

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

How Rupert Murdoch is sticking his oar into Scotland's independence referendum

September 10, 2014 1.19pm BST



You take the High Road, Alex. I'll have the rest of the country. Danny Lawson/PA Wire

Author



John Jewell

Director of Undergraduate Studies, School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University

On September 6, the evening before the Sunday Times published the YouGov opinion poll on Scottish independence in which the Yes campaign was reported to be on 51% against the “No” camp on 49%, Rupert Murdoch tweeted: “London Times will shock Britain and more with reliable new poll on Scottish independence. If right on 18th vote everything up for grabs.” He later followed this up with: “Scottish independence means huge black eye for whole political establishment, especially Cameron and Milliband (sic).”

These were the clearest indications yet that the executive chairman of News Corp appears to be positioning himself firmly in Alex Salmond's pro-independence Yes camp – his most recent tweets indicate a “wrestling” with the issues, to be sure, but let's look at why Murdoch's support for Yes is entirely predictable.

Best pals

Murdoch and Salmond, the Scottish first minister have always had a friendly relationship. In February 2012 Murdoch tweeted: “Alex Salmond clearly most brilliant politician in UK. Gave Cameron back of his hand this week. Loved by Scots.”

In notable contrast to the aloofness which characterises how Westminster MP's now deal with Murdoch and News UK, Salmond is still (even in this post-Leveson and phone-hacking environment)

ready to admit to affection for the media magnate – who had a Scottish grandfather.

Asked by Alistair Campbell in April's GQ if he liked Murdoch, he stated: "I do. He is a remarkable man. What is wrong with this relationship? Why shouldn't politicians engage with people in the media?"



Sun shines on Salmond. Planet Politics, CC BY

Salmond certainly does engage. In the launch edition of the Scottish Sun on Sunday he wrote: "I'm delighted to see the new edition of The Scottish Sun hit the streets... The independence referendum in autumn 2014 will be chance for the whole country to have their say. The Scottish Sun will play an important part in the great debate on our future."

This was fair enough – as in 2011 the daily Scottish Sun, which is one of the country's biggest selling and most influential papers, urged voters to re-elect Salmond, telling its readers: "Play it Again, Salm: Alex Salmond cares passionately about Scotland. He is ambitious for this country and has the drive, the personality and the policies to lead us

through these troubled times."

The business of friendship

But does this close relationship go beyond reciprocal compliments? We know from the Leveson Inquiry and subsequent admissions that Salmond planned to lobby the UK government on Murdoch's behalf in News Corporation's bid to take over BskyB completely in 2010.

We know, too, that Murdoch and Salmond met in Edinburgh 2012, in a meeting described by the first minister's office as "very constructive". Under discussion was: "News Corporation's substantial economic footprint in Scotland ... and the potential for further investment within the country."

Rumour had it at the time, in speculation fuelled by former Murdoch acolytes Andrew Neil and Kelvin Mackenzie, that Murdoch was prepared to move BskyB to Scotland in the event of independence. Mackenzie wrote in the Mail:

A little bird tells me Mr Murdoch suggested a referendum winner would be an announcement that corporation tax for firms coming to an independent Scotland would be cut from the UK norm of 26% to between 10-15%.

Tittle tattle maybe, but there is no denying that the proposal to cut corporation tax in an independent Scotland to 3p below the UK rate would prove attractive to any multinational company.

In another of his pro-Salmond tweets Murdoch cited the BBC as the most "powerful media totally biased for no".



Rupert Murdoch @rupertmurdoch · Sep 7

Salmond's private polls predict 54-46 Yes. Desperate last ten days ahead for both sides. Most powerful media, BBC, totally biased for No.

← ↻ 1.8K ★ 533 ⋮

As a decades-long critic of the BBC, Murdoch has a commercial interest in a change in the broadcasting system of the UK. And it is a fact that an independent Scotland would have radical and far-reaching consequences for the corporation. The loss of income resulting from the disappearance of revenue from Scottish licence fees would impact in variety of ways.

A former director-general of the BBC, John Birt, has pointed out, in the space of just a few years, if Scotland became independent, the BBC as we know it would lose significant funding. Fundamental changes to BBC services would be unavoidable.

Revenge is Tweet

Tacit support for the “Yes” campaign also allows Murdoch the opportunity to gain some sort of revenge on the political elite of Westminster which has so cruelly turned against him.



Rupert Murdoch @rupertmurdoch · Sep 6

Scottish independence means huge black eye for whole political establishment, especially Cameron and Milliband.

← ↻ 496 ★ 161 ⋮

He has dismissively referred to the “southern” parties and world-wide disillusion with political leaders and old establishments, which would seem to sum up his personal attitude to the UK government in general. It is important to remember how far the influence of News International has waned – from the heady days of 2011 and when monopoly control of Sky was literally days away and Andy Coulson was ensconced in Number 10 to the phone hacking trial and Murdoch’s own farcical appearance before the Parliament select committee. No wonder he would wish to see Cameron and Miliband with “black eyes”.

But is his influence over News UK Scottish titles real or imagined? Andrew Neil tweeted on Sunday, September 7: “Strong indications from Murdoch and Salmond sources that Scottish Sun will back independence, despite protestations of London Sun Editor.” It is worth pointing out that the London editor – the widely respected David Dinsmore – is a Scot and a former editor of the Scottish Sun.

It may yet be that the paper does not take an explicit editorial line. But as Roy Greenslade points out, the newspaper has already shown the signs of supporting Yes. Last Thursday one of its most popular columnists, Bill Leckie, declared his backing and the No campaign has been mocked. The No campaign is flagging, it states, the raising of the Scottish flag over Downing Street: “Another Pole Disaster” a “boob” in the charm offensive. We’ll find out in the days ahead, exactly how the Sun plays this one. But Mr Murdoch is clearly plugged in. Watch this space.

 [Rupert Murdoch](#) [The Sun](#) [scotland independence](#) [Scotland Decides 14](#)