Scotland Rising

‘This is a comprehensive, well-sourced and very wide-ranging discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Scotland’s independence movement, as it faces the challenges of a second referendum. Hassan shows how sterile the extreme arguments of unionist and nationalist can be. And he offers a fascinating projection of the impact of Scottish independence on the remnant UK and, in particular, on the “Empire State” delusions of England’s elites.’

—Neal Ascherson, writer and author of Black Sea

‘Gerry Hassan’s forensic, incisive and also respectful account lays out the arguments for and against Scottish independence. The future of Scotland, Hassan rightly notes, will not be decided by true believers and activists for Yes or No, but by many hundreds of thousands of Scots who need to be reasoned with and convinced. This constructive, thoughtful, sharp-edged discussion confronts the choices for a new Scotland. It’s also very readable as well as scholarly.’

—Gavin Esler, broadcaster and author of How Britain Ends

‘A careful consensual account of how Scotland has come to be at the brink of independence, and of what this choice means for those who are not yet committed either way. A clear description of what has changed since 2014 leading to a forensic examination of the implications for impendence of the new context: a far less self-assured British elite. And a clear warning of just how nasty this debate is likely to become, across the UK.’

—Danny Dorling, Professor of Human Geography, University of Oxford

‘An important and timely contribution to the future of the Scottish independent movement.’

—Ruth Wishart, journalist and broadcaster

‘Scotland needs this book. Read it. Give to your grandparents and grandkids. Put it on reading lists for students. Make sure it’s in the libraries. It’s one of the new pillars which we need to structure our thinking.’

—Alison Phipps, Professor of Languages & Intercultural Studies and UNESCO Chair for Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts at University of Glasgow
‘The definitive account of why a decaying democracy in Westminster has triggered democratic renewal in Scotland through the desire for Independence. [This] book is essential reading for everyone who wants to understand the future of the UK, whether it breaks up or how it reconfigures itself.’

—Neal Lawson, Director at Compass

‘This book’s distinction lies not just in its breadth of coverage, but in the light it sheds upon contesting points of view, and the depth to which it recognises identity, culture and the power of myth in Scottish independence. It emphasises the urgency of understanding opposing arguments to aid social change: an ability sadly lacking in most of the political world.’

—Alastair McIntosh, human ecologist and author of Riders on the Storm

‘This is a very welcome contribution on the Scotland’s future that recognises that Scotland’s constitutional future cannot be divorced from the kind of society and economy and this requires tough, honest choices. Not everyone will agree with Gerry’s prescriptions but everyone should welcome this important, stimulating and serious book.’

—James Mitchell, Professor of Government, University of Edinburgh

‘Too often arguments for or against Scottish independence are framed in short-termist narrow terms that reflect the confines of current – and flawed – economic debates. This book breaks out of today’s thinking and looks to the bigger and deeper issues at stake.’

—Katherine Trebeck, political economist

‘Scotland’s future and our constitutional choices warrant deeper, richer debate — debate that allows for imaginative ideas, candid questioning and respect for diversity. With clarity and substance, this book speaks to important issues inherently implicated in such debates, thinking about what’s at stake and why it matters.’

—Dr Hannah Graham, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Stirling University
Scotland Rising
The Case for Independence

Gerry Hassan
Contents

Acknowledgements ix

Introduction 1

PART I: THE TERRAIN OF THE DEBATE

1 The Scottish Question(s) 15
2 Nation, Stories and Voice 30

PART II: THE STORY SO FAR

3 The Road to the Independence Debate: How Did We Get Here? 45
4 The Case for Independence 56
5 Understanding the Case against Independence 70

PART III: SCOTLAND’S CHOICES AND THE DIVIDED KINGDOM

6 Empire State Britain 87
7 Scotland’s Democratic Argument 108
8 Economic Injustice 129
9 A Socially Just Scotland 150
10 Cultural Change and Self-Determination 165
11 Scotland International 182
PART IV: THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

12 How Scotland Gets an Independence Referendum 207
13 The Next Campaign 225

PART V: FUTURE LANDSCAPES

14 After an Independence Vote 253
15 The Future of the UK/rUK after Independence 277
16 Scotland’s Right to Decide 303
17 Future Stories of Scotland 322

Notes 331
Index 361
Introduction

The question of Scottish self-government and independence is a live and ongoing issue that affects, and has significant implications for, not just Scotland but also for the UK/rUK (rest of the UK) and internationally.

This is thus a question that deserves to be treated with respect and seriousness, and that requires substantive discussion and debate. Too often these qualities are found to be missing, crowded out by the noisier parts of how the independence question is expressed in public – a state of affairs which ultimately does no one any real favours.

This book is a conscious attempt to offer a constructive contribution to this vital and important debate and to recognise its wider importance by exploring and making the case for self-government and independence. It aims to offer some of the leading arguments for independence and to consider the choices and difficulties involved, with honesty and a respect for facts and all shades of opinion.

It does this in the context of recognising and respecting the argument for the Union and against independence. At points, it explicitly outlines the case for independence and the case for the Union, and argues that politics and public life would be better served if the main sides could recognise that there was a valid, rational argument on the other side as well as shades of grey in between.

Too often even in the senior levels of Yes and No there is a widespread propensity to caricature the other side. Yes advocates are posed by some pro-Union voices as hopeless romantic nationalists and No supporters by some indepen-
dence advocates as scared – or in the pay of London elites. This is a complete disservice to what is a fundamental question for Scotland, democracy and the subject of independence.

This book is not a narrow, over-partisan, closed-minded account, or an attempt to advance any particular party perspectives. It does not offer a rationale for everything about the Scottish National Party (SNP), their policies and record in office, nor does it commend everything from the Scottish Greens or other pro-independence forces. Similarly, it does not offer a blanket dismissal of everything from the anti-independence parties: Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats. Rather, it starts from the premise that we have to rise above such an outlook and recognise that wisdom, intelligence and ideas come from many disparate sources, including beyond political parties.

It is true that the claims of the SNP and independence are interlinked but they are not the same. The cause of independence would not be possible without the rise and role of the SNP, but it is possible and necessary to differentiate the two. The same is true on the claims of the Union. Whatever people feel about the politics of Labour, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, the argument for the Union is about more than the respective merits or not of these parties.

This book is for anyone with an interest in politics and the notion of challenging the mainstream. If you are for or against independence, unsure or don’t know, or even do not see how this debate is relevant, then this book (while not an introductory text) aims to be as accessible and jargon-free as humanly possible. This does not mean that it is devoid of jargon and esoteric words, but that these are kept to a deliberate minimum – and when they are used, they are explained as much as possible. That has been the intention throughout; readers can judge for themselves how successful this has proven.
This book has not been written for those who think there is no need for further debate and that the subject is now closed. Such perspectives are found across the political spectrum – and include a smattering of independence supporters so impatient for change that they think any further discussion a distraction, and a larger group on the pro-Union side who think this topic was decided in 2014 and that is the end of the matter. Clearly, a large part of Scotland disagrees with these propositions and wants to explore the independence question further.

Those who will shape the future of Scotland are not those who take up much of the oxygen on social media, and are arguably the most passionate, committed and certain. It will not be those who wish everyone else would get in line with their thinking. The people who will determine the future have a very different rationale and way of seeing the world. This group include soft Yes and soft No supporters; the many who do not define themselves by their political identity or think about politics too much, as well as the floating and swing voters. These voters, which this book describes and listens to, will be the defining constituency of this debate. If you are one of this group (or more likely someone with an innate interest in politics), bear this in mind. The future of Scotland will be decided by people who do not live and breathe politics – and in particular party and partisan politics.

Running through this book is the notion that politics across the developed world has an empathy gap which magnifies the bitter divisions and divides which harm and distort democracy and political engagement. This is true of the independence question, and how Yes and No understand each other and frame the topic. Many people will agree and disagree with parts of this book and its assumptions, but this issue of empathy and reaching out and understanding and personifying respect is fundamental to how we think and act in public life and critical to the subject of independence.
All of this is made more urgent by the turbulent times that we live in that are shaped by crisis, turmoil and political upheaval. In the past few years, we have witnessed Brexit – the decision in 2016 of a UK majority to leave the European Union and which saw the UK finally leave the EU on 31 January 2020; the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic with millions of deaths worldwide, national lockdowns and international restrictions, and public services stretched to the point of exhaustion. If that were not enough, in March 2022 Russian President Vladimir Putin decided after months of escalation and brinksmanship to invade Ukraine, provoking an unprecedented political crisis: the first invasion of a sovereign independent European state by another in post-war times. At the time of writing the shape of this conflict is unfolding but looks likely to be long and bitter, involving significant fatalities, destruction and the displacement of large numbers of the Ukrainian population.

All of this is without mentioning the spectres of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Viktor Orbán, Matteo Salvini, Marine Le Pen, Nigel Farage and others – the forces of right-wing populism who have proven so effective as forces of disruption, framing themselves as the new radicals taking on the liberal-left ‘woke’ establishment. Their counter-revolution has sadly yet to blow itself out or be defeated by organised opposition.

This is all of relevance in the Scottish debate. There are many people across the world who will say that they would just like a quiet life, and not to have to consider the big issues or radical change and rupture. There are also many who will say that against the backdrop of the above dramatic changes and upheavals there is need for a period of consolidation and healing in societies that have been stretched to breaking point.

This context has to be remembered in relation to Scottish independence. Scottish society and the rest of the UK have been through tumultuous, uncertain, fraught times in recent years. We have to respect the fragile and bruised fabric of our
country and focus on bringing people together before any formal independence campaign is begun.

One comment on the writing of this book, the personal and the local. This book was written in the beautiful coastal town of Kirkcudbright in Dumfries and Galloway in south-west Scotland where I moved last year after living nearly 30 years in Glasgow. I have always questioned ‘the Central Beltism’ of too much of public life and media in Scotland and been aware of the over-focus on Glasgow and Edinburgh – a trend reinforced by the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. Living in Kirkcudbright, this narrow bandwidth of what politics and power is in Scotland is much more noticeable and an issue which increasingly people mention in conversation and are concerned about, irrespective of their party allegiance and views on independence. This underlines the pointlessness of Scotland achieving independence only to replace Westminster with an Edinburgh that accrues even more power, status and influence and refuses to disperse decision-making across the length and breadth of the country. This is one more subject which shows the need for the independence question not to be about abstractions, and instead about how we make decisions in and within Scotland and nurture and support our own democratic institutions.

*The search for common ground*

In the tumultuous times in which we all live, where despite or maybe because of our huge challenges, there is a widespread fetishisation of small differences, this book starts from the premise that there are things which should unite us. There are rational, logical and instinctual arguments for both independence and the Union. We would benefit from recognising this, and both sides have to undertake serious work to convince voters in enough numbers in the future.
It is perhaps a little idealistic, but agreeing on some common ground across much of the political spectrum might help debates and how we shape the future. This would include:

- The UK domestically is in a state of political crisis concerning government, public institutions and public trust.
- Increasingly over recent decades, the UK has become a harsh, unequal country in terms of economic and social realities and divisions.
- These divisions affect nearly all public life, politics and society – with an unaccountable wealthy elite, millions in poverty and insecurity, and many more worried about their long-term livelihoods.
- The impact of Brexit has done untold damage to the fabric of the country, from how we do politics and take collective decisions to its impact on the economy and the UK’s relationship with its European neighbours.
- The UK’s geo-political position and influence is now seriously weakened – not just by Brexit, but by developments in the US and elsewhere; the current climate and rise of Putin’s military aggressiveness does not automatically address this.
- Scotland’s politics and institutions do not show the advanced state of atrophy, decay and corporate capture of the UK, but serious remedial work and rethinking is needed across all aspects of public life in Scotland.
- None of the mainstream political traditions, whether it be in Scotland, the UK or across the West – left, right, centre, green, feminist, nationalist, pro-autonomy, populist – has so far the answers to the huge challenges of our age: climate change, corporate capitalism, the march of AI and the global and national imbalances and instability which flow from these.
Introduction

Any debate in Scotland should at least aspire to agree to some if not all of the above precepts. The Scottish self-government debate can only make sense and be relevant if there is some buy-in on this wider context and crisis – of politics, capitalism and the planet. Going beyond this, there needs to be some recognition that all the mainstream political parties, philosophies and outlooks, have up until now shown themselves inadequate in how they respond to the multiple challenges facing humanity and the world. We cannot pretend (whatever our view on independence) that continuing as we are is right, or that we have the answers either at a Scottish or UK level.

A word of explanation on some of the observations and testimonies cited in the book. Apart from conventional sources, three waves of contributors are included to widen the bandwidth of debate. First, there are the historic non-voters – ‘the missing Scotland’ and ‘missing million’ – drawing from focus groups undertaken in 2013–14. Second, there are voters who supported No in 2014 who by 2020 had shifted or were open to shifting, who were extensively interviewed. Finally, in February/March 2022, a group of nearly 60 participants in the debate, ranging from academics to opinion formers, businessmen, entrepreneurs, community activists and campaigners. Their views covered the entire political spectrum – pro-independence, pro-Union, agnostic, ambivalent, don’t know – and they were asked specific questions concerning views on independence; the reason or set of reasons for their views; and whether anything could happen that could change their mind.

As one caveat to this – and to the entire independence debate – too much has been framed around already privileged male voices who are used to being on platforms and being heard. This text tries consciously to counteract this, but all of us in Scotland have much work to do in this area – on gender, generationally, class, ethnicity, disability and more. I am more than aware of how a subject as important as this can be the
preserve of a small coterie who congratulate themselves on how inclusive and welcoming they are. We need to recognise that such attitudes are part of the problem.

These are fast-moving, even bewildering and disorientating times. We are living through historic change that should make us pause and reflect on how we understand the world. This obviously includes how all of us see the Scottish debate. The future of Scotland is being created, made and remade by the multiple decisions and exchanges of all of us. We need to recognise this and act accordingly, understanding the responsibility that puts on each one of us who lives in Scotland for ourselves, and for the wider interest and ramifications this has for the rest of the UK and our friends, families and colleagues in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as internationally. This book has been written with all such people in mind as a small contribution in addressing our collective future on this and other issues.

The structure of this book

This book is divided into five parts. The first begins by laying out the context and content of the Scottish question(s) and its rise in recent decades; followed by examining the changing notions of Scotland, stories about Scotland and the importance and power of collective voice.

The next part opens by putting Scotland’s near-history into perspective in asking how independence came centre-stage. It then looks at the main arguments for and against independence, and for the Union, as presented in contemporary debates; making the case that supporters on each side need to better understand the rationale and logic of their opponents to enrich democratic debate.

The third part considers the choices that Scotland faces, the wider dynamics of the nature of the UK and in particular how
they impact on Scotland. It explores the impact of the con-
tinuation of Empire State Britain not just internationally but
domestically, and the fragile nature of the limited democracy
that has been won in the UK, proposing that the UK is in many
respects still not a fully-fledged democracy and how this, along
with Scotland’s own democratic shortcomings, impacts on our
politics and public life. Subsequent chapters in this part address
the nature of British capitalism and the economic inequalities
which define the UK – and their consequences for Scotland.
This is followed by an examination of social inequality,
power and privilege in Scotland and the relevance of this for
the independence question. The next chapter starts from the
presumption that the framing of independence is too often
presented as exclusively about politics and institutions, which
inevitably narrows the debate, rather than addressing wider
societal and cultural change. This is followed by a chapter on
the international dimensions of independence that addresses
Brexit, EU membership, the nuclear question and defence
amongst a range of issues.

The fourth part explores the conditions in which Scotland
has another independence vote. It then reviews the possible
contours and challenges of a future referendum, potential
implications for pro- and anti-independence campaigns, their
messaging and the voters they need to target and listen to.

The final part addresses the future dimensions of Scotland
and the UK, starting with imagining the environment after a
successful independence vote. It does this by first looking at
Scotland after such a vote, then UK/rUK, arguing that the
creation of an independent Scotland is not only a momentous
moment for Scotland, but also for UK/rUK with major impli-
cations for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. These
consequences could have major democratic and progres-
sive advances, if people in these three nations dare to take the opportunity provided by the crumbling of the ancien régime.

The book concludes by emphasising the importance of Scotland’s right to decide its collective future being as widely accepted as possible. The final chapter stresses that this critical debate has to be seen as about more than politics and politicians, drawing from a richer well and tapestry including the stories that a society tells itself. In this, Scotland has moved and shifted dramatically over the course of recent decades, and will continue to do so in the near-future, irrespective of what is decided by the people of Scotland on the independence question. That is right and proper and similar to elsewhere, but the pressures to see this huge topic in a narrow frame — as somehow just being about the SNP, anti-Toryism, anti-Westminster or solely about parties and politicians — has to be resisted and does this subject a grave disservice.

A fundamental strand underpinning this book is the issue of what makes political opinions — allowing for change, and the importance of doubt. In an unpredictable and uncertain world, we have to avoid fixed mindsets and listen to the possibility of change from all sides and directions. It is critical to make spaces to hear those voices of doubt and not allow them to be shouted down to the detriment of us all.

The independence debate has many shades and layers; one that has to be given space and air is the psychological dimension. Independence brings up a profound range of responses from different voters: of enthusiasm and energy, of despair and deflation, and every emotion in between, including confusion and a search for great clarity and answers. This book tries to illuminate the debate, not just by discussing the institutions of government and governance, or even democratic legitimacy, but in thinking about how people see themselves and their
Introduction

collective future and stories and, in a fundamental sense, how they want to express being citizens and even human.

These big questions are daunting ones in a world of confusion, noise and threats, and it behoves all of us to try and engage with a degree of respect and humility, including those living in Scotland, in the rest of the UK and internationally. I have tried my best to honour that in the following pages.