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Sunday September 21, 2014

Older voters dash youthful dreams

By Jim Taylor

By now, you know that Scotland decided to remain part of the United Kingdom. In the referendum on independence held this last Thursday, September 18, 2014, the “No” side won, by a sizeable majority. Over 55 per cent voted against independence, with an unprecedented 85 per cent of eligible voters casting ballots.

A map of the results shows an even more striking imbalance – in only four of 32 electoral districts did a majority favour independence.

Before the referendum, there were many attempts to compare the Scottish vote to the Quebec vote in 1995, which came within one per cent of separation from Canada.

As it turns out, the main similarity between the two votes was a long-held grudge against the English. Both Quebec and Scotland still resent getting taken over, three centuries ago.

But the Scottish question was vastly clearer: “Should Scotland be an independent country?”

Compare that to Quebec’s mumble: “Do you agree that Québec should become sovereign, after having made a formal offer to Canada for a new economic and political partnership, within the scope of the Bill respecting the future of Québec and of the agreement signed on 12 June 1995?”

Also, the Scots did not divide on language lines. In Quebec, a majority of Francophones – about 60 per cent –voted for independence; Anglophones voted even more strongly against.

Rather, the Scottish split appears to have been largely age-based.

Generational divide

If pre-referendum polls were anywhere near accurate, support for continued union with England, Wales, and Northern Ireland came mainly from the over-60 population. The independence movement, on the other hand, was

driven mainly by under-40s – including, for the first time, 16- and 17-year-old voters.

Analyst Mike Smithson suggested, in the *Guardian*, that gender was also a significant factor. “Two trends stick out: women are more likely to be no voters than men, and the older those sampled are the more they are opposed to change. The latter is accentuated by the demographic fact that as you move up the age scale there are more Scottish females alive than Scottish males.”

To compound the age effect, Smithson added, “those in the 60-plus group are more likely to be on the electoral register [and] more likely to vote.”

Personally, I have no strong feelings for or against Scottish independence – although my father’s ancestors came from Scotland and a kilt shop in Edinburgh sells a lovely Taylor tartan.

But I am concerned about the apparent generational divide among voters.

I suppose, if the under-40 Yes side had won, I’d worry that the vote had been swayed by enthusiasm and emotion, without sufficient examination of the consequences of independence. As it is, I’m concerned that most of those who rejected independence for Scotland won’t have to live with the decision they made for younger Scots.

A last minute appeal from former U.K. Prime Minister Gordon Brown aimed directly at the country’s senior citizens: “Use your vote and your voice to remind your children and grandchildren of suffering endured together, sacrifices made together, and achievements earned together... Tell them how we fought and won two world wars together.”

Except, of course, that no one younger than 70 can personally remember World War II, let alone the First World War. And the sufferings and sacrifices that Brown eulogized are meaningless to today’s youth, who grew up with North Sea oil and digital communications.

Preferential treatment?

There’s a lot to be said for the wisdom of the elderly. They have, after all, lived through much more than the younger generations. But is their wisdom always relevant?

The church I belong to recently set up an unofficial group to consider the congregation’s future. The group has good range of male and female members, a reasonable mix of ages. They’re intelligent, thoughtful, and committed to the church.

But those very qualities make them uncharacteristic. Like the No voters

in Scotland, few of them will be around in 15 years, when the long-range visioning they're doing might influence a new style of congregational life.

It could be argued, of course, that elders have always had to make decisions for those who are younger, less committed, less experienced.

***Maclean's* magazine recently attacked the idea of giving special status to older people. "Seniors have long been considered society's most vulnerable citizens," author Tamsin McMahon wrote. In fact, she continued, "Today's seniors are arguably the wealthiest generation in history... In the 1970s, nearly 40 per cent of Canadian seniors lived in poverty. Today, it's five per cent."**

According to McMahon's figures, twice as many members of the working-age population live in poverty, and three times as many children.

Bluntly put, social stereotypes haven't yet caught up with reality. And government programs based on satisfying seniors may, and often do, penalize younger generations.

I hope that's not what's happening in Scotland.

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YOUR TURN

There was lots of mail about last week's column on ISIS, the Islamic State.

Frank Martens got a chuckle out of "the phrase, the ;sunny (Sunni) side of Islam'. I'm glad someone caught it!

Frank went on, "A friend of mine always uses the phrase 'follow the money' when discussing world problems. I believe that this is the case with ISIS:

*** who is supporting ISIS? The manufacturers of the arms that are used by ISIS and its enemies are certainly making a profit from this war.**

*** who is sitting back laughing while Muslims are killing Muslims?**

"Since this country has a substantial armaments manufacturing business, they are not only profiting from the sales of those armaments but are also having the satisfaction of seeing their enemies eliminating each other. It is constant amazement to me that the US and some of its followers believe that the solution to any political problem in other countries is to send in the troops."

Hanny Kooyman shared some of Frank's thoughts: "Perpetual war making, it seems, is profitable for the few. Who are these people that seem to be without conscience, without heart towards their neighbour? Or do we all contribute a little something to make it happen? Sadly enough, war gives people jobs. Catering to people's misery is big business.

"Indeed - bombs are not the answer. However, so many bombs have been dropped already over the years, making ordinary people who had no say the victims. It's surprising to me that retaliation in whatever extreme form has not happened sooner. How can we possibly stop this war- and fear-mongering machine?"

Alan Reynolds wrote, simply, "Yes, violence begets violence, and the pen is still mightier than the sword."

Fran Ota: "I am not surprised they [NATO leaders] did not see ISIS coming. They have learned nothing from past history, in the Middle East or anywhere else. In 2013 they were braying about supporting ISIS to defeat Assad; suddenly in 2014 they are braying about eliminating ISIS and saving Assad. Nothing ever turns out the way they predict.

"Obama has said there will be no 'boots on the ground' but there are - 1600 pairs of them as 'advisors'. We lived in Viet Nam the last three years of that war; this is the same doublespeak all over again."

Doug Rimmer commented, "I do not disagree that the underlying motivation for the Islamic State is power, driven by economic and social displacement. Nor do I disagree that violence (air strikes) will not solve the problems. Statements by US Senators that we need to 'take them out' are stupid on a Rob Ford scale.

"And of course, our failure to understand the problem, indeed our complete unwillingness to even try and understand the problem, will bring nothing but failure and hardship, as it always has and always will. Harper's denial of all 'root causes' sets a new standard for willful ignorance. How can the Sunni-Shia conflict not be a root cause that we have to address?

"That being said, I think it is wrong to downplay the Islamic nature of the Islamic State. What is happening in northern Iraq is not just about Islam, but Islam is very much a part of it.

"And while violence alone will not 'fix' the Islamic State problem, I don't see how it can be absent from the solution. Can we let the Islamic State rape and pillage across Iraq regardless of whose name they do it in? "So, we will bomb. It won't work. We will bomb some more. It won't work. Life will go on."

I was surprised at the number of readers who read "Marshall Plan" and assumed it must be economic (even though I specifically argued it should be educational).

Arthur Cordell, for example, wrote, "I take exception to the naivete of the Marshall Plan suggestion. I don't think that getting a job, a car, and a visa card will change the situation for the ISIS

terrorists. They are marching to the beat of a different drummer."

Isabel Gibson wrote, "The Marshall Plan was, I believe, made possible by the military occupation of Germany and Japan. Shall we, then, occupy the failed states of the Middle East? I don't see economic development as a feasible short-term response to a well-financed military and terror campaign. But I agree that it's the only long-term hope. How difficult it is to get leadership that has more than a 4 to 5 year perspective on anything."

And Steve Roney questioned the educational aspect: "The problem I see with this approach is that the ranks of the Islamic militants come mostly from the best educated – engineers, doctors, and so forth. More Western education would seem therefore to be the perfect recipe for spreading Islamist terror."

There were two longish letters, following up on your letters about the Ferguson police's response to the Michael Brown shooting. I'm going to truncate both significantly.

David Gilchrist wrote that he had experienced harassment, not from U.S. officials, but from his own Canadian ones.

And Judyth Mermelstein wanted to expand on Charles Hill's letter, about the Ferguson police perhaps saving several lives by not revealing the name of the officer who shot Brown. "Perhaps it's worth mentioning to your readers that precious few jobs open to a disaffected poor black person, pay anywhere near what one can earn in the drug trade. While the white middleclass business people who deal drugs can use the proceeds to maintain the lifestyle of their class, their sources of income remain invisible to most people. But when poor black people follow the same path, it's far more obvious: the jobless guy who becomes a big spender (new car, decent housing, fashionable clothing, etc.) is immediately visible. Without examining their own reasoning, most people will assume the money is the result of crime; subconsciously, they know how few opportunities there are for well-paid employment

"As a matter of fact, in most of North America, even if a man is black and made his money in a legitimate business, chances are he'll still get pulled over and frisked fairly often on the assumption that he must be a criminal lowlife.

"Anything not purely Caucasian increases the odds of trouble, even in a diverse, cosmopolitan place like Montreal. Add heavy weaponry and it's a disaster waiting to happen.

"Sometimes I really do wish I believed in a Day of Judgment where people will be called to account for their actions."

TECHNICAL STUFF

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I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of

life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

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Other sources worth pursuing:

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
