

Saturday 20 August 2011
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SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE DIVIDES BOOK FESTIVAL AUDIENCE

The future of Scotland was debated at the Edinburgh International Book Festival last night in a sold out event in the Spiegeltent.

Chair Magnus Linklater was joined by former Liberal Democrat leader Sir Menzies Campbell, Scottish Education Secretary Mike Russell MSP and historian Neal Ascherson to debate the end of the Union.

Mike Russell opened the discussion by stating that Scottish people had 'lost their fear' of independence and argued that the question was no longer *could* Scotland be independent, but rather, *should* the country be independent. Russell argued that the Union was a 'sentimental historical construct', and that Scotland 'should compare itself, not to England, but to the rest of the world.'

An alternative viewpoint was given by Menzies Campbell who put forward the case for radical constitutional reform, not only of devolution but also of the House of Lords and electoral reform. 'Gladstone, Asquith and Campbell' was how the second speaker saw the future trajectory of ideas for Home Rule for the Scottish nation, which provoked Russell to accuse Campbell of 'Jurassic Park Unionism'. Campbell argued that, 'It is no longer just the West Lothian question, but also the West Belfast and West Wales question.'

Journalist and historian Neil Ascherson advocated for the 'settled will' of the Scottish people to be heard and likened the breaking up of the Union not to a divorce but to a marriage; a big decision that should not be taken lightly as independence is a 'one way street'. Ascherson, who is now based in London, also added that the end of the Union was not seen as a big deal south of the border with many English people unfazed by the possible break up of the United Kingdom.

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Several members of the audience then spoke on the topic questioning the panel on the economic, social and political implications of independence on border control, EU membership and defence policy, before a vote was held with roughly half the audience agreeing that we are witnessing the early stages of the break-up of Britain, and the other half voting against this idea.

The final question came from Chair Magnus Linklater, Scottish Editor of The Times, who pushed Russell for the exact phrasing which will appear on the ballot paper at the referendum. Russell refused to divulge what question the nation would be asked to give their verdict on but did say that this would be known in advance once the time was right and a full and wide ranging debate on the topic had taken place in Scotland.

Modern Scottish history is to be discussed again at the Book Festival on Sunday 21 August at 8pm with Professor Tom Devine as he launches his last book in the trilogy 'To the Ends of the Earth: Scotland's Global Diaspora, 1750-2010'.

- ENDS -

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