

## ***Scotland in a Changing World Order***

### **Scottish Council on Global Affairs Roundtable Centre for International Policy Studies, University of Ottawa.**

The SCGA was represented at a roundtable on Scotland's position in the evolving international order hosted by the Centre for international Policy Studies at the University of Ottawa on 7 November 2022. At this event, which took place both in person and online, Council members Claire Duncanson, Stephen Gethins and Peter Jackson took part in a fascinating discussion on different aspects of Scottish external relations followed by a lively question and answer session.

Peter Jackson (Director of the SCGA) outlined the objectives of the new Council, Scotland's first international affairs think tank. The SCGA has emerged as a partnership between three Scottish universities, the Scottish Government and the UK government. The Scottish Council provides a much-needed hub for collaborative policy-relevant research as well as a home for evidence-based, non-partisan debate on all areas of international affairs. It is perhaps surprising that no such institution exists in the UK outside of London. In fulfilling these functions, the SCGA will forge new relationships and deepen existing ties with universities and civil society in the rest of the United Kingdom as well as with centres of expertise in Europe and across the world.

Jackson went on to summarise the Council's three priorities:

- i) To provide a much-needed institutional framework to facilitate and amplify multi-disciplinary research and to link this expertise with policy stakeholders in Scotland, the UK and beyond.
- ii) To promote informed discourse and debate on international affairs within Scotland through informed commentary and an exciting series of public-facing events.
- iii) To promote expertise on global affairs in Scotland and support networks of collaboration to link this expertise with centres of research excellence around the world.

Our strategy for achieving the aims outlined above is vitally dependent on attracting people with ideas and enthusiasm to drive forward in the Council's activities. The core of these activities will be the work of **Research and Engagement Themes**. Work in these various themes will unite academic, private and public expertise and promote partnerships across traditional professional, institutional and disciplinary divides.

The initial themes identified by the SCGA are:

- ☒ Human Rights, Immigration, Migration, Refugees
- ☒ Foreign Policy, Peace Building, Conflict Resolution
- ☒ International Law, Trade and Global Governance
- ☒ Defence and Security
- ☒ Global Public Health, International Development
- ☒ Climate Change, Sustainability, Fisheries, Energy

The expectation is that the vast majority research and engagement activity will cut across at least two of these strands. A core activity Council is to support ambitious and policy-

centric projects, Most of which are likely to address questions relevant to two or more of these strands.

Claire Duncanson then provided a compelling overview of the core themes at the heart of research and advocacy related to global citizenship and a 'Feminist Foreign Policy', policy agendas that have been embraced by the Scottish Government as part of its international strategy. Claire stressed that work in this area falls squarely within the wider policy aim of being a 'good global citizen'. She acknowledged that, like virtually all research projects in global affairs, Feminist Foreign Policy is not without its contradictions.

It is interesting to think about the core pillars of responsible global citizenship. Claire posited that Scotland provides an interesting case study as a sub-state actor seeing to make a 'constructive contribution to addressing global challenges. Key areas of emphasis in such a policy agenda include:

- The creation of viable 'green jobs' aimed at enabling the transition to a more sustainable economic model.
- Poverty reduction with an emphasis on child poverty
- A focus on the inequalities both at home and abroad
- A commitment to Climate Justice
- A recognition of the historic privileges enjoyed by advanced economies in the global north
- A commitment to Gender Equality both at home and abroad.

Scotland's pursuit of these policy priorities faces very real challenges linked to its status as a 'sub-state' operating within a UK context in which external policy is a 'reserved' area. This places important limitations on the ability of the Scottish Government to pursue international priorities distinct from those of the British State. Claire observed that, in practice, the Westminster government has sometimes been lukewarm or even hostile to international initiatives pursued by the Scottish Government. Brexit provides an obvious area where the priorities of Edinburgh and Whitehall have been diametrically opposed as Scotland has endeavoured to retain the closest possible relations with the European Union within a context of often terrible relations between the British Government and the EU.

The current era of 'Polycrises' - from the conflict in Ukraine and the related danger of nuclear war to the ongoing challenges of a global pandemic within the wider context of climate breakdown and biodiversity collapse – presents formidable challenges to any policy agenda emphasising responsible global citizenship.

One area where many see real possibilities for Scotland to make a distinct and significant contribution is that of conflict resolution and peace-brokering. It is argued that Scotland's status as a small 'sub-state' actor outside the club of five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council provides the potential for it to provide a trusted space where opposing sides in an international dispute can meet and negotiate in an atmosphere of trust.

It is easy to overstate Scotland's potential to play such a role, however. Scotland's pivotal role in the British imperial project, and in particular its prominent place in the trans-Atlantic slavery economy, have left historical legacies that may prove difficult to

move past. Scotland is also, of course, a constituent nation of the UK (which *is* a 'P5' state) and hosts Britain's nuclear arsenal.

The same is true of Scotland's aim to be a leading advocate for climate justice. While successive Scottish Governments have made huge strides in investing in renewable energy and have committed to achieve 'net zero by 2045, it is also the case that oil and gas extraction remain a very substantial contributor to the Scotland's economy. Emission targets have been missed most non-pandemic years.

More fundamentally, the path towards Scotland's transformation from an extraction-based economic model towards an economy and society based on regeneration remains unclear.

Scotland has distinguished itself as a advocate of gender equality at home and abroad through its commitment to pursuing a feminist approach to foreign policy and its championing of women as architects as well as participants in peace processes. Scottish civil society has also made important contributions, not least by hosting meetings of the '1325 Fellowship', a global network of women involved in conflict resolution, peace negotiations, post-conflict reconstruction and humanitarian response.

But, here again, formidable challenges remain, particularly if one accepts that a feminist international posture means more than including women in peace-building. Challenging the historical global structures that drive gender and other inequalities is an undertaking of an altogether different order.

Claire concluded her contribution by stressing that true feminist engagement in international politics means engaging with this more ambitious project: challenging the political and economic systems that have created war, exacerbated global inequalities and driven catastrophic climate change.

Stephen Gethins then provided an elegant and thought-provoking set of observations on the distinctiveness of Scottish attitudes towards global affairs as well as the prospects and possibilities for Scotland's future and what might happen if it becomes independent or remains within the United Kingdom. Drawing on the second edition of his excellent book, *Nation to Nation: Scotland's place in the World*, he emphasised the Scotland's distinct 'international footprint' as a promoter of multilateralism, climate justice and the feminist foreign policy objectives outlined by Claire Duncanson amongst a number of distinctive international policy issues.

Scotland has long sought to associate itself with other state and sub-state actors in pursuing foreign and economic policy interests that flow from its distinct place in the world. This has included a long-standing commitment to supporting development initiatives in Africa and in particular financial support for Malawi as well as projects elsewhere in the world. This is in common with other sub-state actors who pursue foreign policy objectives and draws upon a vibrant international civil society sector based in Scotland.

Scotland's position on Brexit is a good example of its distinct position. Scottish voters opposed leaving the EU by a margin of nearly two-to-one. The governing Scottish National Party (SNP) has ever since sought to maintain close political and economic relations with the European institutions and is the only major British Party to openly favour re-joining the EU.

Brexit has illuminated a marked divergence attitudes towards international affairs in Scotland as compared to the rest of the UK. This goes further than the SNP and in the aftermath of the EU Referendum in 2016, other political parties in the Scottish Parliament also backed the goal of remaining part of the EU Single Market and Customs Union, at times diverging with colleagues in the rest of the UK. It may also point the way towards a more permissive environment for a future vote for independence.

Although most recent polls indicate an electorate only very marginally in favour of Scotland leaving the UK, when these polls are unpacked they reveal startling divergences in attitudes among different age groups. The division between voters is often one of age with younger voters, under the age of 55, backing Independence and older voters retaining their opposition, according to polls.

The demographic breakdown of voting intentions therefore paints a worrying picture for supporters of the United Kingdom. A look at political tendencies within the 'millennial' and 'Z' generations could be seen as being troubling for the future of the Union. The traditional view that people become more conservative as they age does not appear to hold up when it comes to these generations. The evolution of political attitudes among millennials, in particular, is not mirroring the rightward trajectory of their baby boomer predecessors. More work is still being done on Scottish attitudes, but this trajectory could prove challenging for the future of the UK.

All of this makes the work of the Scottish Council on Global Affairs more important than ever before. The Council was established with the support of every party in the Scottish Parliament as well as both the Scottish and British governments. It will provide a much-needed non-partisan space for the evidence-based debate that must inform the debate that is coming over Scotland's future.

The roundtable was followed by a stimulating question and answer session that showcased the impressive knowledge and engagement of the audience at CIPS. We at the SCGA are very grateful for the chance to introduce ourselves to the unique blend of students, practicing academics, current and former policy practitioners and informed members of the public in Canada.

We look forward to future collaboration with colleagues in Ottawa.