



## Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

### The Scottish Independence Referendum

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There's been a remarkable change in communal attitudes to Scotland recently: people no longer complain whenever we point out that Scotland is different, and that communal concerns about the English National Curriculum, for example, or Coroners' powers, simply are not relevant north of the border (instead we have tzorres of our own!); instead suddenly everyone wants to know what will happen if Scotland becomes independent – will we still be part of the UK communal structure, or will we have to set up, as a questioner at the Board of Deputies recently put it, a “parallel body”?

Well, we won't have to set up anything, since that parallel body already exists: the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) was set up to deal with all those matters of concern to the Jewish community that really are very different in Scotland. Many are not new: the Scottish legal and educational systems remained distinct after the Union in 1707 even though legislative authority passed (temporarily, as it turned out!) to Westminster. These differences, or rather ignorance of them, can have serious effects: there are no "Marriage Secretaries" in Scots Law, and the Hon Secretary of the shul has as much standing as the flower-arranger to sign civil marriage certificates! Fortunately when we discovered that some shuls had been following English usage, SCoJeC was able to persuade the Registrar General to homologate the marriages retrospectively, so the couples affected will never know that they had been living in sin.



*SCoJeC Director Ephraim Borowski with the First Minister, Alex Salmond, and Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis during the Chief Rabbi's recent visit to the Scottish Parliament.*

After Devolution in 1999, the consensus was that around 90% of matters affecting the day-to-day lives of people living in Scotland would be determined in Scotland. Health, delivery of welfare and social work, planning and local government, emergency services, food and agriculture, registration and census matters, economic development, heritage, culture and sport, and transport and tourism are all devolved to the Scottish Parliament. Further devolution in 2012 added elections and increased the power to vary taxation – but reclaimed for Westminster the regulation of activities in Antarctica! What remains reserved to the UK Parliament are foreign policy and defence, the economy, social security, immigration, employment, and a few medical matters such as fertility and transplantation. Equality policy is made in Westminster but implemented by Holyrood.

Obviously it is only reserved policy areas that can be affected by the outcome of September's referendum, but even that overstates the case. All the main anti-independence

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political parties nonetheless favour devolving more powers to Edinburgh – more economic policy, energy, and immigration, for example, while the Scottish Nationalists propose that an independent Scotland would remain in a currency union with the rest of the UK so that many aspects of economic policy will continue to be decided in London.

So would independence be good for the Jews? It's not for SCoJeC to say – as a representative body, we can only speak on behalf of the Jewish Community of Scotland on matters on which the Jewish Community is largely agreed, and our recent [Being Jewish in Scotland project](#) has told us much about their concerns. We do not believe that there is any intrinsic threat to Jewish people or the Community as such, nor any inherent benefit, from either independence or continued membership of the union, so just as we cannot take sides in an election, we cannot take sides in the Referendum.

Clearly opinion about independence is divided, but a straw poll at a recent communal event saw the audience split roughly 200 against and 3 for. An article in the *Jewish Chronicle* by a Jewish SNP member gave several examples of how the current SNP administration had been supportive of the community – but the same was true of the previous Labour-Liberal coalition. On the other side, there are those who point out in apocalyptic terms that the combination of nationalism with socialism is one we have seen before; the SNP would reply that theirs is a civic, not an ethnic, nationalism, embracing all who live in Scotland, and welcoming immigration. Others point to the Scottish Parliament's obsession with Israel – in the current session, out of 222 Members' Motions about foreign countries, no fewer than 43 have been about Israel, while there have been only 12 each about Syria and South Africa, the next highest, and only 1 about Iran; the SNP Minister for External Affairs has, however, publicly declared his opposition to boycotts and his eagerness to visit Israel – and has been subjected to abuse as a result.

Will it happen? The polls have consistently shown a majority against independence, although the gap seems to be narrowing. But all depends what they ask: unsurprisingly, more people respond “Don't know” if asked “How will you vote on 18 Sept?” than “If the poll were today, how would you vote?” Astonishingly more than 20% – and contrary to popular belief, more nationalists than unionists – say they might change their minds. More than 20% of SNP and Labour voters plan to vote against party lines, and more than 20% of those who describe themselves as “Scottish, not British” plan to vote No. Most women, most of the middle class, and most graduates, plan to vote No – but most people do plan to vote: more than 80%, compared with 54% for a general election. The Scottish Social Attitudes Survey found that most Scots want to be able to determine their own level of taxation – but want it to be the same as the rest of the UK!

Much of the argument comes down to sentiment rather than reason. The biggest determinant is economic: polls have shown that people would vote whichever way would make them £500 a year better off, and both sides claim to exceed this – but promising is not persuading! And oddly, support for independence jumped after the Chancellor ruled out a currency union. Undoubtedly the nationalists have more passion, but which camp has reason on their side, though not quite the decisive question, remains moot. The nationalists accuse the unionists of negativity, but given a Yes/No question, how can those arguing for No not be negative?! When Scots enter the polling booth on 18 September, will they follow their heads, their hearts, or their pockets? Who knows! SCoJeC can't say, but we will continue to work with whoever governs Scotland, whether within or outwith the United Kingdom, in order to improve the experience of *being Jewish in Scotland*.

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