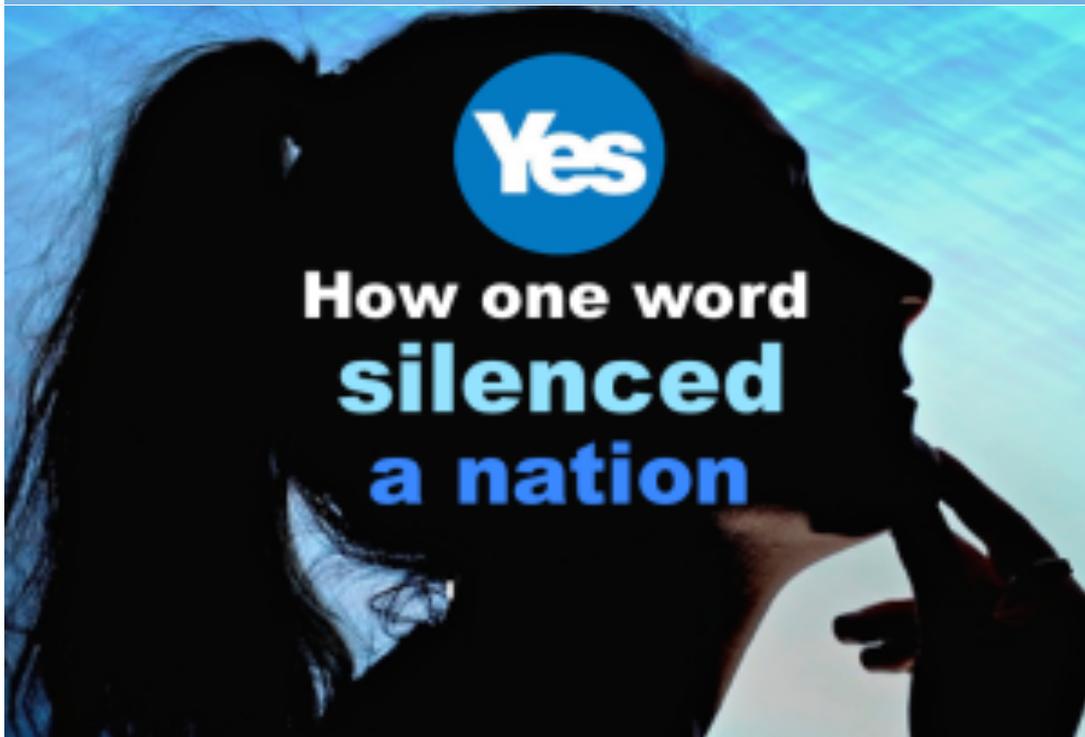


WAKEUPSCOTLAND



EWAN MORRISON – YES: WHY I JOINED YES AND WHY I CHANGED TO NO

Ewan Morrison is an award-winning Scottish author and screenwriter. This article first appeared on the website Wake Up Scotland in the week before the Scottish Referendum on Independence, 2014. It received 382,000 views. It was then reprinted in the Daily Mail.

Four months ago I joined the Yes camp out of a desire to take part in the great debate that the Yes camp told me was taking place within their ranks. Being a doubter I thought maybe I'd failed to find this debate and that it was exclusive to the

membership of the Yes camp, so I joined hoping I could locate it and take part. But even as I was accepted into the ranks – after my ‘Morrison votes Yes’ article in Bella Caledonia, I noted that 5 out of the meagre 20 comments I received berated me for either not having decided sooner or for having questioned Yes at all. Another said, and I paraphrase: ‘Well if he’s had to mull it over he could easily switch to the other side.’ That comment in Bella Caledonia worked away at me like a stone in my shoe. Beneath it, I realised, was a subconscious message: ‘Now that you’re in with us you have to toe the line – ask questions about Yes and you’re out.’

Within the Yes camp I attempted to find the revolutionary and inclusive debate that I’d heard was happening. But as soon as I was ‘in’ I was being asked to sign petitions, to help with recruitment, to take part in Yes groups, to come out publicly in the media, to spread the word and add the blue circle Yes logo to my social media photograph – even to come along and sing a ‘Scottish song’ at a Yes event. I declined to sing but I went along to public meetings and took part in debates online. I noticed that whenever someone raised a pragmatic question about governance, economics or future projections for oil revenue or the balance of payments in iScotland, they were quickly silenced by comments such as “We’ll sort that out after the referendum, this is not the place or the time for those kinds of questions”. Or the people who asked such questions were indirectly accused of ‘being negative’ or talking the language of the enemy. There was an ethos of “Shh, if you start asking questions like that we’ll all end up arguing (and that’ll be negative) so in the interests of unity (and positivity) keep your mouth shut.”

It was within a public meeting that I realised there was no absolutely no debate within the Yes camp. Zero debate – the focus was instead on attacking the enemy and creating an impenetrable shell to protect the unquestionable entity. In its place was a kind of shopping list of desires that was being added to daily. So there was: Get rid of Trident, raise the minimum wage, lower corporation tax, promote gay and lesbian rights, create a world leading Green economy, exploit oil to the full and become a world leading petro-chemical economy, nationalise the banks, nationalise BP, be more attractive to foreign investment. The shopping list of ‘positive’ ideal goals could never tally up, the desires of the Yessers were incompatible and contradicted each other, but to raise this was seen as being ‘negative’. Every kind of Yes had to be included, and this meant there could be no debate. Instead there was a kind of self-censorship and conformism. The Yes camp had turned itself into a recruitment machine which had to silence dissent and differences between the many clashing interest groups under its banner. This was what YES had started to mean – it meant YES to everything – everything is possible – so don’t question anything. You couldn’t talk about what would happen after the referendum because then all the

conflicts between all the different desires and factions would emerge. Questioning even triggered a self-policing process – The Yes Thought Police – rather like the Calvinist one in which doubters started to hate themselves and became fearful of showing signs of their inner torment. I have witnessed some of the greatest minds within Scotland go through this process, one week they are vocally discussing complex issues of global capitalism and the next they're posting 'selfies' of teenagers waving flags and photos of cute puppy dogs carrying Yes signs in their mouths. The conformist dumbing down has been acute and noted by those outside Scotland who wondered where all the intellectuals went.

The Yes movement started to remind me of the Trotskyists – another movement who believed they were political but were really no more than a recruitment machine. I know because I was a member of the SWP in the late 80s. As a 'Trot' we were absolutely banned from talking about what the economy or country would be like 'after the revolution'; to worry about it, speculate on it or raise questions or even practical suggestions was not permitted. We had to keep all talk of 'after the revolution' very vague because our primary goal was to get more people to join our organisation. I learned then that if you keep a promise of a better society utterly ambiguous it takes on power in the imagination of the listener. Everything can be better "after the revolution". It's a brilliant recruitment tool because everyone with all their conflicting desires can imagine precisely what they want. The key is to keep it very simple – offer a one word promise. In the case of the Trotskyists it's 'Revolution,' in the case of the independence campaign it's the word 'Yes'. Yes can mean five million things. It's your own personal independence. Believing in Yes is believing in yourself and your ability to determine your own future. Yes is very personal. How can you not say Yes to yourself? You'd have to hate yourself? Yes is about belief in a better you and it uses You as a metaphor for society as if you could simply transpose your good intentions and self belief onto the world of politics. The micro onto the macro. Yes is a form of belief – and this is the genius of the Yes campaign: they've managed to conflate personal self-determination with state power – to shrink the idea of the state down to the self and the question of the future down to 'belief in the self.' You wouldn't want to repress yourself and you personally want to be independent in your own life so, the Yes logic goes you should ask the same of your country. Every economist has told us that you cannot transpose the micro-economics of your home onto the globe – that micro and macro are different worlds, with different rules, but Yes has managed to blur the two to say 'your country is you.' Your country is an extension of your own personal desires. As the ubiquitous campaign slogan runs 'Scotland's future in Scotland's hands' – and to reinforce the domestic personal motif the image is that of a newborn – a perfect new self.

The Yes camp have managed to make it seem like criticism of their politics is an attack on the individual's right to imagine a better self. To do this, the Yes campaign has had to be emptied of almost all actual political content. It has had to become a form of faith.

And it's not surprising – there is no way that the groups under the banner of Yes could actually work together; they're all fighting for fundamentally different things. How can the Greens reconcile themselves with the 'let's make Scotland a new Saudi Arabia' oil barons? How can the radical left reconcile themselves with the pro-capitalist Business for Scotland group? Or the L.G.B.T Yes Youth community find common cause with elderly Calvinist nationalists or with the millionaire SNP donor who backed Clause 28. Instead converts chant the same mantra – YES – to cover all the cracks between their mutual hatred. Debate becomes reduced down to one word and the positivity of that one word erases all conflicts and questions beneath a fantasized unity. YES. Yes also erases history, politics and reality. Yes means too many things and ends up meaning nothing. It's silenced the conflicting politics within it to the point that it means little more than the euphoric American self-help phrase "be all you can be."



Now some may say – ah yes but Yes is a rainbow coalition – the very essence of democratic pluralism. But you have to ask yourself with so many groups all tugging in so many directions what makes a separate Scotland any different from the rest of the UK with its democratic conflicts, its mess? Democracy is a daily struggle, an ongoing fight to reconcile differing opinions and ideologies, of contesting facts and plans and shouldering the burdens we inherit from history. It's hard, it's exhausting, it's frustrating and it's all about compromise. So why do we need to leave the union to engage in this painful process we call democracy?

The answer is that the factions within the Yes camp are all dreaming that they will have more power in the new Scotland 'after the referendum.' Bigger fish in the smaller pond. The Greens will have more power than they ever could in the UK. Business leaders will have more influence over Scottish government. The hard left will finally realise its dream of seizing power and creating a perfect socialist nation. Each group is dreaming of this fresh new country (as clean as a white sheet, as unsullied as a newborn) in which they themselves dominate and hold control. Clearly these groups can't all have more power and the banner they share is a fantasy of a unity that is not actually there. It's a Freudian slip when converts claim that the first thing that will happen 'after independence' is that the SNP will be voted out – it betrays the fantasy that each interest group has of its own coming dominance.

Many people are voting Yes just to express their frustration at not being able to engage with politics as it is. They're voting Yes because they want their voice to be heard for the first time. That's understandable and admirable, but Yes is not a debate or a democratic dream, it's an empty word and an empty political process which means dream of what you want and express it with all the passion in your heart. The dream will die as soon as the singular Yes gets voted and Scotland then turns into a battleground of repressed and competing Yesses. Once the recruitment machine has served its purpose it will collapse and the repressed questions will return with a vengeance.

I left the Yes camp and joined the No camp not because I like the UK or think the status quo works well as it is. No. I think things are as complicated and compromised as they always are and that we live in trying times. The Yes camp understand that and so have created an illusion of a free space in which everything you've ever wanted can come to pass – overnight. How can it? There are exactly the same political conflicts within the factions of Yes as there are within the UK. After a Yes vote the fight for control of Scotland will begin and that unity that seemed like a dream will be shattered into the different groups who agreed to silence themselves to achieve an illusion of an impossible unity – the kind of unity you find in faith, not

in politics. What makes this worse than remaining in the UK is that Scotland will be fighting out its internal battles on a world stage after demonstrating it intends to run its new politics on an illusion of unity, a unity that breaks up even as it is observed.

