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All the fear, none of the hope: EU referendum campaigns should learn from Scotland

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PA/Andrew Milligan

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Over the past four years, the UK has engaged in an existential discussion with itself. Its people have been asking profound questions about their political unions and the type of country (or countries) in which they wish to live.

Scotland voted to stay in the UK in the 2014 referendum but the political landscape has changed significantly since. Now the whole UK is in the middle of an EU referendum. Yet again people (actually it is mainly just the Conservative party and the media) are discussing the economy, political autonomy and identity.

The experience of the Scottish independence referendum is still fresh and its effects are still being felt (31 Conservatives were recently elected to Holyrood on an overtly “no second referendum” ticket, for example). There are lessons in the way the Scottish referendum played out for the European version, although it sadly looks like the most important ones have not yet been learnt.

Project Fear

The Scottish independence referendum was a battle between the status quo and change – fear versus hope.

The Better Together campaign to keep Scotland in the UK had a strategy that was dubbed “Project Fear”. It was very disciplined in its approach. Scotland was told relentlessly that separation risked jobs, investment, higher interest rates and national security.

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Where's the vision Dave? PA/Eddie Keogh

Does any of this sound familiar? It should do, since the EU referendum Remain campaign seems to have been lifted wholesale from the Better Together strategy manual. Simply replace “Scottish Independence” with “Brexit” in front of the word “risks”.

Fear is powerful and effective in campaigning. It lends itself to the creation of vivid images of unemployment and even poverty. It makes change feel risky. As such, it is a particularly useful tool for the side representing the status quo. This helps explain Remain’s choice of economic fear (punctuated as in Scotland, with warnings of terrorism).

Where’s the hope?

The key difference between the EU referendum and the Scottish vote, however, is that Yes Scotland (seeking independence) decided not to fight fear with fear. Where the Leave camp is spreading fear of immigration and the undemocratic EU, the Scottish independence campaign tried to build a hopeful picture of the fairer, more prosperous, greener country Scotland could become.

Better Together struggled to seed a grassroots campaign. During the summer of 2014, the streets of Scotland belonged to Yes and it was there that the true power of its hopeful message blossomed. Hundreds of local Yes groups sprung up and Scotland abounded with posters, a bewildering array of badges, flags, street stalls and speaker meetings. It was noisy, good humoured, passionate and exciting.

Even though the Yes campaign ultimately lost, this message of hope has been credited with energising politics in Scotland. The political narrative in Scotland is now very different from the rest of the UK. The Scottish parliament is due to debate a radical land reform bill, the creation of a nationalised electricity company and increasing taxes on higher earners.

In the end, Better Together's victory in the Scottish referendum was pyrrhic. It won the battle with fear but the cost was seeing its architects (and the unionist parties they represented) hard hit in the 2015 Westminster election.

In contrast to Holyrood, Westminster continues in its narrow neoliberal agenda of privatisation and austerity. To many Scots this all makes Westminster politics and, by association, the idea of the UK, feel mean spirited, limited and reactionary.

Previously, Britain's steel, coal and gas industries, provided jobs and clear symbols of the unifying power and benefits of the UK. With those now long gone, a new positive case is required to build and maintain loyalty in it.

This pyrrhic victory looks set to be repeated in the EU referendum. A win for Remain will do nothing to heal the internecine rifts of the Conservative party and will cost the politicians dear as they fail to inspire and lead with a hopeful vision of what Britain can become either inside or outside the EU.

Fear is effective in helping you cling on to power but it also degrades the thing you want to preserve. The issue is not really that both sides in the EU referendum are basing their campaigns on fear, it is that neither is providing hope.

Without hope they cannot learn from the Scottish independence campaign. Without a positive vision they have squandered this opportunity for meaningful, hopeful political engagement across the UK. More destructive than this still for the politicians and structures they represent, is the fact that by only using fear they open themselves bare to accusations that they have neither a vision nor the wit to imagine a better future.

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