Sporting Politics? Sport, Identity and Constitutional Crisis

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Abstract

This chapter examines the link between sport, the media and politics during times of constitutional crisis. The case study looks at the position of Scotland within the UK in the run up to and since the 2014 Independence Referendum. The chapter outlines the historical relationship between sport and political and national cultures in the stateless nation of Scotland. It then investigates the position and impact of sports culture in the political and cultural debate in the run up to the 2014 Referendum that would decide if Scotland were to become a separate State or remain within the UK. In so doing, the chapter focuses on the role that key sporting figures, such as Andy Murray, played in the media discourses that surrounded the vote in 2014 and beyond. In particular, the role of social media is investigated as is the ongoing relationship between representations of sport and aspects of expressions of political and national identity. This chapter suggests that caution is needed in simply assuming expressions of national identity through sport get unproblematically translated into particular forms of political nationalism.

Introduction

The relationship between sport, the media and politics during times of constitutional crisis is the focus of this chapter. These issues are examined through a case study of Scotland in the run up to and since the 2014 Independence Referendum. In so doing, this chapter documents the historical relationship between sport and political and national cultures in the stateless nation of Scotland. The chapter then investigates the position and impact of sports culture in the political and cultural debate in the run up to the 2014 Referendum. This would be a political decision that would decide if Scotland were to become a separate State or remain within the UK.

As part of the case study the chapter focuses on the role that key sporting figures, such as Andy Murray, played in the media discourses that surrounded the vote in 2014 and beyond. It is particularly interested in the role of social media played in the ongoing relationship between representations of sport and aspects of expressions of political and national identity. Throughout this chapter the findings suggest that caution is required

in assuming expressions of national identity through sport get unproblematically translated into the political arena.

The initial part of the chapter briefly highlights the interplay between sport, politics and identity before examining in more detail the context for the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum. The latter sections of the chapter reflect on the role and position that sport in Scotland and its attendant culture played in the broader political process and the role of the media in this process.

Sport, Politics and Identity

David Papineau (2017), in his book examining the relationship between philosophy and sport, noted that: "Those few philosophers who have written about the value of sport tend to stand somewhere between Chomsky and Shankly. They don't dismiss sport as meaningless, but at the same time they distinguish it from real life. In their view, sport is worthwhile precisely because it gives us a break from more serious pursuits. I think that the philosophers have it wrong too. Sport is just as serious as the rest of life. Shankly may have been a tad overenthusiastic, but he had the right idea. Sport reaches deep into human nature, and can be as important as anything else" (Papineau, 2017, p. 272).

What is not in doubt is that sport as a cultural form is deeply connected to the society that produces and reproduces the institutional frameworks that sustain and underpin sporting culture. In contemporary society and with regard to elite sport, the media are a key element of this process, both as financial underwriters of sport and as mediators of the range of representations that sports culture offers.

To this end it is unsurprising that sports culture can become implicated in wider cultural and political identities. At times, such as in the origins and history of an organisation such as the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in Ireland, these links and expressions of identity are overt and implicit (Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, 2014). Sporting organisations such as the GAA become part of a wider cultural and political mobilisation of collective identity which helps to legitimise certain political and cultural narratives around the nation, its origins and its practice.

The Scottish case also allows us to reflect on how globalisation (both in sports and politics) interconnects with often deeply embedded regional and national identities and

practices. It is not the case of one identity dominating over another, of an either/or type scenario. Rather it is the complex interplay between differing layers and levels of identity as long-standing football supporters follow a global game that is still framed within often local sensitivities. While lamented by some, the Scottish game is less global than say the English Premier League (in terms of players, European success, international media coverage and reputation). That doesn't mean that globalisation doesn't impact on the football industry in Scotland, but rather that it does so in particular ways that reflect a specifically rooted geographical, cultural and political context.

Indeed, given the long-standing and embedded importance of symbols in sporting culture and the growth since the late 19th century of international sporting competition, it does not take a massive leap of the imagination to position sport as a cultural form that lends itself to collective expressions of identity. Initially bound within a particular time and physical space, as the media develop an interest in this lucrative commercial form of entertainment, the mediation of sport moves from newspapers, to live radio, television and the internet to become an increasingly boundless, instant and potentially global experience.

Politics: Scotland a stateless nation

If we acknowledge that aspects of sports culture are rooted in the wider political and cultural context within which such such cultural forms are produced, we also need to be clear what we mean by the term politics in this context. At times politics can be clearly linked to the mainstream political culture of that time. Examples include politicians and political elites associating themselves with high profile sporting successes as rather crude attempts to make political capital from them. However, we need to understand that politics is also about how power is organised in society, and this reaches out from beyond mainstream political culture into areas such as class, gender and the politics of ethnicity and identity.

For example, for many years Scotland has had a sporting identity rather than a political one. As a stateless nation its national football and rugby teams became symbolic carriers of Scottish national identity, particularly on an international sporting stage (that recognised Scotland as nation) at a time when the country's political identity was subsumed within the UK Westminster State.

From the supporters of the Scottish national football team, the self-styled "Tartan Army", to the culture and identity that surrounded the Old Firm rivalry between Celtic and Rangers, Scottish sport gave range to mediated expressions of the country's often complex self-image and range of individual and collective identities at a time when these often were unable to find expression in a political form.

Scotland has had major political referendums before 2014. For a generation of Scottish politicians, the 1979 referendum on whether to establish a Scottish Assembly shaped the subsequent political landscape in Scotland for the next two decades. In a very different analogue media age, the 1979 referendum saw 51.6% support the proposal for Scottish Home Rule, but on a turnout of 64%, this represented only 32.9% of the electorate and thus failed to reach the requisite 40% of the electorate required trigger a new Assembly. For some the abject failure of the Scottish national team at the World Cup Finals in Argentina the previous year played a role in this result that appeared to reflect a collective crisis of confidence among the Scottish population. While impossible to prove, the very fact that Scotland's terrible showing at the World Cup – with defeat to Peru, followed by a draw with Iran, before hopes were raised and then dashed by a gallant 3-2 victory over Holland – could be linked to the failed 1979 referendum is indicative of the linkage between high profile sporting success (or failure) and notions of a collective feel good factor that may be translated into the political arena.

The political landscape continued to be dominated by debates around greater political autonomy for Scotland, and this was heighted by the repeated election of a UK Conservative government despite Scotland returning few, if any Conservative MPs to Westminster. By 1997, the 'settled will' of the Scottish people to have a parliament sit again in Edinburgh was recognised by the New Labour government which ended 18 years of Conservative rule in the UK.

A referendum – based this time on securing a simple majority as opposed to what many felt was the rigged target of 1979 – initiated by New Labour in 1997, asked whether the Scottish electorate wanted a Scottish parliament established and saw an overwhelming vote of 75% in favour, with 25% against on a 61% turnout. A form of proportional representation would elect the 129 MSPs (Members of the Scottish Parliament), thus ensuring a greater spread of political parties in the parliament and ensuring that single

party government would be difficult to achieve given this electoral system. A series of coalition Labour/Liberal Democrat Scottish Executives ensued following the first Scottish parliamentary elections for almost 300 years in 1999.

Rather than settle any debate about an independent Scotland, the Scottish parliament saw the breakup of the Labour hegemony of Scottish politics that had existed since the 1950s, and became a platform for a re-invigorated Scottish National Party (SNP) led for most of this time by the dominant figure in Scottish politics during this period, Alex Salmond. By the 2007 Scottish elections, and despite the electoral system, the SNP under Salmond became a minority Scottish government (the term government having now replaced the rather anodyne term Executive in the lexicon of Scottish and eventually UK politics).

By the election of 2011, the SNP, with its growing experience of government, went to the polls promising that if elected they would hold a referendum on Scottish Independence within the lifetime of the Scottish Parliament. In 2011, they secured a majority of seats in the Scottish Parliament (the first time any party had achieved this since 1999) and set about negotiating with the UK Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government the terms of an independence referendum. The Edinburgh agreement of October 2012 saw First Minister Salmond and Prime Minister Cameron agree the terms of such a vote and 18 September 2014 became the date of the referendum. What is important to understand here is that the issue of Scottish independence runs deep within Scottish political and civic culture, and that to all intents and purposes from 2012 the issue of the referendum dominated the political landscape of Scottish politics. In effect, what you had in Scotland was a long campaign of varying degrees of intensity, but never absent from the political and media discourse. Meanwhile, across the rest of the UK, the issue of Scottish independence was largely absent from political discourse, as not for the first time Scotland and the Scottish Question faded from the London-based political and media agenda where political elites simply failed to register the impact any Yes to independence vote would have in dismantling the seemingly impregnable UK state.

Scotland 2014: The Independence Referendum

“The referendum campaign of 2014 was the most extraordinary political episode in the modern history of Scotland. Never before had the nation engaged in such a long and

intensive dialogue about its present and future. Animated discussions took place within families, among friends and colleagues at work, in pubs, coffee bars, restaurants, in the streets, schools universities and churches. Most often they were friendly but some ended in disharmony and disagreement between relatives and close acquaintances. Indeed, it was not at all unusual to find families' split down the middle on how they would vote as the day of reckoning approached" (Devine, 2016, p. 232).

As the distinguished Scottish historian Tom Devine notes above, the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 was an event unprecedented in not just modern Scottish political history, but also that of the UK state. The referendum of 18 September 2014 saw 97% of the Scottish based adult population registered to vote. The actual voter turnout would be 84.15%, the highest in Scottish political history. The result would see 55% vote to remain in the UK and 45% vote for the creation of an independent Scotland.

The referendum question finally agreed was "Should Scotland be an independent country?" This was not an uncontroversial formulation given the various permutations that could have been put forward. In addition, 16-year olds would get to vote in the referendum and the final Yes/No decision would be based on a simple majority. The two main campaign teams launched in May and June 2012 were the independence campaign *Yes Scotland,* driven initially by the SNP/Scottish Green Party and the Scottish Socialist Party (but always a broad coalition of interests) and led by Blair Jenkins, a former BBC Head of News and Current Affairs and STV Director of Broadcasting, while the campaign to remain in the UK and urging a No vote was called *Better Together,* backed by the Scottish Conservatives/Scottish Labour and the Scottish Liberal Democrats. It was chaired by former Labour chancellor Alistair Darling, and the campaign director was Blair McDougall, a former Labour special advisor.

One challenge was the long nature of the campaign given that by the end of 2012 the referendum had already become the focus of political debate in Scotland despite there being over 20 months until polling day. The polls tended to suggest that independence would be rejected by about 60% to 40%, and that the core of the Yes vote was around 35% and that this would need to shift significantly.

From the outset, the *Yes Scotland* campaign built on the strong political campaigning machine that had been successfully developed by the SNP in winning both the 2007

and 2011 Scottish elections. The focus was on social media and mobilising local activists to make the case for independence. It is important to note that support for independence was of course not solely the preserve of the SNP. Both the Scottish Greens and Scottish Socialist parties supported the campaign, mobilising their local networks accordingly and support from a range of nationalist leaning, but non-affiliated groups such as National Collective, a coalition of artists and cultural activists, which in fact had been active since late 2011 but gained significant prominence during the campaign. Other important grassroots and community-based groups/networks that played a role in the Yes campaign included The Radical Independence campaign, the Common Weal and Women for Independence. All were part of a broad coalition of civic, cultural and political groups within the Yes campaign who all used social media as a key organising tool and communication platform.

The Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Act 2013 was passed in June 2013 by the Scottish parliament, and the campaign moved up a significant level with the publication by the SNP government of its 670-page white paper *Scotland's Future*, which they published in November of that year (SNP, 2013). Up until this point, the polls had shown little movement despite the plethora of well attended public events being run by various public, private and political organisations about the referendum. What was not in doubt was that this was an issue that people were keen to have more information about. However, what was also clear was that a large percentage of the electorate had already made their mind up with regard to how they were going to vote, while a constituency of around 15-20% were undecided.

My personal experience of the long campaign and attending numerous public events was that the engagement and debate, while always passionate, was by and large not ill-tempered or intemperate. However, as we moved into the year of the referendum, the sense that I had was that there was increasingly less listening going on in the public discussion and the hardening of opinion and in some cases (from events I attended) a coarsening of the debate. In part, this was due to the timeline and a realisation that polling day was getting closer and more people were thinking through what impact the outcome of the vote might have on their lives. While for political nationalists, there was recognition that this may be the one opportunity they would have to realise their ultimate political aspiration. In other words, the stakes could not be much higher.

The Scottish-based newspapers were from the outset broadly pro-union, however the characterising of them as propaganda arms of *Better Together* (whom *The Herald,* for example, often criticised) is too simplistic - it was more complex than that. For example, newspapers such as *The Herald* (the largest-selling broadsheet in Scotland), while pro-union, gave, ample space to some of the most eloquent Yes advocates in columnists such as the late Ian Bell and Iain McWhirter. In other words, newspapers such as *The Herald* and *The Scotsman*, while editorially pro-union, gave space to a range of voices from the Scottish commentariat supportive of the independence campaign. Other newspapers were less generous and more hostile to the SNP in particular in their coverage. David Hutchison, in his analysis of newspaper and broadcast coverage during the referendum argues: "The lack of press support was a serious problem for the Yes side. It had to hope that the more balanced broadcast coverage worked against the general hostility and the virulence of some of the newspapers opposed to independence. On the other hand, the public may have tired of the unpleasantness of some of the coverage, even in the papers they regularly purchased, particularly as they contrasted this with the ways in which some of the more polished performers on the Yes side handled themselves on television discussions and debates. Could it even be the case that unremitting hostility was self-defeating, for after a while voters might have resented such coverage by English newspapers in their Scottish editions, which ultimately might have seemed not just anti-SNP or anti-independence but anti-Scottish?" (Hutchison, 2016, p. 32).

The newspapers, with their declining readerships and no obligation to be impartial in political matters, were on balance more likely to reinforce the arguments of the No campaign. The one notable exception was the *Sunday Herald* newspaper which came out strongly in favour of a Yes vote (and saw its circulation double during the campaign) and has continued to advocate independence since the referendum. Thus, it would be the "impartial broadcasters" who carried a significant responsibility to inform the public on the issue of the referendum. A YouGov Poll (YouGov, 2014) in September 2014 showed how over 70% of people in Scotland got a "very large" or "a significant amount" of their information about the referendum from radio and television. This compared with 60% for newspapers and 54% for social media. Voters were of course using differing media and not consuming them in isolation, but that poll also showed that 40% got "not very much" information or "none at all" from social

media, the highest percentage across the various media. This highlighted, as we note below, the limits in reach across the population as a whole of social media in political communication terms.

Covering the referendum campaign proved challenging for the BBC in Scotland. Firstly, it initially seemed to treat the referendum as it would a general election, locked into a more rigid party-political mode, rather than reflect the more local and bottom-up nature of much of the debate. The referendum also emphasised the tension that can exist between a highly London centric BBC newsgathering operation (serving a UK audience, including Scotland) and a Glasgow based newsgathering operation serving BBC Scotland and a specific Scottish audience. As noted earlier, for much of the long campaign from late 2012 onwards the Scottish referendum was largely absent from a London-based media that saw its role as serving all the UK. Indeed, not until very late in the campaign (the last few weeks) did the London-based media and political elite appear to wake up to the fact that what was at stake in Scotland had direct and profound implications not just for Scotland, but for the future of the UK and all its nations and regions. They then compounded the confusion by seemingly descending on mass to Glasgow and Edinburgh and "big footing"

[1] Scottish journalists by sending its so-called heavyweights "North of the border" to report to the rest of the UK on what was happening. In so doing, they often appeared to trample on the Scottish-based BBC journalists who were perfectly capable of telling the story of the referendum to a non-Scottish and UK-wide audience waking up to the fact that the Scottish Question actually had implications for their future as well as those living in Scotland.

What this process highlighted was the difficult task that the news media faced in both informing and reflecting the complex political and cultural reality of a devolved UK multi-nation state. The BBC, for example, had taken its time to grasp the changing political landscape created by devolution, which meant that the Health minister discussed on the main UK-wide television news bulletin – and referred to simply as the Health minister – had no jurisdiction in say Scotland, which had its own Health minister accountable to the Scottish parliament. Thus, for Scottish viewers watching a UK-wide news programme this was not the Health minister, but rather the minister for England and Wales and the NHS changes being discussed did not affect them. Yet as the 2008

King report for the BBC Trust into impartiality and BBC Network news of the UK's nations demonstrated, the BBC had failed to adequately acknowledge or address this and related issues (King, 2008). Even subsequently, it has often struggled to address the more complex political environment in ways that allow it to tell various narratives of UK back to its audiences that allow it to understand its shared connections, as well as its growing differences.

Journalist and broadcaster Iain McWhirter also thinks the BBC made life difficult for itself by refusing to acknowledge that as the British broadcasting company it was, whether it liked it or not, also part of the story. He suggests: "The further problem for the broadcast media – most notably the BBC – is that, having no editorial opinions of their own, they tend to take the lead from the newspapers. Whatever happens to be on the front pages is seen as a guide to the questions to ask, the approach to take, the issues to explore. This is perhaps acceptable during normal elections, but in a referendum like Scotland's where all the press are taking the same political line, this puts the BBC in an invidious position – especially in its news reviews. It has to recount what the main organs of news and opinions are saying and if they all say that independence will lead to job losses and economic distress, even a Great Depression, then they are bound to ask Yes supporters: "have you taken leave of your senses in asking people to vote for economic apocalypse?" As *The Herald* blogger Jock Morrison put it: "the BBC's 'impartiality' generally consisted of giving the Yes side the opportunity to respond to scare stories circulated by supporters of the Union"" (MacWhirter, 2014 p. 92-93).

Throughout the campaign and in its aftermath, many in the Yes camp appeared to be highly critical of the BBC and its coverage of the referendum. To some it appeared they helped to reinforce what many dubbed 'Project Fear' viewed as the strategy of the *Better Together* campaign (i.e. the relentless stories about the dangers and perils of leaving the union). The Director of the *Yes Scotland* campaign Blair Jenkins was however happy to note after the campaign that he felt there was no structural bias against the campaign at the BBC. Certainly, STV, the channel 3 franchise holder in Scotland, BBC Scotland's rival broadcaster, fared better as a commercial Public Service Broadcaster (PSB). Its coverage of both sides in the referendum was felt to be closer to the campaign as it was evolving on the ground, and they were certainly more fleet-of-foot in their initial use of social media to augment their television and online news provision. They also benefited, by way of contrast with the BBC, as having

developed a very strong Scottish regional and national brand identity and relationship with its audience.

The Sporting Referendum

Sport was largely absent from the referendum debate and this in itself is worth reflecting on, given what we have discussed in the early part of the chapter. What the referendum was not about was whether Scotland was a nation; it was rather about the need to create a Scottish State to govern that nation. Hence in a sporting context the dominant symbols of Scottish nationhood have also co-existed within a wider domain of representations with the other nations of the UK (in, for example, a rugby international competition such as the Six Nations, which also includes Ireland – competing as a single island team), or within the framework of Olympic competition though the structure of Team GB (Great Britain). In other words, for many years within a sporting discourse Scotland has had a dual identity, both as a standalone sporting nation and as part of a wider UK state sporting entity as in the case of the Olympics.

Understanding the depth of a sense of a dual identity (for many this means being both Scottish and British) helps explain why sporting allegiances cannot be simply read across unproblematically from the sporting arena into the political arena in a Scottish context. This is not a new issue. Over twenty-five years ago this was identified by Jim Sillars, then a leading SNP politician who talked about "ninety-minute patriots", referring to Scottish fans who supported Scotland on the football pitch but failed to translate this into political support for the SNP at the ballot box. As we note above, the rise of the SNP in Scotland and the collapse of Labour are indicative of how these once seemingly immovable political allegiances have dramatically shifted in the last quarter of a century. Yet the multi-faceted aspects of political and cultural identities remain in that people (although not in the same numbers) can still feel both Scottish and British at the same time and find complex ways of expressing this through both sporting and political identities.

The Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games that took place in the middle of the referendum proved a good example of this complexity of sporting and political identity and the specific nature of the Scottish experience. The politics of the Games is itself complex with its post-British empire discourse (Whigham and Black, 2018). They are hosted by a city, but of course such a high profile international multi-sports event will

garner extensive national (Scottish and UK) and international media coverage. It was agreed that a suspension of campaigning would take place during the two weeks of the Games to avoid politicians being able to make political capital of an international event at which Scotland competes as a separate nation/team. The success of the Games provided evidence of Glasgow's premier position as a world sports city, able to stage and manage major multi-sport events. The media coverage reflected the complexity of Scottish identity, allowing some to read into it echoes of discourses of British empire, while for others it showed how Scottish identity could stand apart with confidence rather than be locked into a British identity. Yet as Whigham and Black in their study of the Games argue: "Whilst some academic reflections on the Games sought to highlight the potential for the media to politicise the event to support the pro-independence and/or pro-union referendum campaigns (Harris and Skillen, 2016; Jarvie, 2017; Ochman, 2013), the Janus-faced symbolism of the Games' simultaneous association with Scottishness and Britishness thus undermined the potential for unambiguous or uncontested narratives regarding the political implications of the event. Therefore, whilst choreographed displays such as the opening ceremony of the Games can incorporate a range of symbolic illustrations of Scotland's history, heritage and character, it is possible to view and portray this symbolism through a multitude of contrasting lenses, underlining the multidirectionality of such events" (Whigham and Black, 2018, p. 369).

This complexity of identity is also reflected in other areas of domestic Scottish sport. Celtic football club has traditionally drawn much of its core support from the Catholic population of the country (itself a minority). In addition, the Irish immigrant origins of the club and its explicit connections to Ireland remain an important part of the narrative of the club and its sense of self-identity. While the club has never been keen to get directly involved in party politics, historically much of that support, with its Catholic-Irish origins, would have seen the Scottish Labour party as its natural home. By way of contrast, the SNP was often perceived as having a strong Protestant identity associated with the party and an exclusive definition of Scottishness that did not appear to offer a home to Catholic-Irish immigrants.

In more recent decades, generational change and the shifting position of the SNP onto the centre left terrain once occupied by Labour (and not least in the explicit reaching out to the Catholic community that took place in the 1990s under its former leader and

First Minister Alex Salmond), has resulted in support for the party among Celtic supporters as being not uncommon. What this serves to highlight is that political and cultural identities do shift overtime in response to wider social, political and economic shifts in Scottish society. This doesn't lessen the passion surrounding sporting fandom or the role of clubs and sport in terms of identity formation and expression; it simply serves to remind us that translating them unproblematically into direct political expressions requires a degree of caution.

Throughout the campaign various sportspeople made interventions or stood on particular platforms, but there is little evidence to suggest that these specific interventions had much impact on the electorate. The intervention of tennis player Andy Murray on the day of the vote did gain much media coverage. His tweet of "Huge day for Scotland today! No campaign negativity last few days totally swayed my view on it. excited to see the outcome. lets do this!" suggested support for independence. Murray was subjected to vile online abuse after the tweet and this unfortunately reflects the growing level of online hostility and incivility that now characterises large areas of the online space when an individual quite legitimately chooses to simply express a political opinion.

Concluding Thoughts

The Scottish Referendum of 2014 highlighted the increasing complexity that now exists in shaping political engagement and political decision-making in the digital media environment. Reflecting on the nature of the political campaign that surrounded the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, political analyst James Mitchell argues: "The most significant impact of the campaign was the revival of Scottish democracy. The 85 per cent turnout in the referendum broke records. Scotland witnessed a level of engagement never previously seen. The political parties and established media normally set the agenda and did so again, but to a far lesser extent. As a means of public engagement, the referendum had been a spectacular success" (Mitchell, 2016, p. 13).

While this is unquestionably true, what is less clear is the long-term sustainability of such political engagement. While voter turnout is of course only one measure of political engagement, although a highly significant one, the following UK-wide general election of 2015 saw Scottish turnout at 71% (up from 64% in 2010). In the Scottish Parliamentary elections of 2016, this figure was only 56% and, in the UK- wide

European Union referendum of 2016 voter turnout in Scotland was 67% compared to 73% in England.

What these indicate perhaps is that few issues are more likely to prompt political engagement than such a fundamental issue as the creation of a new independent state, specifically in an environment in which a mature nation already exists, albeit within a multi-nation state such as the UK. Scottish independence is also an issue deeply rooted in Scottish political, cultural and civic life. It also masks another issue around the actual depth of the engagement and the level, quality and informed nature of that engagement. It is important to recognise that engagement operates at many levels and with varying degrees of intensity that often make it difficult to capture or quantify. It also fluctuates as people's lives and circumstances alter or change.

The sense that the political identity of Scotland has become increasingly distinctive and even disconnected from the rest of the UK was further enhanced by the EU Referendum result of 2016. This saw Scotland vote to Remain by 62% to 38%, putting it out of step with England and reinforcing the sense of political crisis that is engulfing the UK state over Brexit. Part of the political fallout of this process has been that another Scottish Referendum on Independence has become more likely. Such is the political crisis that in an age of referendums it can feel politically like we are actually living in an era of *neverendums*!

The media industries (and the political elite) often have a particular view of what engagement might be and this is often driven by commercial imperatives. At a time when trust in legacy media and its ability to deliver meaningful news is challenged, the very notion of what we understand by terms such as 'news', 'balance' and 'impartiality' is in flux. Given this, it is little surprise that social media will play a greater role in the 'mediated news space' that helps us understand our position in society.

Sporting identities, from local rivalries to national expressions reflect the complex nature of contemporary Britain. These identities can also shift and change over time and caution is required not to simply map broader collective sporting and cultural identities onto specific political identities. It is often more complex than that. Sport matters, but perhaps not always in the way we might expect it does.

What is clear is that we have entered a different phase of political communication and engagement that offers a challenge to existing political parties and legacy media. As

noted earlier, this is not to suggest that their power to shape, influence and agenda set has disappeared, but rather that we are in a more complex and diffuse media environment. Traditional political parties and media still matter – and to dismiss them can lead to a flawed understanding of political and social change – but social media and other channels of communication are part of an information landscape that continues to evolve.

Endnote

On taking over as head coach of the men's Scottish national football team in May 2019, Steve Clarke cited the success of Shelley Kerr, head coach of the women's national football team who had reached the World Cup Finals, as an inspiration to him and his squad as they attempted to reach a major tournament for the first time since 1998. It offered a glimpse of the wider sporting and political change that has taken place in the gender politics of Scottish sport and society in recent decades.

Over 50 years ago Celtic, a team drawn from around Glasgow, representing the Catholic Irish immigrant community in Scotland, won the European Cup in Lisbon. The Lisbon Lions (as the team became known after their victory) offer a powerful narrative about sport and the complex nature of identity: an expression of a community that still resonates over half a century later as the Scottish club changed the future of European football. As journalist Roddy Forsyth notes: "In 1967 Celtic were hailed as a British success story but were they, some asked – as they had done for 89 years – truly a Scottish club? Founded by Andrew Kearns from Sligo, aka Brother Walfrid of the Marist Order, and drawing support overwhelmingly from members or descendants of the Irish diaspora, Celtic flew the tricolour flag of the Irish Republic above the Parkhead stands. Yet, with the triumph of 1967, Celtic supplied a potent answer to the question of identity. If eleven men of mixed-faith backgrounds, all born within thirty miles of Celtic Park – and managed by Jock Stein, a local Protestant – could not be regarded as Scottish, how would they ever fit the description?" (Forsyth, 2017, p. 17).

Led by their inspiration captain, the late Billy McNeill (a Scot of Lithuanian and Irish descent), the Lisbon Lions allowed a minority community to stand proud, a stateless nation not only to feel good about itself but also to extend its horizons beyond Scotland through the team's European adventures.

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Notes

[1] 'Big footing' is a journalistic term to refer to when local/regional journalists are bypassed by their national counterparts (working for the same organisation) in covering a story of national importance. In Scotland this is further complicated by the fact that many journalists are already national (Scottish) although not UK wide in their reach.