

This is an Age of Global Governance

James Wilkie

All right, so independence is on the back burner till the next time, which may come sooner than we think. And in that event the case for it will have to be put a good deal more realistically and professionally than was obvious during the first round we have just experienced.

Possibly the greatest weakness of the Yes campaign was its obvious ignorance of the broader aspects of independence, and of the vast changes that have taken place in those respects within the past few years. The very nature of independence is no longer what it used to be.

Remember that the restoration of the Scottish Parliament and Government was not a voluntary action by the UK, but was enforced by international action instigated by the Scotland-UN Committee that the London establishment was unable to resist. <http://www.electricscotland.com/independence/intro.pdf>

The present Scottish Government has, on the whole, coped admirably with domestic issues of inland policy – and all credit for this remarkable performance to the SNP, which had never in its previous history held government office.

Capably administering a devolved administration is, however, a far cry from governing an independent state that has to be slotted into an inter-dependent global political and economic system of almost unbelievable complexity. That world system has changed out of all recognition over the past 20 years or so.

The so-called *bipolar* global power system, based on the predominance of the US and USSR in world affairs, has gone, to be replaced for a year or two by the *unipolar* ascendance of the USA, which in its turn has given way to a *multipolar* system of global governance.

Even that is now breaking down, as the accelerating drift of functions of government into global institutions overtakes the whole concept of “poles of power” and makes them redundant.

So does this mean that we have at last achieved world government, something that has been a gleam in the eyes of generations of idealists? Well, yes and no.

The recent emergence of a global level of organisation of the affairs of the human animal that crawls around on the surface of this planet is not on the basis of *government*, but of *governance*.

“Government” implies the functions of a single, centralised authority to set and apply the rules for communal living on this ball whirling through space. The practical reality is that that is totally impossible until such time as we can breed a caste of high priests with minds capable of encompassing the vast parameters

of the issues involved as a single whole. There is no “world government” as such, nor is there any immediate prospect of one.

What is now emerging is a system of *global governance* with a multitude of different actors at various levels within any single field. The World Health Organisation (WHO), for example, sets the rules and works in close cooperation with national and local health authorities, universities, research centres, the Red Cross and other nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). While the WHO takes the lead in combating diseases and other health issues that cross national borders, action on any one of the many issues relevant to the field of health may be initiated by any one of the various actors involved, with the cooperation of all.

So our political system now operates on four main levels: global, regional (e.g. European), national, and local in various forms. Each one of them has direct relevance for the individual citizen, with more and more political and economic decisions being taken in the global institutions and passed down to those at regional, sub-regional and national level for implementation.

It has, for example, been estimated that around 80 per cent of the economic legislation promulgated by the sub-regional European Union as its own has actually been taken over from higher-level authorities like the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and passed on by the Commission to the EU members.

One notorious example was the set of rules on the curvature of bananas and cucumbers, which started life as recommended standards for packaging issued by the 56-member United Nations Economic Commission for Europe at the request of the producer associations. When this came down the line to the 27-member EU, nothing would satisfy it but these voluntary norms had to be made compulsory, a classic example of bureaucracy gone daft.

In the end, the rules had to be humiliatingly repealed, to a chorus of derision from EU members as well as from the other half of Europe that is not in the sub-regional EU. All of the European states, in and out of the EU, were and are members of the UNECE anyway, so that EU action on the matter was superfluous from the start and should never have been undertaken.

The EU members are also members of the WTO and many others of the hundreds of global institutions that now set the rules for our daily lives, but they are forbidden by the EU “common policies” rule from taking an individual policy line in the global institutions, even in their own interests. They have to adhere to the single EU line, which after the recent change in voting rules increasingly favours the larger EU members.

This is where the EFTA members Norway, Iceland and Switzerland have far more influence than any EU member state, and just as much as the EU itself, in the global institutions where the important decisions are increasingly being made. This all plays a part in creating the enormous foreign trading surpluses the EFTA countries enjoy, not in least in their trade with EU members.

Europe has four major regional institutions. Its largest political organisation is the 57-member Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), with its own European Parliament in Copenhagen. The OSCE has the status of a Chapter VIII regional authority under the United Nations Charter and reports to the UN Security Council. The OSCE, the UNECE, the Council of Europe and NATO with its 50 member and partner states, represent the whole of Europe and speak in the name of Europe.

As globalisation inexorably progresses, it is being balanced at the opposite end by the development of around a dozen sub-regional groups within Europe. The largest of these sub-regional cooperation groups is of course the 28-member European Union, basically a Central European concept.

The 8-member Nordic Council represents Scandinavia, while the Tromsø-based 8-member Arctic Council consists of the countries bordering on the Arctic Ocean.

The Central European initiative (CEI), with 18 member states and a wide range of functions and activities, is based in Trieste. The Working Community of the Alpine Lands unites 10 regional authorities of Austria, Germany, Switzerland and Italy with mutual borders in the Alpine region on matters of common interest and joint cross-border projects.

The Working Community of the Danube Region has one state member (Moldova) and 39 regional government members and two regional observers from another 10 states. The smaller Alps-Adriatic Alliance follows the same pattern by including both member states (Slovenia and Croatia) and regional authorities from others that are not represented on a national basis.

The programmes of these institutions are very variable, but concentrated on transnational problems and cooperation opportunities peculiar to their regions that cannot be handled on a European basis. This short selection illustrates how much can be achieved by Scotland and its neighbours after constitutional independence.

I imagine that the ultimate future of government within the so-called British Isles will be a confederation of sovereign states, including the whole of Ireland, for the regulation of common problems by consensus, and not dictation as hitherto.

Scotland, which is geographically a Scandinavian country, can and should also apply for membership of the Nordic Council, the North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission, and other organisations relevant to its situation in the region. It may also be possible to obtain associate membership or observer status in the Arctic Council, on the ground that Scotland's national waters are the only ones of a non-member that border on the Council's own maritime jurisdiction.

Quite a lot has still to be done to prepare the ground for the next round of the action to bring Scotland's constitutional status into line with the realities of the world in the 21st century. Let us, however, start from a basis of hard fact and experience, not misinformation and kindergarten-level wishful thinking.