



Do we really want a race of uneducated Northern Britons?

by Alastair Stewart

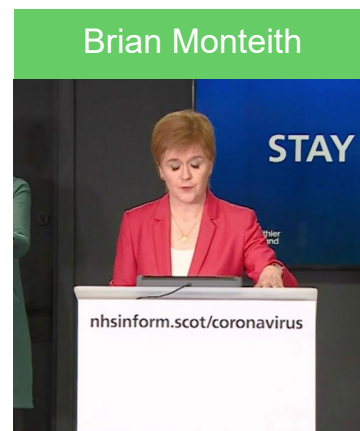
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FOR THE SOCIOLOGIST Ernest Gellner, a nation is only as successful as the priority it affords its education system; and today we see a global economy in which a country's success is contingent on its ability to produce a workforce of "high skills, at moderate cost, and at an ever-increasing pace."

At the most basic level, literacy is the prerequisite for all subsequent vocational and non-vocational specialisations; and in this context the impact of independence on the Scottish primary education system is of particular relevance.

The SNP argue that the best way to equip young Scots with the skills necessary to compete with countries like China and India is to regain (emphasis added) full autonomy from Westminster. In the words of John Swinney MSP: 'UK

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Sturgeon's PPBs must be called out and called off

David Bone



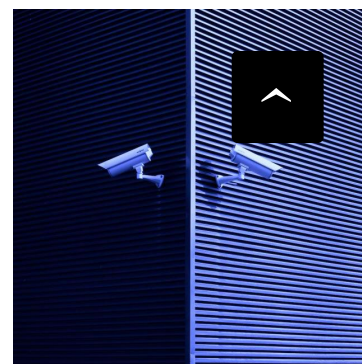
governments...have failed to maximise Scotland's potential...the achievements under devolution showed that a Scottish Government could achieve much for the country."

Quite bluntly, this solution is a misnomer. Even before the Scotland Act of 1998, devolution operated in all but name. Scotland's educational system was entirely autonomous from England with its own curriculum, examinations and legislative framework.

That autonomous framework has deep roots, stretching as far back as the Education Act of 1696 which established schools in every parish, paid for by local landowners and the Church of Scotland. The subsequent pre-Union, Protestant Religion and Presbyterian Church Act of 1707, enshrined the Church of Scotland's role in Scotland, and guaranteed the continuation of Scotland's parish school system in the Act of Union that swiftly followed.

Yet concurrently thereafter, Westminster funding increased throughout the early nineteenth century, long before the centralising Education Act of 1872 and the creation of the Westminster based Scotch Education Department. As historian Tom Devine notes "the contributing role of the state, even before 1872, in the improvement of literacy should not be underestimated." As early as 1833 capital grants were available from Westminster for those schools that accepted school inspections, that followed an improved curriculum and that recruited state certified teachers.

By 1846 pupils over the age of 13 that taught at their schools (yes, taught) while studying would be eligible for



2040 – A Scottish dystopia



Scottish Tories must emerge from life support soon to make any difference



Trigger warning: we are not an effing amusement park

state subsidised scholarships for undertaking professional teacher training.

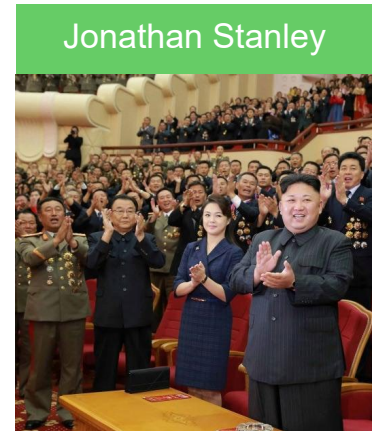
By 1855, again by virtue of significant central funding, Scotland boasted some of the highest levels of literacy in Europe with 89% for men compared to 70% in England and Wales and 77% versus 70% for women.

This, therefore, is the background to understanding the 1872 Act, legislation that was brought in by Gladstone's Liberals, who held an astounding 51 seats out of a possible 58 in Scotland.

Whatever the motivation for the 1872 Act (the background to which can be found in the 1865 Argyll Commission), within 30 years of its passing illiteracy was eliminated from both the Highlands and Lowlands and education had been made compulsory for 5 to 13 year olds. By 1910, Scotland had more pupils in primary education than all other advanced European countries.

The most notable and long lasting reverberation of the 1872 Act for Scotland today was the consolidation of a Scottish primary education framework into the Scotch Education Department, which became a part of the newly established Scottish Office in 1885; its permanent home for the duration of the twentieth century. In turn, the old framework has passed into the hands of successive Holyrood administrations, with expanded central funding to local authorities and national policy framing powers.

It would, therefore, be more accurate to call the SNP's plans for an exclusively Scottish funded education system an untested innovation, rather than a re-establishment of 'Scottish money, for Scottish education'.



*Political narcissism
always eats itself - the
SNP will be no different*



*Scottish Conservatives
need a leader to take the
fight to Sturgeon – not
make swipes at
colleagues*

But in any event, in the five years since the SNP first entered into government, they have failed to demonstrate that they are capable of developing an education system that can produce competitive standards in a modern world, even with Westminster funding.

Only last year, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Report (2011) listed Scotland alongside Uganda, with 3 out of 10 people being illiterate. The Scottish Survey of Adult Literacies (SSA, 2009) foreshadowed the UN findings, concluding that just over a quarter of the Scottish population will face 'constrained opportunities' due to poor literacy (with 1 in 28 of them facing 'serious challenges').

The Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN, 2011) indicates an equally uninspiring picture for Scottish children. In 2011, from 11,000 pupils between P4 and P7, it was found that an average of 7 out of 10 children were rated as 'performing well': but by the time the children reach second year at high school, the figure falls to 4 out of 10. Why are children falling away in these critical years? This is a big question, and a big problem for the Scottish government.

But the SNP's answer to illiteracy remains quixotic, and a progressive program of investment to support the Curriculum for Excellence, the Literacy Action Plan, the Early Years Framework, a commitment to smaller class sizes and £1.25 billion in capital for new schools is completely at odds with their economic punt on independence.

Not only does such an argument presume readily available capital to substitute the £8.8 billion (2011 – 2012) in subsidies from the United Kingdom to Scotland, it offers little reassurance of at least breaking even with current

Scottish expenditure commitments.

Scotland's annual GDP stands at £145 billion in 2010-2011. Assuming that Scotland even retained full control of oil and gas from the North Sea, 18% of Scottish of GDP (the percentage presently contributed by oil and gas revenues) would become reliant on one of the most notoriously fluctuating commodities in the world.

By betting that taxes can be raised locally from hydrocarbons and conveniently ignoring the annual 6% decade long decline in North Sea production, the SNP are risking the £2.5 billion Education and Lifelong Learning Portfolio (2012-2013) budget needed to give Scotland basic literacy skills intrinsic to global survival, let alone increased success.

And given that poor literacy and numeracy among pupils in Scotland is twice as likely to be among those from deprived backgrounds, jeopardising spending commitments through an ill thought out proposal for independence will have widespread repercussions in combatting poverty and increasing access to academic opportunities for the poorest and most marginalised in our society.

Surely, though, having left the United Kingdom an independent Scotland could look to the European Union for funding for its impoverished education budget?

Well, quite simply the financial benefits of UK membership would be gone in exchange for supranational EU monitoring and 'advisory services'. There is no EU pot of gold: Member states must retain full responsibility, and the bill, for their educational provision; and billions of pounds worth of UK subsidies would be replaced with a few million euros for well-meaning but hardly central programs such as

the Comenius Exchange Programme.

In his maiden speech, the first SNP Westminster MP Robert McIntyre famously asked 'do we really want a race of uneducated Britons?' Today, as then, the answer remains a resounding no. The trickery of the SNP's independence argument is that it presents past failures as successes and past successes as failures: but in order to ensure Scotland produces the talents required for competition against larger and more robust economies, it is essential to understand that the past is a provider of wisdom. Those who would govern must learn that the past is not a shrouded enemy - historic Scottish-Anglo relations are not something to be ashamed of.

The Headmaster from Alan Bennett's *Forty Years On* said it best: "The future comes after the past. Otherwise it couldn't be the future."

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