

**266**SEPTEMBER
2014

THE NO VOTE OFFERS A REPRIEVE – NO MORE

Francis Ghilès, Associate Senior Researcher CIDOB

England, and the rest of the United Kingdom outside Scotland, has been spared the humiliation of loosing 30% of its landmass, 10% of its population and the sheer wit and culture of people of whom the writer George Bernard Shaw once said: “God help England if she had not Scots to think for her”. However sad and bitterly disappointed many Scots feel, they can take pride in the extraordinary energy and public debate unleashed by the campaign for the referendum. Voter turnout, at 85%, was the highest since 1910 and it will be difficult for the establishment in London to put the genie back in the bottle, however well practised its leading figures are in the art of smothering debate and democracy.

This crisis may go to waste but the opportunity to reshape a state designed for a long gone imperial age is unique. Because Britain relinquished her empire relatively smoothly, in a way that left few obvious scars, the process had little effect on British politics. In 1962, a prominent US politician, Dean Acheson made the wounding aside that “Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role”. Fifty years later the death throws of Britain as a world power are still with us. The country has ambitions above its station and it is unlikely that the country’s current leaders have the stomach for a debate which takes into account the relationship with the US, the Trident nuclear deterrent and the country’s Security Council veto. That said, Britain’s capacity to pursue its interests abroad, not least in Europe, its influence and its prestige, are predicated on the way it governs itself.

The independence campaign demanded more accountable government and a stop to the endless privatisation pursued by Tory and Labour alike for the past thirty years. It spoke of a deep resentment felt, not just in Scotland but in many English regions of the way London has been built up as a super-state on the global highway, a city which is becoming unaffordable to many of its own dwellers. Talk of a federal United Kingdom will lead nowhere – England, with 85% of the population, is simply too preponderant to allow for such a neat reallocation of authority among regions and nations. If the prime minister spends his time trying to wrong foot the leaders of the Labour and Liberal parties – with whom he united to make a solemn plea to the Scots to stay in the Union, he will only breed renewed cynicism all around. Will he show the courage to confront some of his own party diehards and rise above the mean politics which characterise Westminster. No

one mistakes David Cameron for Winston Churchill or Harold Macmillan but he could at least show the grit and passion displayed by one of his more recent and still underestimated predecessors John Major whose passionate intervention in favour of a No vote was noteworthy. He might remember that the intervention of the former Labour prime minister, Gordon Brown probably saved him from defeat. This is the time for joint policies, however difficult they may be to craft, between Britain's major political parties.

A very practical proposition would be to restore to the cities, towns and shires of England control over local spending that was so brutally taken away from them when Margaret Thatcher introduced the poll tax. That would do more to re-engage English voters and allow democracy to flourish. David Cameron ran the risk a week ago of going down in history as the prime minister who lost Scotland. Could he become the prime minister who restored accountable government? Such a policy would resonate far beyond the borders of the UK, not least in Europe, where populist parties are gaining ground for many of the same reasons that encouraged many Scots to vote yes, not the least of which is growing disgust at a corrupt class of professional politicians who are aloof from the everyday worries of their voters.

Britain is a highly centralised state, even more so than Napoleonic France – a country where a third rate minister in London can tell politicians running great cities like Bristol and Manchester what to do; where the iron grip of the Treasury sets budgets across the Kingdom with total disregard for the wishes of the people. Restoring some common sense and honesty might, just, inject a modicum of logic into the increasingly raucous and mean debate on the UK's role in Europe.

The opportunity for reform may of course go to waste. After the global financial crisis of 2008, the banks pushed the world economy to the brink. But Wall Street and the City returned to business as usual soon enough. The precedent is hardly encouraging. Those who appreciate how important the contribution of Scots to modern economic and legal thinking has been these past three centuries can only hope that they are in a position to help the rest of the United Kingdom, not least the English to modernise, dare one say, reinvent the idea and practise of democracy in the United Kingdom. That would help reinvigorate democracy in Europe, fight back the growing tide of – often – ugly nationalism and prejudice. Its consequences would be felt beyond the shores of the British isles and might finally offer Britain a new role.