

# Security in a Small Nation Scotland, Democracy, Politics

EDITED BY ANDREW W. NEAL

# Security in a Small Nation

Scotland, Democracy, Politics

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# Concluding Remarks: The Narrative of Security and Pathways of Transition

*Thierry Balzacq*

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This contribution stands as a conclusion to the book, arguing that both the tone and the content of debates over security during the Scottish referendum were mainly underwritten by narratives which sought to harness the ambiguity of security. It postulates that ambiguity yields different outcomes and empowers different actors. In a context of deep uncertainty, such as that of a referendum over independence, the ambiguous nature of security would tend to impose exacting commitments on the revisionist side, since it has to show that the devil we don't know is better than the devil we know. Hence, perhaps, the hesitancy of the Yes side to prioritise security topics.

If nothing else, debates over independence share one ineradicable trait: they are set in oppositional terms, as a struggle between the status quo and change. But the exact contents and contours of the discussion are often disrupted by the confusion — deliberate or not — between diagnosis and conviction. That is, a referendum over independence is as much about describing the situation now and after (depending of course on the outcome) as it is about defending firmly held beliefs. The reason, I argue, is that any discourse that attempts to make sense of the stakes brought about by the prospects of independence is primarily a ‘narrative’. Contributors to this volume show that within the context of a referendum, politics is primarily about the competing narratives that describe a nation’s future, vying for prominence. However, because narratives often need to accommodate various demands, they are communicated using ambiguous terms. The result is a blurring effect on the message, which may or may not be desirable but is certainly not without consequences for how people weigh opposing arguments.

Narratives, we know, are designed, not natural, entities. According to Molly Patterson and Kristen Renwick Monroe, a narrative is a ‘sequence of events arranged around a problem and designed to restore equilibrium’.<sup>1</sup> Such narratives draw on different ‘facts’, and, when the facts seem to be the same, they endow them with different meanings, as if meaning depended on how the ‘facts’ are interpreted. Above all, the primary concern is how best to sideline the opposing argument. Further, while a referendum on independence seeks closure over the destiny of a country, the inherent ambiguity of ‘security’ does not easily lend itself to serene discussions.<sup>2</sup> This explains, at least partly, why, in times of transition, security discussion often stretches between two heightened narratives: continuity or change.

In this conclusion, my aim is to chart the importance of narratives in understanding the twists and turns undergone by ‘security’ during the Scottish referendum. I argue that the relatively low profile of this issue during the campaign might have had less to do with its lack of

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- 1 Molly Patterson and Kristen Renwick Monroe, ‘Narrative in Political Science’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1, 1 (1998), 315–31 (p. 324); see also S. R. Shenhav, ‘Political Narratives and Political Reality’, *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique*, 27, 3 (2006), 245–62, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.1.1.315>
  - 2 Arnold Wolfers, “‘National Security’ as an Ambiguous Symbol”, *Political Science Quarterly*, 67, 4 (1952), 481–502, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2145138>

political clout than with the difficulty of acknowledging and handling its ambiguous nature. This made it difficult for a single side to enter, let alone dominate, the technicalities of the security field. This conclusion therefore explores three interrelated themes raised by the Scottish referendum as they relate to security: narratives, politics, and ambiguity. In a sense, security expresses a way in which a community weaves different aspects of the present reality into a narrative in order to give meaning to its life.

## Narratives

Referenda are always directed toward a goal. That goal divides; its nature varies. Stakeholders can speculate endlessly about the implications of their favourite outcome, but they seldom question the reality of their perspective. In a referendum, opposite sides must put forward their own accounts of what is at stake, what their preferred outcome would be and, more importantly, why it matters. Indeed, 'the chief characteristic of a narrative is that it renders understanding only by connecting (however unstably) parts of a constructed configuration or a social network (however incoherent or unrealizable) composed of symbolic, institutional, and material practices'.<sup>3</sup> Typically, such narratives order events by situating the community in the plot.<sup>4</sup> They are not a mere reporting of facts, though narrators pretend to draw on what is; rather, narratives aim to explain and justify why events should be assembled and organised in a particular way. It is in this sense that Patterson and Monroe argue that 'all narratives are essentially normative'.<sup>5</sup>

The chapters brought together in this book feature one main narrative, that is, 'smallness'. From this narrative, two heated dualities arise: first, strong versus weak Scotland; second, isolated versus integrated Scotland. There is not enough evidence to weigh the power of each component of these two pairs of dualities, but Juliet Kaarbo

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3 M. R. Somers and G. D. Gibson, 'Reclaiming the Epistemological "Other": Narrative and the Social Constitution of Identity', in *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, ed. by Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Wiley, 1994), pp. 37–99.

4 See Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1986); Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989); Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

5 Patterson and Monroe (1998), p. 321.

and Daniel Keneally, on the one hand, and Baldur Thorhallsson and Alysso J. K. Bailes, on the other, consistently document the invocation of smallness during the Scottish referendum. The Yes and the No wings saw in smallness two radically different types of future for Scotland. In particular, the Yes side interpreted independence as an opportunity to build a state that would be more sensitive to international rules, while pursuing an ethical diplomacy of sorts. The No side, by contrast, saw in smallness a vital vulnerability for Scotland. Overall, the discussion boiled down to whether smallness was a strength, a risk, or a natural weakness. For instance, Sandy Hardie's chapter holds that Scottish independence would have diminished Scotland's ability to protect its citizens, in particular abroad. It is not feasible here to bring all the different aspects of this argument into sharper relief, but I can sketch a possible counter-approach that may diminish its force. Part of the difficulty with this view is that it depends upon an independent Scotland pursuing the same goals and foreign policies as the UK, which make UK citizens one of the prized targets for some violent groups the world over. But Hardie implicitly captures an important element that undergirds any debate over a referendum, namely the issue of time. In fact, referenda show in a particularly acute form how it is tricky to know what will happen once a state is independent. It might be that all really rests with the capacity of the political elite to adapt swiftly to the new environment, but adaptation is harder when the elite lacks expertise in the domain at stake or is unprepared. Matters might even be worse if the former 'shelter' decides to punish the newly independent entity. That said, given the range of shared interests, it remains uncertain as to whether the UK would have taken an aggressive stance with a newly independent Scotland. In times of global interdependence, resentment does not necessarily result in revenge.

Debates on small states have waxed and waned, but they generally involve matters of resources, visibility, and influence. The now voluminous literature on small states teaches us, among other things, that the success or failure of small states in the international arena depends on a host of factors for which size alone cannot account.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this

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6 For a start, see *inter alia*, C. Clarke and T. Payne, *Politics. Security and Development in Small States* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987); Tom Crowards, 'Defining the Category of "Small States"', *Journal of International Development*, 14, 2 (2002), 143-79, <http://>

is why, as Thorhallsson and Bailes argue, in addition to interesting similarities with Nordic states, Scotland's case stirred up challenges which had less to do with its smallness than with the newness of the situation its independence would have created both for itself and for the international system. A dominant feature of international systems is that they abhor uncertainty. In this sense, the primary challenge that a narrative which supports independence confronts is to relieve the uncertainty that any change of such a magnitude creates. So whereas the No side could safely draw on the uncertainty sparked by what an independent Scotland would have to struggle against, the Yes side could only emphasise the view that the No wing occluded the long-term benefits of independence. This involves different ways — with respect to security — of: defining the problem, characterising choices, prioritising options, justifying strategies, assessing capacities (e.g., expertise and institutional robustness), and outlining solutions. The struggles around these challenges contribute to defining the politics of the referendum.

## Politics

A second conversation that the book opens concerns the — relatively little — space afforded to security during the campaign. Though some chapters dig into the reasons for this marginalisation, they also note that the referendum did not entirely confirm the theoretical tendency within security studies to draw a line between normal politics and security politics.<sup>7</sup> This does not mean security and politics always enter

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[dx.doi.org/10.1002/jid.860](https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.860); Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Small States and Small States Revisited', *New Political Economy*, 8, 1 (2003), 9–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356346032000078705>; Olav F. Knudsen, 'Small States, Latent and Extant: Towards a General Perspective', *Journal of International relations and Development*, 5, 2 (2002), 182–98, [http://ams.hi.is/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Small\\_States\\_Latent\\_Extant.pdf](http://ams.hi.is/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Small_States_Latent_Extant.pdf); Keohane (1969).

7 This can mainly be found in the Copenhagen School's version of securitisation theory. See, *inter alia*, Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998). For an extensive review of the different strands of securitisation theory and their treatment of the relations between security and politics, see: T. Balzacq and others, 'What Kind of Theory — If Any — Is Securitization?', *International Relations*, 29, 1 (2014), 96–136, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0047117814526606>; T. Balzacq, S. Leonard, and J. Ruzicka, 'Securitization' Revisited: Theory and Cases', *International Relations*, 30, 4 (2015), pp. 494–531, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0047117815596590>

into each other's orbit. Instead, it points to the view that the referendum was an intriguing case to study, as it challenged some of the premises students and scholars have about security. Andrew Neal, for instance, 'compares the quietude of security politics in Scotland with the history and transformation of politics at Westminster'. He points out that, of the 670 pages of the Scottish Government's White Paper, only 6 were devoted to security and intelligence. Of course, quantity is hardly the only reliable testimony of importance or priority, but it provides us with clues as to why security was not as widely debated as could have been expected. Perhaps the referendum sheds light on the undefined *work* of security rather than on the politics of security as such. It may in fact be argued that security's powerful ability to alter the mood and terms of the debate was profitably mobilised neither by the Yes nor by the No wing. Instead, security rode the tension between Yes and No, but did not tilt the balance in favour of either of the two sides.

Neal assesses the lack of security discourse in two ways. One is an apparently responsible silence, which prevented the debate veering into securitisation as an exceptional kind of politics. The second, he says, might have been a strategy of avoiding discussions of security at length, because they would have potentially disclosed the superior expertise of Westminster on the issue. In my view, the second part of the argument has more leverage. In many ways, this is confirmed by Colin Atkinson, Nick Brooke and Brian Harris' analysis of the Scottish Government's proposals on intelligence accountability.<sup>8</sup> But what are we to conclude from the apparently insufficient expertise of the Scottish political elite? Not that it could not live up to the challenges brought by potential security issues. Even those countries most learned about security do not always perform at the level expected. Nor that Scotland would have been more insecure out of the UK. The truth is, nobody knows. Pathways either to security or insecurity are numerous and not always predictable. Yet, what we know is that the Yes proposals on security exhibited several shortcomings. For instance, they did not sufficiently depart from the existing mechanisms of the current UK political settlement. This means, in other words, that the Yes side

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8 See also Chapter 6 of this volume.

proclaimed the demise of processes to which it aimed to contribute. It wanted to sever ties with one specific shelter, but could only do so by acknowledging that a shelter was needed, the nature of which was to be negotiated after the referendum. The No side, on the other hand, relied on mechanisms over which it had little control. It wanted to remain inside the UK, but had to acknowledge that this meant a lack of security agency on the Scottish side, that is, a position of security dependence *vis-à-vis* London. Between the Yes and the No sides, then, sit different possibilities of how Scottish agency could have operated on security. A notable benefit of this book is to help us understand in what ways specific security narratives are able to produce Scotland as either an object or a subject of security.

## Ambiguity

In general, parties involved in referendum campaigns need to display sureness regarding the most uncertain of events. The problem, however, is that security discussions only happen when there are questions about the current state of a polity, that is, when there is a form of uncertainty. Moreover, in the context of a referendum regarding a nation's independence, security might quickly become a point of contention for the different stakeholders. Because of its emotional weight, most actors would presumably make whatever effort they could to tap into security's power to catch people's attention. Be that as it may, in the Scottish case, the Yes side had to bear most of the burden of proof, because it had to convince people that Scotland would be better off without what the No side described as the 'UK shelter'.<sup>9</sup> The problem, however, is that it is difficult to assess the extent to which the future will be better than the present, under contingent circumstances.<sup>10</sup> In this light, the familiar security discourse maintained by the No side appeared more comforting, if not reassuring, than the leap into the unknown demanded by the Yes campaign. A referendum does not only happen in a given cultural and historical context, but it also creates its own context, in particular by betting on the future of the nation. In

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9 See Chapter 2 in this volume.

10 A point well made by Hugh Bochel and Andrew Defty in Chapter 4 of this book.

this light, recourse to security talk appears a risky strategy, because of the evolving conditions of the discussion. While the Yes side required people to be open to a different, new, and unpredictable order, the No campaign held that order and security derived from remaining under an institutional blanket whose strengths (and flaws) had been tested. This is to say, the Yes side was unable to cut short the ambiguities inherent in security and close the gaps.<sup>11</sup>

Whether we like it or not, security arguments with a higher chance to succeed are usually those which offer a predetermined course, disqualify 'abstract principles', and privilege 'finite relations'.<sup>12</sup> The most important point is that securitisation, to this way of thinking, serves to close options and minimise political contingency. During the debates surrounding the Scottish referendum, for instance, the No side began with the presumptive reliability of the UK polity and drew upon uncertainty in order to securitise independence, whereas the Yes campaign, by proposing to revise previously established relations, had the indirect effect of opening the Scottish political community to unpredictability, making it harder to stimulate a broader public commitment.

The politics of independence, then, through which the Yes and the No sides represented their views, may be looked upon as a politics of dealing with ambiguity in security. In any case, the debate between Yes and No was a matter of degree. The more uncertainty was portrayed as a problem, the more a position leaned towards No. The greater the predominance of new, though indeterminate relations, the more the approach leaned towards Yes. Thus, in trying to intuit why security was dealt with or not addressed in the way it was, we need explicitly to engage the management of ambiguity by each side, since the difficulty of 'speaking security' owes something to the ambiguity that always looms in the background of security talks.

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11 See Charles Raab's contribution in Chapter 3 of this volume.

12 Willem de Lint and Sirpa Virta, 'Security in Ambiguity Towards a Radical Security Politics', *Theoretical Criminology*, 8, 4 (2004), 465–89 (p. 474), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1362480604046660>

## Conclusion

My focus in these concluding remarks has been to identify the main lines that might enable us to connect the dots between the chapters assembled in this book. I would now like to raise a point which I think could constitute a next step in the discussion, because it matters beyond the Scottish case: the ethics of independence. I know the issue is slippery, but would it not be productive to ask: under what conditions is independence ethically defensible? Or, put differently, are all the claims made about or against secession 'right'? Is there a just secession, of sorts? What does secession teach us about the moral standing of group agents? These are not the same as whether independence from a polity in order to set up a new state is materially warranted or not. Though they are separate questions, the second — i.e. whether secession is practically feasible — is somewhat nested in the first group of questions. With various entities across Europe aspiring to independence, scholars would be well advised to develop more robust works on the ethics of independence.<sup>13</sup> This is even more urgent for those who claim to be working within critical approaches to security, wherein issues of emancipation and agency are so central. In this sense, the chapters brought together here constitute a viable first step towards such a task, for without a fine grained analysis of the meaning of different arguments, it is much more difficult to assess the ethical issues they generate.

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13 A nice introduction can be found here: Allen Buchanan, *Secession: The Morality of Political Divorce from Fort Sumter to Lithuania and Quebec* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991). Some advanced works are: Cass R. Sunstein, 'Constitutionalism and Secession', *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 58, 2 (1991), 633–70, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1599969>; Avishai Margalit and Joseph Raz, 'National Self-Determination', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 87, 9 (1990), 439–61, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2026968>; Daniel Weinstock, 'Constitutionalizing the Right to Secede', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 9, 2 (2001), 182–203, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-9760.00124>

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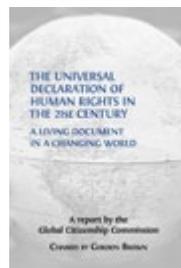
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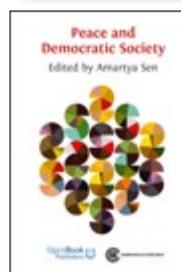
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# Security in a Small Nation

## Scotland, Democracy, Politics

Andrew W. Neal (ed.)

The 2014 Referendum on Scottish independence sparked debate on every dimension of modern statehood. Levels of public interest and engagement were unprecedented, as demonstrated by record-breaking voter turnout. Yet aside from Trident, the issue of security was relatively neglected in the campaigns, and there remains a lack of literature on the topic. In this volume Andrew Neal has collated a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives on security and constitutional change in Scotland and the UK, including writing from experts in foreign policy analysis, intelligence studies, parliamentary studies, and journalism.

*Security in a Small Nation* provides an illuminating analysis of the politics of security. Its authors reflect on a number of related issues including international comparisons, alliances, regional cooperation, terrorism, intelligence sharing, democratic oversight, and media coverage. It has a particular focus on what security means for small states and democratic politics.

The book draws on current debates about the extent of intelligence powers and their implications for accountability, privacy, and human rights. It examines the foreign and security policy of other small states through the prism of Scottish independence, providing unique insight into the bureaucratic and political processes associated with multi-level security governance. These contributions provide a detailed picture of the changing landscape of security, including the role of diverse and decentralised agencies, and new security interdependencies within and between states.

The analysis presented in this book will inform ongoing constitutional debates in the UK and the study of other secessionist movements around the world. *Security in a Small Nation* is essential reading for any follower of UK and Scottish politics, and those with an interest in security and nationhood on a global scale.

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