

Alistair Carmichael: 'Nationalists say Scotland and England have different values. That's not true'

In his first major interview of the year, the Scottish secretary says that nationalist rhetoric is in danger of poisoning relations in the referendum runup

Daniel Boffey Policy Editor

The Observer, Sunday 2 February 2014



Alistair Carmichael, secretary of state for Scotland. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod

It was the week that the Scottish referendum debate jolted into life. A poll, seemingly going against the grain of popular opinion, suggested a quite sudden swing in support to those seeking an independent Scotland, putting those in favour of the union at 44% compared with the Yes campaign's 37% – narrowing the gap by 10% since September 2013.

Meanwhile, depending on one's position on the referendum, the governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, either warned that a standalone Scotland would lose its fiscal independence anyway if it used the pound or, for the first time, accepted that a deal

could be done to allow Scots to retain sterling post-independence, giving encouragement to the SNP's plans.

The starting whistle was truly blown on the race to decide Scotland's future – certainly, at least, for the spin doctors interpreting the latest twists and turns.

But for Alistair Carmichael, the secretary of state for Scotland, talking to the *Observer* in his first major interview of the year of the Scottish referendum, it was a telling week for another, troubling and perhaps more significant, reason.

On Wednesday, at a conference on higher education, the SNP's education minister, Michael Russell accused the government south of the border of xenophobia.

The ostensible target was the coalition's immigration policies, which the minister claimed were pushing foreign students away from Scottish universities. But for Carmichael, who has heard Russell also recently talk of the need to charge English students for attending Scottish universities (free to Scots) so as to avoid a flood of "fee refugees", it was symptomatic of a telling tactical switch in the nationalists' rhetoric.

The nationalists, he said, are "trying to portray this as a contest between different values in Scotland from England". It's a trend that he has even felt moved to warn the prime minister and the cabinet about.

For Carmichael, born on Islay in the Inner Hebrides and the Liberal Democrat MP for Orkney and Shetland, such politics of division is an abomination. He believes the tactic is one born out of desperation due to a lack of poll movement for the independence campaigners in 2013. But he also sees it as dangerous.

"There is no more a set of homogenous Scottish values than there is a set of homogenous English values. One of the tactics is to talk about 'England' meaning the south-east and London. I mean, if you look at voting patterns as an indication of people's values then it is clear that people in the north of England and Wales, in the Midlands, share many of the values of the people of Scotland. And there are a whole range of values held by people in the city of London," he said.

Asked whether there was a risk of such talk creating antagonism between English and Scots, a poisoning of relations, he said: "I think that is the danger."

Carmichael's warning today, just eight months ahead of the vote, could, of course, be seen as political posturing. Yet there are reports of a rise in the proportion of race hate crimes in Scotland against "white English", from 3% to 5%, between 2011-12 and 2012-13 – the only group to be subject to such an increase. Only last week it emerged that the former prime minister, Gordon Brown, had felt moved to intervene in the case of a bullied English schoolgirl in his constituency told to "fuck off back to your own country" .

Carmichael is keen to say that he believes such tactics will be rejected by Scots. But he also clearly believes that a nastiness is infecting the debate in Scotland. "The language has already been quite disgraceful, talking about fees refugees swamping Scottish universities," he said. "That helps nobody. It's quite deliberate; it isn't done by accident."

He added: "There are people who are genuinely obsessive about this. I have been called a quisling and any number of things like that. It is offensive not just to me – I have broad shoulders, I can take it – but to our neighbours, who suffered under Nazi occupation. To compare the position of Scotland as part of the UK to their situation is offensive and shows an incredible lack of judgment."

Sitting in the Yes Scotland office near Glasgow Central station, Blair Jenkins, chief executive of the campaign for independence, is having none of it. His offices, in the basement of a former bank, have the air of a here-today, gone-tomorrow, pop-up business. The small reception, decorated in bold primary colours, is essentially a gift shop. "Yes" polo shirts go for £17. "Yessie" T-shirts, complete with cartoon image of the Loch Ness monster, are yours for £7.99. Even the painting of Glasgow rush hour behind the receptionist can be picked up for a mere £695.

In nine months it will all disappear. Jenkins, a former director of broadcasting at STV, hopes to go back into television when this is all over. Politics, he says, isn't for him. But he has a deep and obvious passion for winning this fight and leaving a legacy beyond branded T-shirts and mugs. He rejects, out of hand, however, the suggestion that those seeking independence have gone below the belt.

"Hand on heart, the rhetoric, the over-the-top language, has come far more from the other side," he said. "One [pro-union] politician talked about 'bayoneting the wounded' after the referendum. Scottish politicians and English politicians have compared [Scotland's first minister] Alex Salmond variously to Mussolini, Hitler, the North Korean chap, Mugabe. There's nothing that comes the other way [like that]."

That is not to say that Jenkins rejects the framing of the referendum debate as one of values. He talks about having friends all over England, and celebrating back in 1966 when England won the World Cup. "My mum fell in love with Nobby Stiles," he said.

But, while insisting that his campaign is talking every bit about economics as it is the battle of Bannockburn, it is when discussing Scotland's difference that Jenkins leans forward and truly comes alive. "One of the things driving this debate, driving the referendum, is the fact that people in Scotland on the whole want to make different kinds of choices about what kind of society they want to have, what kind of economy they have and the values they want to live by.

"It's not a dry constitutional debate in Scotland. It's how, as a community and a society, we want to live. Scotland has always produced entrepreneurs and we value that; people

who can grow their own businesses. But I feel there is a much stronger sense here that we fight for one another and we need a society where we look out for one another and people don't get thoroughly marginalised and left out, and that's an important part of the debate."

The emotional gambit will obviously be a strong one for those seeking independence. Independence has the glamour and excitement of something new. It appeals alike to nationalists and radical internationalists, keen to make a break from the strictures of Westminster politics. Those seeking to keep the union have found themselves constrained from union rallies for fear of activating the unionists from Northern Ireland, and others, who would poison their well.

For Professor John Curtice, professor of politics at Strathclyde University, the polls show that it is not sentimental arguments that will win this referendum. Analysing the ICM poll out last weekend, he warns that the swing could be rogue.

"In so far as there is a real swing, what explains it is that in this poll people felt that independence would be good for Scotland's economy rather than bad," he said. "It is the economy 'what done it'."

Standing outside Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art on Thursday, 44-year-old Jeanette Ryan, who is unemployed but studying photography, was taking photos of a statue of the Duke of Wellington. That very British hero has a traffic cone on his head. He has sported it for a number of years now, no matter how many times the local council removes the makeshift orange hat and warns off students and others who stick it up there under the cover of night.

"I always take pictures of him. He's very appealing with that cone on his head," she giggles.

"I'll vote yes and I would like to think we would become independent. But I think there are a lot of scared people out there," she said.

Glasgow is an irreverent place, but pounds and pence in your pocket matter, too.

Kelly Gibson, 36, a homeless *Big Issue* seller on busy Sauchiehall Street, perhaps summed it up best: "I think that maybe we've got too much to lose. If they can't explain to me how Scotland will be richer, how do I know that I will be better off?"

More from the Guardian [What's this?](#)

[Death of servicewoman: family hopes for justice from fresh inquest](#) 01 Feb 2014

[Scotland's assisted suicide bill is an offence to our human dignity](#) 01 Feb 2014

More from around the web [What's this?](#)

[Drone with legs can perch, watch and walk like a bird](#) (New Scientist)

[Credit after bankruptcy](#) (Experian)

Hugh Grant's the daddy, but that doesn't make him the baddy 02 Feb 2014

Expert Gamers Reveal Secrets of "Battlefield 4": Collecting Dog Tags (EA)

Theresa May snookered in the crucible 30 Jan 2014

When a Writer Doesn't Need a License: the Scary Reality of October 1962 (Humanthology)

David Cameron and François Hollande head for EU clash 30 Jan 2014

Did your Ancestor Storm Normandy? How to Figure It Out? (Ancestry)

© 2014 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.