

The Anarchist Vote

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A some time theme of articles on Bella has been people's journey from DON'T KNOW to YES. The passage from ABSTENTION to YES has just as much to offer however.

The possibility of abstention has been a real one for some Scots of the anarchist persuasion, who don't participate in the electoral process. Not only is this not an election, though, but we've reached a glorious stage in our political consciousness in that there is in fact nobody left who can say they don't care about this vote.

In 2012 when we began talking about our referendum in earnest, I noticed to my pleasure a small number of anarchist articles on the subject were published.

What drew me to these articles was the tone — they lacked the hard-wearing sense of optimism that sometimes accompanies arguments for YES, the vague background idea that independence can cure anything. Likewise the articles presented what I felt were positive notes of caution, contained in such phrases as:

'We don't deny that Scotland is a nation, but that nations are not something communists can support. They are always in some way defined by and tied to the state and are a means to bring about cohesion and identity across classes.'

What is clearer two years later is that much of what is normally labelled 'communist' or 'anarchist' is in fact reflected in some of the thinking of the left, much of the thinking of the Radical independence Campaign and is also evident in the minds of many of the Yes-leaning populace. Angus Calder, whom no-one could ever describe as an anarchist, said in *Scotlands of the Mind* in 2002:

'Through the mists beyond our watershed, I hope that what I think I can glimpse might actually emerge — a nation without the disastrous paraphernalia of a nation state.'

This sentiment, while from a republican (or federalist?) stance, still reflects the thinking of the self-confessed Glasgow Anarchist who wrote the quote above.

Corollary to this, it appears that there is less need for anyone to use the word 'anarchist' at all. You'll see the word anarchist quite a bit in this article, but it will be the only place you'll see it in this debate. It's not that Scottish anarchists have avoided indyref, it's just that they've been more at home with it than many, because they have been talking about ideas for new societies all along. There is also among Scottish anarchists, some reasonable doubts concerning just how rosy the future will be in an independent state. This is because it is a mainstay for anyone who cares about class struggle politics that they be opposed to both Scottish and British nationalism, as nationalism is seen as binding people to the capitalist nation-state, reinforcing everyday exploitation. The unknown future is a great place in which to speculate on more equal societies, but anarchists as you are aware still believe that what passes as representative democracy in the world today is a front for class oppression, generally by corporate interest.

This leaves the question as to whether in practical terms, an anarchist should vote YES or abstain. I should add quickly that there appears to be no reason for an anarchist to vote NO, and nor have I have heard of anyone identifying with anarchism who is voting NO. Of all the groups I contacted in Scotland, numbering over 1,000 individuals, I obviously couldn't find anyone that supported a NO.

However, I am writing this because I have come across some who are still considering abstaining.

This isn't entirely great news for the YES campaign, because with the polls pitting the race as close as they do, it looks like an abstention will be as good as a NO on the day.

Traditionally, and within whichever associations they form, anarchists in Scotland, as elsewhere, have always been organisers. Some of the people that have undergone a political awakening and signed up to groups like The Common Weal which gather around catchphrases such as 'participatory democracy' are in general not aware that the anarchists among us have been organising real community action for a long time.

Now, and thanks to this referendum, anarchists have joined with Radical Independence Campaign, and Radical Independence has been fortunate to have the benefit of their experience.

The Radical Independence Campaign, and radical independence in general, has reduced the need for the label 'anarchist', and this may be a good thing. Anarchism isn't discussed much as a concept. As a name, title or descriptor of any sort, 'anarchist' isn't popular with the people, and it isn't popular with political parties, but when there is such a large crossover as there appears to be between anarchism in Scotland and the radical independence movement, it's worth a closer look.

THE NEED TO VOTE

As you are well aware we're not talking about an election here. Political parties, fortified with notions of their own dignity, have yet to spoil this referendum debate, which is why it's been such a high quality debate.

We've been asked to imagine what Scotland will be like as an independent country, and the imagining has been done entirely by the YES campaigners. One of the slogans of the National Collective arts group has been just that – Imagine a Better Scotland.

Politicians have done what they always do and protested the abhorrence of the views of their parliamentary rivals, but politicians defend their points merely to be singular in defending them. They don't do imagining.

YES campaigners ask you to imagine what defence, equality, health, or the economy might look like in a newly independent country – and there is more to it than that. We may take any aspect of our lives and imagine how it may develop. Much more imagining is possible than we are used to.

This is why some anarchist ideas are now being heard, whether they are labelled anarchist or not, because imagining is what anarchists do.

Anarchists have been imagining societies outside the box for a long time now. As the idea of the democratic nation state grew in strength, from the time of the Enlightenment, so arose the anarchist ideals which were critical of it. Among some of these anarchist goals were:

- A totally voluntary society
- Distribution that is communist with totally free accessibility
- At the very least a delegate democracy over a representative democracy
- Something like collective self-management

- And this participatory society on a world-wide scale

These are sketches of a few ideas from a much wider variety of anarchist aims, and here is a disclaimer which will set the record straight on anarchism in general: There is no anarchist consensus about independence movements in Scotland or anywhere. There is no anarchist consensus at all, as anarchism isn't programmatic like other political philosophies. Anarchist associations are real, but sometimes people within them don't even identify with the word anarchism — that's just how it works — so in saying 'anarchists' in this article I am more correctly referring to those who may identify with some or various anarchist goals or aims. I am not speaking for anyone or any one group, although I have canvassed anarchist groups in this country, and individuals within these groups responded, speaking on behalf of themselves.

Back to practicalities then, and the anarchist journey to YES balances the idea that anarchists don't like the idea of nations, against their tendency towards localisation. Ironically, when it comes to nation states, it is sometimes felt that the breaking down of national boundaries makes the boundaries less relevant. Here are some of the opinions I have canvassed.

THE QUESTION

Do you view independence as a state towards breaking down power structures, or do you support devolution as a move towards more democratic federal structures?

THE ANSWERS

My road to anarchism began long ago when I became a socialist, and I did so after reading the prison writings of Bobby Sands, so I can't help but sympathize with independence movements. Anti-imperialism is something I can get behind, even when it's not anarchist.

The recurring argument is that instead of creating new border, we should destroy them. A government holding his power on millions of people is not going to leave it any soon. However, when all the smaller states will start to fight for their own independence, it is only a matter of time before the people then overthrow their own state government to create even smaller state.

I feel like independence would only replace a system of dominance by another with the main difference being that it has a similar culture than the majority of its oppressed populace. It seems to me that it is a fight for a frontier not a liberation.

With a closer government, it is easier to protest authority.

I support nearly anybody fighting for the autonomy of their own community. It decentralizes power and keeps the will of the people as closely aligned to actuality as possible, while still functioning as a united state.

I suppose, fundamentally, if you're going to have a state, it might as well be as small as possible, for the sake of being as accountable as possible to its people, for smaller structures to have to devolve, and to expose the violence by which other states manipulate its constituents.

2012 TO DATE

A handful of definitive anarchist articles were written on the subject of independence, two years ago. Since then, those involved in Scottish class struggle have not changed their views. One of the best pieces was written by a member of the Glasgow Anarchist Federation in a personal capacity. This article presents:

Rather than simply repeat long-standing principles, however, we need to articulate some kind of an analysis and ask ourselves how potential state reorganization will affect us and the wider class struggle.

What is key to this report is the questions as to whether anarchists even should be involved in this issue, and the fact that it is perhaps a good opportunity to remind people of their aims.

As anarchists, we obviously shouldn't argue for voting but nor should we fetishize the act of not voting. Of far more importance is that we are outside of the narrative and critique all political managers.

Critiquing political managers is necessary but I question placing anarchism outside of the narrative. It might be wise to place the word anarchism outside of the narrative, but not anarchist values because these values are manifest in people, all of whom are dedicated to change.

Radical Independence campaigners on Scottish doorsteps have discovered afresh that everyday life is almost entirely anarchist. Voluntary arrangements and understandings prevail almost everywhere — but tell the people that it's anarchist to want to co-operate on an entirely local level, and you'll find that the label is sometimes not helpful.

In absence of the word anarchism then, there is some huge crossover between local Anarchist Federations in Aberdeen, Inverness, Dundee, Glasgow and Edinburgh, and the Radical Independence movements in these places.

VOTING

It is held of anarchists, that they don't participate in the electoral process, believing that parliaments provide a facade behind which the business of managing capitalism goes on. However, anarchists have no problem voting. Anarchists vote all the time because they understand that the process of finding out how many and how few people want to do something is essential. The electoral process is something different and means leaving decisions that will effect many people to a few leaders or bosses.

To this extent anarchism is real democracy. Central to anarchist politics is the idea that everyone effected by a decision should have their say in making that decision. Anarchists oppose government elections because these elections are about choosing rulers rather than ending the division into rulers and ruled. Therefore I would argue that this referendum is the exact kind of popular vote that anarchists have always longed for.

Practical anarchy has never depended on total local self-sufficiency. But many anarchists argue that communities and regions should be as self-sufficient as possible, so as not to depend on distant, impersonal outsiders for necessities. Is it beginning to sound a bit more like indy?

I think it is. Even with modern technology which was designed to enlarge commercial markets and destroy self-sufficiency, much more self-sufficiency is possible than governments and corporations want us to know.

IMAGINE

Some of the goals articulated by Scottish equality campaigners during the referendum have been iterated by anarchists for a long time. Anarchists are more serious about these ideas than their hearers have ever been apt to believe, possibly because the ideas are often given labels which make them sound seditious.

Anarchist comments reflect the ease with which the radical YES campaigners are so alive because for the first time they are excited about personally organising a new society.

While an independent Scotland will still have politicians and bureaucrats who decide things for other people, it will be yet be closer to anarchist ideals – a local community, in which people share common knowledge of their community and its environment, where they will have to live with the consequences of their decisions. Unlike politicians or bureaucrats, who decide for other people.

and

I'm all for it. I see the further decentralisation of democracy in a largely leftist country as a move anarchists should support.

and

While Scotland may be no better off under independence, a vote for YES is yet a positive step towards the sort of localism which anarchists would like to see characterise the coming century. While some anarchists are ignoring the referendum as a sham, considering that voting either YES or NO is promoting the statism they oppose the most, I'd argue to them that the possibility of a YES result opens the door to a localised globe ever so slightly wider, and could be a step in the right direction towards an entirely localised voluntary and cooperative society.

and

We will help those who are poorer or having a shite time. Without promise or punishment by an exterior moral arbiter. I think the concept is something we could possibly strive towards. I think that an Independent Scotland needs as many voices as possible.

and

I can appreciate both perspectives. Independence is not the solution to the issues but “widening the floor of the prison cell” as Chomsky put it.

The journey to YES, therefore, should be straightforward for anarchist groups, whom in general believe in localisation. The ideas that the referendum vote is another way to snare or divide us, and that it is a social exercise to widen the floor of the prison cell, are both real, but they are more than balanced by the possibility that by voting in association with the rest of our country, we are effecting a change in local values.

For those that may be planning abstention, now might be the time to consider a vote for solidarity with the many people who have begun in the last years to share views which in some cases anarchists have felt to be their own.

There is no reason to believe that in an independent Scotland libertarian organising would be any easier or that we would see an upsurge in class struggle. Likewise anarchists will always push against state solutions to social and labour problems, and yet who could resist the chance to halt the embedded mechanisms as represented by the Acts of Union

Stuart Christie, who has never had a problem with the label anarchist, believes that a YES vote is the chance for ‘a break with history – it offers a solution to the people of Scotland disgusted with – and alarmed at – the anti-democratic and elitist behaviour of the Westminster politicians.’

I quote Christie, from an article in the La Rioja newspaper, from Northern Spain.

Christie says:

‘For me it has nothing to do with economic benefit. I’m not suggesting that if Scottish independence comes, it will be a utopia. Far from it. But for me it is an opportunity to create new institutions for a new form of democracy.’

‘If Scotland votes for independence, it opens the floodgates for Catalonia. And also creates an example for other countries to also break free of those very centralized and authoritarian regimes that act with impunity.’

It is this sort of practicality that I am also forwarding, and I think any potential abstainers should read Stuart Christie’s article and consider it. Anarchism has always been global, and has through history focused on workers’ direct and democratic control of society. I think this kind of aspiration has often been expressed in the last year of YES campaigning in Scotland.

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