is becoming a lot more closely related to football and the whole Rangers-Celtic divide. There is more division and more hatred.”
- “We all spoke together well given we’re three strangers – we all had similar views even though we’ve got different spectrums.”
- “The funding to tackle unemployment in Glasgow – a lot of that has come from the European Social Fund, so with Brexit and all that is going on with that we have to think about what is going to happen with that. And the pandemic will have made unemployment worse as well.”
- “I couldn’t see any conflict with what others were mentioning.”
- “Everyone is agreed we just want to get back to normal.”

Independence and the Union

Yes and No voters were paired off and asked to talk to each other about their views.

- “It took me a while to realise that my partner’s views on independence were different to mine. Even though he was a No supporter and I’m a Yes, we both agreed on so many things. I was glad to hear the things that he was pissed off about were the same things that I was pissed off about. Everyone just wants everyone to grow up a wee bit.”
- “My partner said she’d regret it if Scotland was never going to be independent, but I just don’t care. But we agreed on the reasons people would want it and why other people wouldn’t want it. It was a very civil conversation.”
- “I’m not sure we’ll get independence in my lifetime, so it would be for my daughter, rather than me. But we need to decide in the next five or ten years – we can’t keep going having referendums ad nauseum.”
- “Our views weren’t too far apart, but it’s not worth going to the ballot box over and over again. We need to make a decision and get on with it.”
- “We were pretty much in agreement in wanting to look for a better Scotland. That’s basically it.”
- “Even though me and my partner had different views, we were able to listen to one another. Even though we didn’t agree, we gave each other the time to actually speak. I listened to her point of view and I could understand some of what we were saying – there were still commonalities there. It was great to just be able to listen to each other and not let things get too heated.”
- “We were polar opposites, but everyone has their own reasons for thinking what they do.”

Making a plan

Participants were divided into two groups of six, divided evenly between No and Yes, and were asked to come up with a plan for how to manage the independence issue.

Group 1

- “We felt the fairest process could hinge on the amount of people who vote SNP – if it’s a huge number, that voice needs to be listened to. That would give a mandate for a second referendum.”
- “We wanted to wait for things to be in a better position before we focus on an independence referendum. There’s far too much that needs to be put in place. I personally would be worried about having independence being delivered by people that could only obsess about independence during a mess and crisis like this.”
- “We were thinking five to six years, maybe more.”
- “If SNP get a big majority this time round, I would like to see a situation where maybe in five years’ time – if it’s still the same situation then – then we would agree with Westminster then we need to have another vote. Whether it’s five years or ten years, you can’t just have them saying no. It’s clear most people in Scotland want a vote and if the situation stays the same in five years’ time we should have another vote.”
- “There’s a lot of uncertainty not just in the UK but the whole world. It is not fair to put such a big and important decision on people – especially people with families – who have been through so much just now. It needs to be at least a few years’ time – you can’t be making a Yes-No decision overnight when people have been through so much trauma.”
- “I’m definitely No and I don’t think this is the time. Maybe five or ten years to make a decision. The SNP has a lot to prove, and they should use this time to do it. People really need to see what they can do and what they can’t do.”
- “How and the why is a tough thing because of the uncertainty of the election and the pandemic. That means we can’t really put a date on it.”

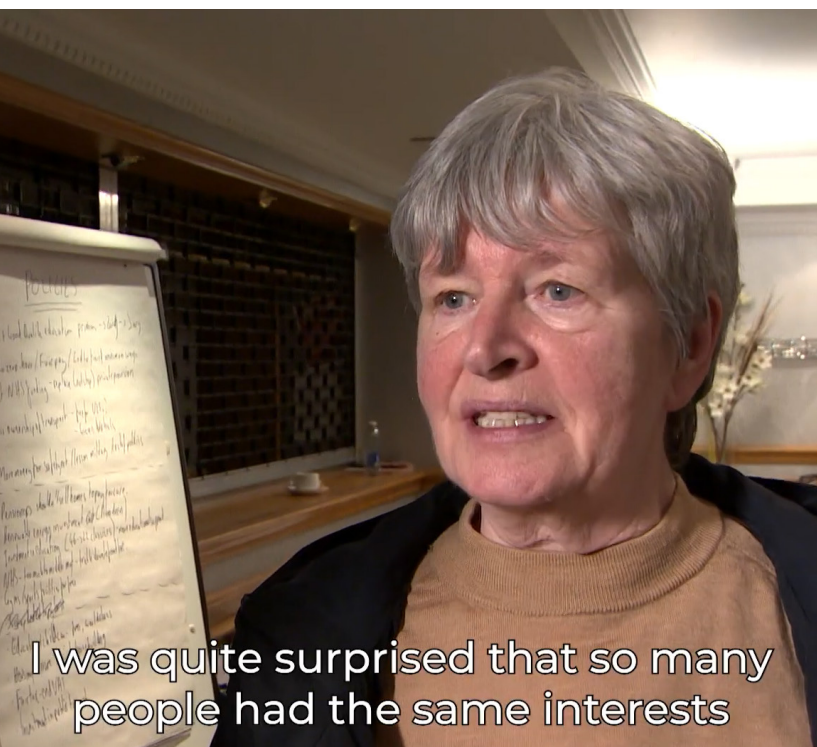
Group 2

- “We don’t really have a majority in parliament to make any decisions and that’s because of the voting system we have. People need to understand who they’re voting for. I’ve looked into it and I don’t understand what the second vote does.”
- “Given everything that is going on with COVID that is at the forefront of everyone’s mind, whether you are Yes or No. Lockdown and everything that has happened in the last year mean that we need to come out of that first.”
- “I think we should get COVID by first before we start thinking about independence again. We need to sort out everything that has been going on – I want another referendum, but not in the next few months or the next few years. I want council services back up and running, I want things back to normal before we do it. But I want a vote and I want my say.”
- “As much as I want independence, I don’t understand how SNP MSPs are elected.”
- “Even though not everyone agreed, what I took from it was that even those saying No recognised we need to take another vote on it. But we also agreed it can’t happen all the time.”



Final reflections

- *“The thing I will take away is that everyone just wanted to improve their lives and the lives of others. Hopefully we’ll be able to get that, one way or the other, when we get out of the pandemic.”*
- *“We are stuck in deadlock and it’s a big question as to how we get out of it. Apparently, there are minds greater than ours to decide it.”*
- *“I found it really interesting how people had the same opinions and the same mindset, despite coming from different backgrounds.”*
- *“It made me realise I don’t have very strong political opinions. I want another referendum, but I don’t care too much whether it is next week, next month or next year. There’s other stuff I want to sort out first.”*
- *“Even if people had strong minded views they kept an open mind and that helped make it smooth. I was really surprised with the similarities everyone had whether you’re Yes or No, which was nice to hear. But also, good to have the chance to be listened to too.”*
- *“It was interesting that we were all different ages and backgrounds but pretty much all of us have the same views on politics.”*
- *“I voted No the last time and the thing that was refreshing for me was that everyone had a common-sense approach. Most people wanted to address the day job first before getting into another referendum. It was all very friendly too.”*



I was quite surprised that so many people had the same interests

WHO WE ARE

Our Scottish Future was set up two years ago by Gordon Brown to promote a better, more positive vision for Scotland’s place in the UK. We believe that Scotland’s best interests are served by maintaining a cooperative relationship with the rest of the UK, based on the values of solidarity and empathy with one another. While we believe that the best way to deliver that relationship is through the union of the United Kingdom, we also believe that “no change Unionism” is failing to deliver the kind of relationship most Scots want. We are engaged in public consultation and policy work designed to set out how a better UK might look and operate over the coming decades.

Andrew Liddle

Andrew is a political author and historian. He has previously worked as Scottish Political Correspondent for The Press and Journal and Chief Reporter for The Courier. Between 2017 and 2019 he served as Deputy Head of Media for the Scottish Labour Party. He most recently worked as a political and economic advisor at the U.S. Consulate General Edinburgh. Cheers, Mr. Churchill, his account of Winston Churchill’s 14 years as a Dundee MP, is due to be published by Birlinn next year.

Eddie Barnes

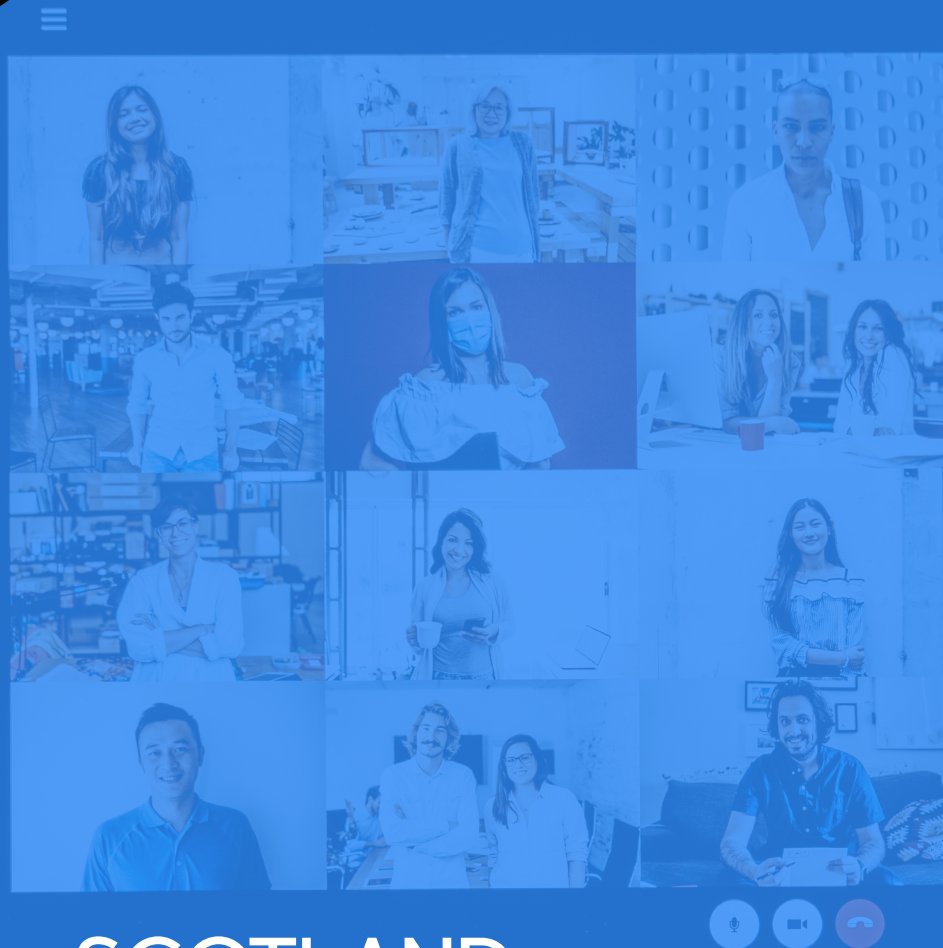
Eddie Barnes is project manager for Our Scottish Future. Prior to that he was political editor of the Scotsman and Scotland on Sunday titles, and head of strategy and communications for the Scottish Conservative party.

Henry Stannard

OUR THANKS

Our thanks first and foremost go to the scores of participants from across Scotland who gave up their time to take part in the Scotland in a Zoom project. We are grateful to you for participating and sharing your views honestly and respectfully.

Craig Ross Dawson managed the recruitment for this project and we would like to thank their team, including their recruiters, for securing such a politically and geographically diverse array of participants.



SCOTLAND IN A ZOOM

By Andrew Liddle,
Henry Stannard,
& Eddie Barnes