



# Scotland and the State of the Union

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Six years is a long time in politics. Since Scotland voted to stick with the United Kingdom by a margin of 55-45% the political landscape in the UK, and internationally, has changed irrevocably. While “a once in a generation opportunity” has not passed since the vote in 2014, the status quo and outlook has transformed in such a manner that the debate on independence is once again an acutely pressing issue for Downing Street and Westminster at large.

While polling has, for the first time, consistent support for breaking up the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson remains staunchly against allowing another plebiscite for the Scottish People. To discuss the issues and themes driving the current debate, Finsbury brought together two of Scotland’s leading political thinkers – Andrew Wilson, the Founding Partner of Charlotte Street Partners, former SNP MSP and Chair of the SNP’s Growth Commission, and Alex Massie, political columnist for The Times, The Sunday Times and Scotland Editor at The Spectator.

Chris Sibbald is a Managing Director at Finsbury and Scotland native helping businesses and organisations communicate with clarity in the uncertain political environment. He worked for the former SNP Westminster Leader, Angus Robertson, ahead of the Scottish Independence referendum and more recently, supported the Scottish Government in the creation of a Scottish National Investment Bank and the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**The discussion focused on:**

- **The settled will, but not yet:** while those over 55 remain stubbornly against independence, underlying polling for younger generations is consistently in favour, which bodes well for any future referendum. But, as the pandemic and economic recovery remain the national priority, there is no immediate rush to have the question put immediately but probably in the next 2-5 years. While John Smith viewed devolution as the “settled will”, it appears the broad church of people will likely remain intransigent for independence, but it will come by virtue of a process rather than any singular event.
- **Scotland the same:** we shouldn’t kid ourselves that this debate will be won or lost on policy or economics, it’s all about politics. The SNP’s argument against Brexit and separation from the European Union is of economic self-harm, and yet it sees its separation from the United Kingdom as economic opportunity. Sound like an overlap in rhetoric? This is a debate rooted in identity and feelings not just about Scotland’s place in the UK but also in Europe.
- **Transition to success:** in contrast to the lack of a prospectus following Brexit, the SNP will need to develop and articulate an honest transition plan to recognise the level of integration and obligations that exist. This will take time and there is no avoiding that, however being clear on the processes required for policy making will help reassure undecided voters – so expect Wilson’s commission report to come in for greater scrutiny when the time comes.
- **Britain needs purpose:** perhaps the biggest contributor to Scottish nationalism has been the decline in salience of British identity. Arguments about currency only have so much purchase with voters, what it means to be who I am matters much more. There is a way back to being “Scottish and British” but that path must be found soon, as saying “no you can’t” will become an increasingly weak position for the Union.
- **London should listen:** just as the UK gained its empire by accident, it could very well lose Scotland just as easily, so said Alex Massie. The debate may dominate in Scotland, but the issues are for the whole United Kingdom, it’s about time everyone took it seriously and paid attention.



## **LONDON**

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