

Macwhirter, I., 2015, *Disunited Kingdom. How Westminster Won a Referendum But Lost Scotland*, Cargo Publishing, Glasgow, pp. 176.

Ian Macwhirter is one of the most influential Scottish political commentators, nowadays especially known from the pages of “The Herald” and “Sunday Herald” and – a sign of the times – his Twitter account. He also has over 20 years of experience as a broadcaster, reporting for the BBC from Westminster and Holyrood. Such vast experience makes him an exceptionally attentive observer of Scottish politics and, especially, the seismic period of the independence referendum campaign and its aftermath, which is the subject of the book under review (one relevant detail is that Macwhirter, somewhat hesitantly, voted yes; in the book he explains why). It must be added that this volume should be considered as a complementary sequel to his earlier book *Road to Referendum*, published in 2014 and tracing the historical developments that led to the September 2014 vote.

On 11 June 1998 – it was a period after the September 1997 devolution referendum and before the first elections to the reestablished Scottish parliament – Macwhirter published in “The Scotsman” the opinion piece *The two tartan armies*. Political questions regarding Scotland’s constitutional future were inspired by the participation of its national football team in the World Cup of that year (hence the reference to “the tartan army,” as Scotland’s football supporters are known). The penultimate paragraph reads:

Of course, we still don’t know exactly how solid is this new constituency for Scottish independence; it could be merely an expression of cultural Scottishness which will evaporate (...). Or it could be that since the September referendum Scotland already feels that it is another country, and that the momentum will propel Scotland into some form of independence in Europe. This is a question which we simply cannot begin to answer at this stage in national development.

What a telling contrast this quote makes with the one that ends *Disunited Kingdom*...!

I have seen extraordinary changes in Scottish attitudes to self-government in the past twenty years that I would never have believed possible. The hundreds of thousands of Scots who have been persuaded that they need independence to create a fairer nuclear free society – they are not going to go away. It is my firm belief now, having seen the reaction to the referendum, that Scotland will be an independent country. And we may not have to wait very long to see it.

Of course, an ounce of uncertainty remains but Macwhirter's conclusion clearly shows how much has changed in the last two decades.

In his book Macwhirter analyzes the repercussions of this change, by telling why the independence referendum has not definitely (or at least for several generations) sealed the constitutional future of Scotland. It can be argued, that he is answering this multidimensional question by exploring various tensions affecting on the one hand the United Kingdom and Scotland itself on the other.

One such tension or rather discrepancy is the Scottish socio-political landscape as opposed to that of the English. Macwhirter firmly believes that the majority of Scots are willing to live in social-democratic country, while in England (the results of the May 2015 general elections seem to prove his point) the neo-liberal model is the prevalent one. It leads him to the dramatic conclusion: "The tensions that have emerged between the social democratic aspirations of Scotland and the political realities of Westminster politics are simply too great to be contained within (...) a unitary UK state." In addition, such divergences are even more striking when the current state of the Union is taken into account. In Macwhirter's opinion the mutual trust between England and Scotland was probably damaged beyond repair by the chancellor George Osborne during his infamous "Sermon on the Pound": "History may judge that, as a moral community, the Union died on 13th February 2014, and that it was George Osborne who wielded the knife."

Of course, such a background forms a fertile ground for political forces willing to lead Scotland towards independence or, at least, greater leeway in a reformed British state (possibly confederal as Macwhirter is of opinion that "The momentum generated by the independence movement is taking Scotland so far down the road of self-government that it may no longer be possible to halt it, or contain it within a new federal constitution even if one were on offer"). At

the moment the most formidable among such forces is the Scottish National Party, the membership of which has trebled (!) in the months following the referendum. It has to be noted that Macwhirter, albeit without losing professional distance, is an admirer of Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon. It is evident for him, that the party's current strong position was made possible by its highly skilled leaders. He also demystifies the party's ideology by clearly showing that it undoubtedly belongs to the civic current of nationalism and not the ethnic.

What is crucial after the referendum is that the pro-independence movement is much broader and composed of various organizations coupled with the enthusiastic support of a significant part of Scotland's cultural elite. Nevertheless, one of the biggest puzzles of Macwhirter's books is: can this broad civic movement be persuasive enough to win the confidence of the "silent majority," which has opposed independence at the ballot-box? Also: how to do it while, in Macwhirter's opinion, the majority of the Scottish media is at best lukewarm and at worst vehemently against independence?

This is an honest, well-argued and well-balanced book. The author's experience and seriousness of approach make the following sentence a resounding one: "The result [of the referendum – S.B.] was fascinating in its ambiguity. The Unionists didn't quite win, and the Yes campaign didn't quite lose. Everyone accepts that change has to come." But what kind of change and when? That is the question which, at this moment, even Macwhirter cannot answer precisely.

Sergiusz Bober

Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow
Institute of Political Science