

It is now a question of identity

Scottish independence is about much more than economics, says **David Chillingworth**

I listened to the First Minister of Scotland, Alex Salmond, on 1 July last year, as he responded to the Queen's speech after she had opened the fourth session of the Scottish Parliament: "So there is much we share, that is a given. But the nations of these islands are also distinctive, with our own unique history and culture, our own economic challenges and our own opportunities. Some of us believe the best way to articulate that uniqueness and tackle those challenges lies within ourselves — and should be fully expressed within the work of this Parliament.

"However, whatever constitutional path that the people of Scotland choose — and it is their choice to make — we will aspire to be, in your words, 'firm friends and equal partners'."

Nobody should underestimate Mr Salmond. Warm and respectful, he played back to the Queen her own words from her recent historic visit to Dublin. He sought to be transformative, and risked being cheeky at the same time.

On a visit to Sussex last month, I handed the taxi-driver at Haywards Heath Station a Scottish banknote. I didn't catch the whole of what he said. But it wasn't kind, and it included the word Salmond. Suddenly, the Scottish independence debate is a live issue across the UK. Scotland has been a good place to be for me these past seven years. In contrast with my past experience in Northern Ireland, constitution and identity are largely uncontested. There is broad acceptance that devolution has been good for Scotland. People like the idea that the Scottish government at Holyrood is accessible.

There has been a refreshing lack of the negative imaging of "the other", which so easily grows. England is spoken of as a non-specific "down south". Scotland is diverse and inclusive. For the most part, people manage not to be unpleasant about England in order to feel good about being Scottish. But suddenly it is different. No longer a slightly whimsical idea, Scottish independence has become a matter of serious politics. And not just politics — it is about identity and belonging as well. That is why it is important for Churches and other faith groups to be involved in the way in which this debate is shaped.

I believe that Churches should be firmly agnostic about matters of flags, emblems, and jurisdiction. Our concerns should be human rights, values, inclusion, culture, and ethos. The Nobel laureate John Hume recalled the words of his Scottish Presbyterian great-grandfather: "Always remember. You cannot eat a flag." Nationalist passion can be an expensive luxury. It carries risks for Churches: they can all too easily find themselves becoming markers of division.

This is the stuff of my family story. My grandfather ministered in the 1930s in Dublin among Southern Irish Protestants. Dispossessed of their political identity by Irish Partition in 1922, they invested their identity in the Church of Ireland. The resolving of that pain was one of the things that the Queen's recent visit to Ireland accomplished.

In the 1980s and '90s, I ministered among Ulster Protestants who couldn't understand why British in Portadown didn't seem to be the same as British in Finchley. They invested what too often became a sectarian-shaped sense of loss in their Churches.

Scotland is different — blessedly different. But it is part of the task of Churches and other faith groups to help people to manage shifts of identity. The critical question in all of this is who "we" are — and indeed, who is "not us".

I believe that Churches should be agnostic about the choice that will be the subject of a referendum. But we are already involved — not least because of our history. The Church of Scotland is the national Church. Before devolution, it was probably the most significant institutional expression of Scottish identity. The Roman Catholic Church is particularly strong in the west of Scotland — much of that coming from those descended from 19th-century Irish immigrants.

The Scottish Episcopal Church has a long and difficult history. It represents important strands of Scottish religious, political, and cultural history. But it is colloquially known in some parts of Scotland as the "English Church". There is historic warrant for that label — but most of those who use it are outside the Episcopal Church, and probably see it as a marker that says simply "not belonging in the same way as others belong". We need to ensure that we do not become unhelpfully defined or confined by that label.

The independence debate has many aspects. Some, such as attitudes to the monarchy, are constitutional: these describe the nature of any new Scottish state and its external relationships. Others are political — such as any future defence policy. But most questions are economic, and range

from issues of currency to the more everyday matters of health, education, and pensions.

What should matter most to Churches and faith groups is the identity dimension. Inevitably, the desire to affirm a new expression of Scottish identity will lead to a sharpening of the distinction between that identity and others. But Scotland is already a place of multiple identities. These arise from the richness of Scottish history. They also grow naturally in any modern and mobile society, where people's belonging arises from intermingling of family, place, and culture.

To see the question of Scottish independence simply as a political and economic debate to be pursued between now and 2014 does not do justice to these deeper questions.

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