



# **Disgruntled Remainers & Support for Scottish Independence**

Focus Group Findings

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## Background

Focus groups were carried out with “disgruntled Remainers”: Scots who voted No in 2014, Remain in 2016 and who have now switched to (or are leaning towards) favouring independence. These voters are believed to account for roughly 20% of current support for independence<sup>1</sup>. The focus groups were designed to understand their motivations for switching and to explore the arguments in favour of remaining in the United Kingdom which most resonate with them.

- Focus Groups were held 21st September – 21st October 2020
- 64 participants in Zoom based groups of 4 or 5 = 14 groups, 21 hours of discussion
- Moderated by Alan Barnard of Campaign It!
- Heavily weighted towards people now leaning “Yes”
- Gender: 5x male, 6x female, 3x mixed groups
- Demographics: mostly C1/C2
- Age: 3x [18-26], 4x [28-45], 7x [38-62]
- Geography: 7x Edinburgh, 6x Glasgow, 1x Dundee
- No SNP members or self-identified Rangers supporters

In the following commentary, all boxed text in *italics* represent direct quotes from focus groups – if words or sentiments are repeated, this reflects the fact that these were heard across multiple groups.

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<sup>1</sup> These Islands analysis of Yougov polling data from August 2020:  
[https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/l0arqcm4ea/TimesResults\\_200810\\_ScotlandV2\\_W.pdf](https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/l0arqcm4ea/TimesResults_200810_ScotlandV2_W.pdf)

## Focus Group Findings

### Scotland and the United Kingdom: What's in a Name?

When asked what first comes to mind when thinking about the UK and Scotland respectively, the UK was associated with power, security and safety in numbers (but also Tory governments) whereas Scotland evoked home, family, pride and beautiful scenery.

**The United Kingdom:** *safety in numbers / four nations / four parts / a group / power / armed forces / the Queen / royal family / it's good to be part of Britain, it's stronger*

**But ...** *Tory governments / the way the government has behaved, I'm not proud to be British*

**Scotland:** *home / family / home / pride / home / proud / beautiful / outdoors & scenery / the highlands / no place like it / honesty / no nonsense / a nation in its own right*

It's striking that while Scotland triggers emotional and even romantic responses, the United Kingdom seems to be associated more with pragmatic, utilitarian values. We find ourselves questioning whether the term United Kingdom may itself be a barrier to building emotional connection, implying as it does a construct, a union of discrete parts (and therefore something that by implication can more readily be dissolved).

It may be that – while recognising the sensitivities of being seen to exclude Northern Ireland – talk of Britain (and by extension Britons, being British) may have a greater emotional and historical resonance. It's certainly easier to say one is British than “a citizen of the United Kingdom”. Given that the UK competes in the Olympics as Team GB, perhaps those who defend the union should be less bashful about talking about Britain, Great Britain and Britishness. This is a topic which was not explored in these focus groups but which justifies further investigation.

### A Binary Choice?

The participants very consistently framed their decision process as a binary choice, with “bungling Boris and Brexit” on one side and “competent Nicola and independence” on the other.

If this were purely a battle between political personalities it is clear that – for these focus group participants at least – there could only be one winner.

**Boris Johnson:** *bumbling Boris / he's embarrassing himself / he's a zombie / he's not up to the job / he just blabbers on / it's the embarrassment factor – he's like Trump / he has no respect for Scotland*

**Nicola Sturgeon:** *admire her, the way she's handled the Covid response / she has impressed / she talks a good game / Sturgeon will admit her faults / she's clear and concise / I trust Nicola / rooting for her / she talks in layman's terms / quite like her*

*Wouldn't be ashamed of my country if Nicola was in charge  
Sturgeon gives us a reason to be independent*

While perceptions of Boris Johnson were almost universally negative, there were just a handful of critical comments aimed at Nicola Sturgeon in any of the groups.

*A one-man band?  
does Nicola fighting London help anybody?  
what does she offer beyond independence?*

### **It's The Way They Make us Feel**

A sentiment consistently voiced was that “they” (whether personified as Tories, Westminster or England) simply don’t care about “us”.

*It's the way they make us feel / they don't care about us / Conservative government couldn't care less / they couldn't give a damn about Scotland / they don't care about us, they honestly don't care about us / they're driving us out if anything / it's not acceptable the way we've been treated / honestly, I've been to England – they don't accept our bank notes / we're the poor relative, an afterthought*

Resentment of what is seen as a right wing, Brexit-driven Tory government was frequently, forcefully expressed.

*We have a government we voted against / UK government has shafted us all / the UK has pissed on us again about Brexit / incompetent Brexit process / bullied people back to work / just don't trust these guys / breaking international law / applauded voting down nurses' pay rises  
It's patronising when they say “we give to Scotland” – are we too wee, too poor?*

### **Labour: Missing in Action?**

These disgruntled Remainers were often former Labour voters, and it became clear that if Keir Starmer and the UK Labour party were seen to take a clear, pro-Union stance, it would make these indy-curious voters think again.

*What does Keir think about the Union? / if Keir was pro-Union, it would give a reason to consider that future / Keir Starmer is a positive / a resurgent Labour would change the equation / if the Labour party improved, it would change things [view on independence]*

It can be argued, of course, that Keir Starmer does already adopt an unequivocally pro-Union stance. Nevertheless, these focus group participants were evidently unaware of it. When one group of independence supporters was asked whether Labour being in power in Westminster would make a difference, they answered that it would.

*That would put a spanner in the works for me  
Then supporting independence would be tougher for me – it makes me think*

What was apparent, however, is that Labour have a lot of lost ground to make up in Scotland – and for many it appears the SNP have replaced Labour as the progressive, left-leaning option.

*Labour is non-existent in Scotland / Labour loved us / it's been gut-wrenching to watch Labour / they took us to war / they joined the Tories / moderate right not progressive left / no top Labour people / we need an opposition / we need an opposition to the SNP, we need options / the SNP have become Labour*

As discussions progressed, there were signs that at least some in these groups doubted the SNP's socialist credentials - and at least one young voter started to question out loud how he could reconcile what he considered to be his socialist values with the idea of separation.

*Do the SNP really represent Socialist values?  
If Scotland's left wing, why not be thinking more about the collective... independence is a bit strange when you think about it like that*

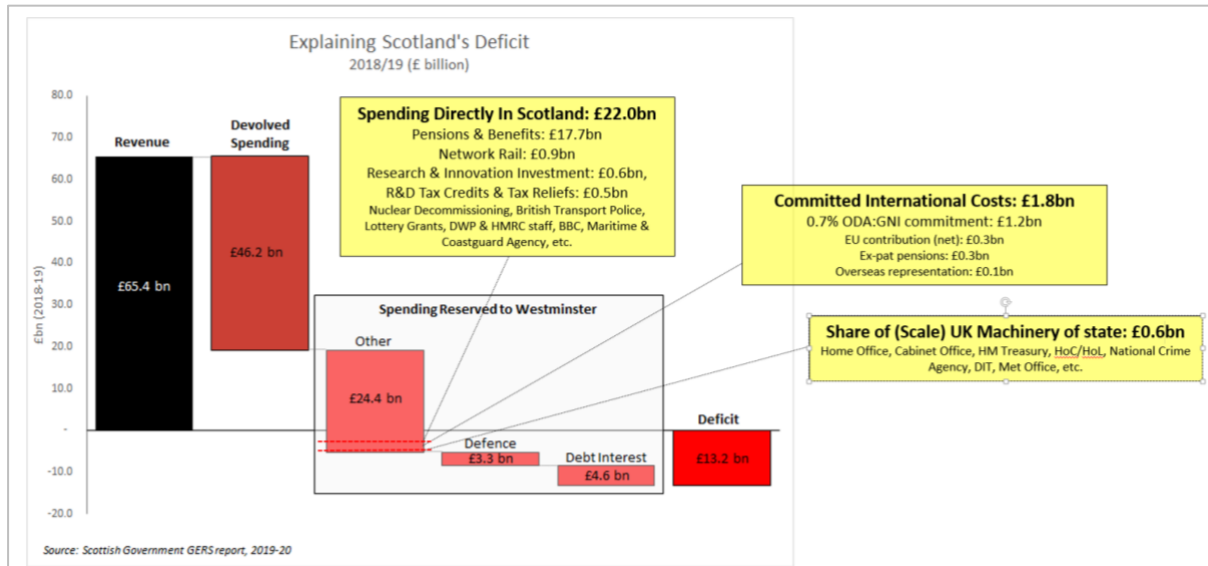
### **It's Good to Share?**

The groups were asked to think about the value of the UK as a sharing union, as a mechanism for smoothing out economic ups and downs and sharing resources when and where they are needed most.

There was immediate scepticism about whether this was true – and in many cases outright rejection of the idea that Scotland benefits from UK-wide sharing of resources.

*Are we [UK] really sharing the wealth? / but does sharing really happen? / is it sharing, or are we being taken advantage of? / Scotland contributes more / fairly sure we're net contributors / most of funding is down South / there's disproportionate infrastructure spending to England / but how much of Scotland's money goes to the UK / we're rich – it's been hidden / do we put in more or are we subsidised – I don't know what to believe / but how much of Scotland's money goes to the UK?*

The participants were presented with simple economic facts about the taxes raised by and the money spent *in* as well as *for* Scotland. Time was taken to explain that the data was provided by the Scottish Government and that it shows beyond any doubt that “Scotland gets back more” in spending than it generates in taxes, even *before* being allocated a share UK defence or debt interest costs.



The reactions were surprising. We might have expected these groups to dismiss the data as irrelevant, but that is not what we heard – very consistently the participants *refused to believe the numbers could be true*.

*We don't think that's happening / I just don't believe that – will need to look at the figures / the GERS figures are manipulated / those numbers don't include our oil revenues / lots of stuff [revenue] isn't counted as Scottish / don't believe those figures*

*I'm sure somebody could supply another set of figures*

Suffice to say the objections to the figures were misplaced – oil revenues are of course included and the Scottish Government economists who compile the figures don't miss out “lots of stuff” or “manipulate” the GERS figures to make Scotland look bad.

The last quote above is perhaps the most telling: if the official numbers fail to fit the narrative then people will look elsewhere for a set of numbers that do. Unfortunately – in the age of social media and with widespread efforts by nationalists to undermine the Scottish Government's own figures (a phenomenon we might term “GERS-denial”) – the indy-curious won't have to search far to find a Facebook meme, Twitter post or hastily written blog that will give them permission to ignore the facts.

For those familiar with the intricacies of Scotland's fiscal accounts, these focus groups confirm a depressing reality: the challenge is not to inform an uninformed electorate, but to educate one that has been very skilfully misinformed.

## **But Then Why?**

As the participants grappled to reconcile their stated support for independence with their shock at the scale of the current economic value of UK-wide sharing to Scotland, one particular question began to be asked: why do “they” want to keep us?

*Then why are they so determined to keep us? / England would get rid of us if that were true / if £10 billion is true, then why do they want to keep us? / why are they doing that? / then why does Boris want to keep us?*

When this logic was challenged by the moderator – after all, why would an independent Scotland want to keep the Outer Hebrides or Ross and Cromarty? – that disbelief turned into an appeal.

*Would help if Westminster said why they need us / what do we bring to the table? / it's about self-esteem / it's a national pride thing / they could sweet talk us a bit more*

This desire to be made to feel valued was a thread that ran through the groups, and it is a challenge that needs to be met head-on by those outside Scotland who value and seek to defend the Union. In the words of one of the focus group participants: it's a self-respect thing.

## **The Facts Matter**

As participants struggled to overcome their scepticism and unwillingness to accept the data, it became clear that – to these indy-curious voters, at any rate – the fiscal reality really does matter.

*Some of that has shocked me / looks like something's got to give, eh? / can't really argue with that / if [this meant] free tuition fees were lost, that would be a deal-breaker! / this has made me question a few things – the figures are a worry / maybe it's easy for the SNP to appear generous when propped up by the UK / makes me worry about how ill-informed and uninformed I am*

***If this was true, surely nobody would vote for it [independence]***

The outstanding question, of course, is how to get the fiscal reality better understood – who are the trusted message carriers and how can the vast amount of online disinformation be combated? The daunting nature of this challenge is not in doubt – but nor is the importance of taking it on.

## **Borders**

We were surprised to discover that, despite the high profile of these issue in the context of Brexit, the participants were generally dismissive of potential border issues.

*Don't see why exports [to rUK] should be affected / border isn't going to be a problem / the border issues would get sorted – it would probably benefit our trade / I don't see it [trade friction with rUK] happening / just don't think it would be a massive problem / not sure if you have to take the EU rules [on borders, if an independent Scotland were in the EU]*

It is hard not to notice that, when it comes to denying concerns about borders, these supporters of independence sound an awful lot like some Brexiteers.

## **Currency & EU Accession**

This was the area where our indy-curious participants were most likely to express doubt and uncertainty.

Many believed that, as Scottish banknotes already exist, there was nothing to worry about - and perhaps half of the participants simply dismissed the currency issue...

*There are already Scottish notes, so we have our own currency / we can easily produce our own bank notes – we already do / what’s wrong with just using the Scottish pound? / you already get a different exchange rate for Scottish pounds – it happened to a friend visiting Canada and the Scottish pound is worth more / we can adopt any currency we like*

... but others did admit to having doubts and concerns.

*It’s the one issue that needs cleared up to be honest / it’s the biggest question for me / it’s still to be figured out / we’ll worry about that later / if people appreciated the currency risks, it would be a show-stopper*

The process for joining the EU was described, including the specific conditions as outlined in Chapter 17 of the Acquis Communautaire<sup>2</sup> around central bank independence and control of currency (treating “exchange rates as a matter of common concern”), being on track to meet deficit targets as laid out in the Stability and Growth Pact and committing to “adopt the Euro in due course”.

These very real hurdles were largely dismissed as being of no account.

*We’d be fast-tracked / you can work through it / the right people will get it done / even if it takes ages, so what – better than definitely being out / I’m sure the SNP have thought about it / well they [SNP] must have thought it through / it must be manageable, or they wouldn’t be saying we could*

## **In Nicola We Trust**

A very consistent theme throughout these discussions is reflected in the last set of quotes above – these voters showed near blind-faith in the fact that somebody somewhere must have worked out a way round all of these issues. Strikingly, this was often expressed as absolute faith in Nicola Sturgeon personally.

*Nicola Sturgeon obviously thinks these things can be overcome / I’m sure Nicola must have other reasons, she’d just not telling us at the moment / if Sturgeon knows these figures, there must be a plan / there must be a reason, there must be a plan hidden away / there must be a reason why people think it’s a good idea / intelligent people like Nicola Sturgeon must have looked at all these things / people have looked into it, they must have worked out what to do*

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<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/conditions-membership/chapters-of-the-acquis\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/conditions-membership/chapters-of-the-acquis_en)



While this faith in Sturgeon might be seen as a positive for the independence movement, it also exposes a major weakness: support for independence is precariously balanced on the shoulders of one politician. What would happen if, through becoming better informed, these voters decided that their faith had been misplaced and/or their trust betrayed? How stable would support for independence remain were Sturgeon no longer to be First Minister?

### **Pandemic Response**

While Brexit is a clear motivator for participants in these groups shifting in favour of independence, Covid and the pandemic response was also cited as a reason.

*Covid has shown Scotland is very good at setting up systems – it's Nicola / we [Scotland] are taking things more seriously / strong decisions in Scotland*

There was, however, some recognition that the Furlough Scheme was something that an independent Scotland may not have been able to afford...

*Not sure we could afford it / where would that money come from? / could we afford the Furlough scheme? / why should we be grateful, we pay the highest taxes in the UK!*

... some evidence that people saw a (missed?) opportunity for the UK to work more closely together in combatting the virus...

*We need to work together / impression we're not working together as four nations – and not for the want of trying*

... and some realisation that perhaps Sturgeon was making political capital out of the pandemic.

*Sturgeon has the easier job / can see her getting political about Covid / when she says "I'm not going to make a political point here", you know she's about to!*

### **Everything Changes, Everything Stays the Same**

When articulating why independence is considered to be “the answer”, many of the reasons given will be familiar to anybody who engaged with the debate in 2014.

*At least we could vote for who wants the best for Scotland / get what we vote for in our country / our needs are completely different / it would be more sustainable making our own decisions / our rules, our decisions / independence will make us richer / we'd have our own say – we're rich / we could make Scotland more redistributive / only good could come of it! / we have no say now / Westminster is too far away / how much influence do we really have? / it's a disaster down South / too many broken promises / we've been done over too many times now / could it be any worse?*

When pressed, there was some recognition that breaking up the United Kingdom was not a decision that should be made based on like/dislike of current political leaders and (particularly amongst the female groups) that this is a decision that should not be made in haste.

*Not a fan of Boris, that's the main thing / can't just make the decision because we don't like Boris / a bad idea until we've seen the outcome of Brexit / wouldn't vote for the SNP if it meant an indyref any time soon / now isn't the right time*

Within the focus groups we discussed the recklessness of breaking up the UK based on the personalities of current leaders. The argument was put forward that “today you might hate Boris and love Nicola – but they will go, one day. So make your decision on long term issues, not your attitude to individual politicians in power today”. This argument gained traction, as did the observation that “the government in Westminster can be changed in 2024, but Scotland’s separation from the UK would be forever”.

### **Now Is Not The Time?**

The expressions of caution above were outweighed by what might be described as a more gung-ho attitude displayed in most of the groups.

*Covid's such a mess, now is the ideal time! / if we're ever going to do it, it might as well be now / let's give it a bash / might as well have a crack / what the hell! / may as well do it [Brexit and separation] all at once / we're going nowhere as it is / we're not going anywhere as part of the UK / something needs to give*

There were, however, some voices who still felt that the idea of “once in a generation” should be respected. When some of the practical challenges of unpicking the UK’s deeply integrated machinery of state and resolving the currency issue *in parallel* with managing both Brexit and the pandemic response were raised, we saw a notable dampening of enthusiasm for a referendum anytime soon.

### **Does devolution work?**

There are some signs that the SNP’s approach to Westminster politics is being seen as a negative – although whether the blame for that is placed with SNP MPs or the “Westminster parties” is not always clear.

*Devolution should work, but collective decisions don't happen / Scottish MPs in Westminster are divisive, not making it better / devolution is being used to gather support for independence / spend quite a bit of time being embarrassed by them [SNP MPs] / they've not really used tax powers, they play the blame game / nobody listens to them / they're there to haul up the banner for Scotland and independence*

## Interpretation & Conclusion

Disgruntled Remainers who are tempted by independence perceive their choice as a binary one. It is “bungling Boris’s Brexit” versus “competent Nicola’s independence”. When framed in this way, our focus groups instinctively lean towards independence.

The Labour party are missing in action. If Keir Starmer set out his stall as somebody implacably opposed to the break-up of the UK – on the basis that it would betray those core Labour values of unity and solidarity upon which the UK’s welfare state was built – it could be a game-changer for many of these indy-curious voters.

More generally, Scots who have been wooed by the Nationalist narrative need to be told they have a valuable role to play in a positive future for Britain. It’s about pride, self-esteem and self-respect – and right now these Scots feel that Scotland is unloved, disrespected and condescended to by Westminster. Politicians outside Scotland who would defend the Union need to articulate why Scotland matters to them – and Scots need to hear it.

For those who fear the break-up of the UK, the positive message that emerges from these focus groups is that support for independence is built on sand: it’s reliant on what appears to be blind faith in Nicola Sturgeon preventing voters engaging with the economic realities.

It’s telling that when it comes to fiscal reality, we didn’t find potential Yes voters accepting their veracity but shrugging their shoulders (as we might have expected) – they simply refused to believe that the facts could be true.

It can be argued, then, that Scotland does not so much have an uninformed electorate as one that has been very skilfully fed misinformation. There is little political gain to be had from telling people that they have been misled – but finding trusted message carriers who can present facts in an accessible manner might help these voters work it out for themselves.

Support for independence is based principally on faith and fact-denial. This renders it potentially unstable. A better understanding of the facts may bring with it a realisation that trust in Sturgeon and the SNP (“they must have thought this through”) was seriously misplaced.

We explored with some of the focus groups the possibility of reframing the debate away from “them” keeping “us” and towards the idea that the United Kingdom is “ours”, and this seemed to resonate with some:

It’s our United Kingdom – Scots can take pride in the part we’ve played in building this country, it belongs to us just as much as it does to Westminster. Tearing the UK apart because we don’t like what ‘Westminster’ is currently doing makes no sense – why throw away all that we’ve worked for?

Ultimately, though, we conclude that nothing will change unless the core issue is addressed: Scots must hear why they are valued and appreciated by others in the UK – “it’s about self-respect”; “it’s how they make us feel”.