Independence day

If Scotland votes to leave the United Kingdom, will the independent nation maintain its level of science funding?

On 18 September, Scotland goes to the polls. The question is succinct: 'Should Scotland be an independent country?'; the answer, a simple choice between 'yes' and 'no'. But of course a referendum that could result in the unravelling of the centuries-old union of Scotland with England and Wales is anything but straightforward.

On the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603, James VI of Scotland became James I of Scotland, England and Ireland. This Union of the Crowns was not cemented, however, until the Acts of Union were passed more than a century later, finally joining England and Scotland as 'Great Britain'. But in 1998 the Scotland Act devolved powers to the re-established Scottish parliament in Edinburgh, and now the Scottish population of somewhat more than 5 million might once again go it alone.

Opinion polls in the month ahead of the referendum have registered a majority in favour of 'no', but the proportion of as yet undecided voters might make the final outcome a close call. The debate between the two camps has heated up, particularly around issues such as currency — will Scotland keep the pound, and will it be allowed to maintain a currency union that ensures financial support from the Bank of England? UK political party leaders in London say no, but Scotland's First Minister Alex Salmond claims the pound will be kept, even without currency union.

There are very many issues to consider in loosening the ties that bind the Scottish nation to the rest of the UK — and among them is the future of science and research. In a letter to *The Times*, Royal Society President Sir Paul Nurse has warned of detrimental effects on scientific collaboration between Scotland and the rest of the UK, and on funding especially, should the 'yes' vote prevail: "Scotland has long done particularly well through its access to UK research funding. If it turns out that an independent Scotland has to form its own science and research budget, maintaining these levels of research spending would cost the Scottish taxpayer significantly more"[1].

A November 2013 UK government report[2], *Scotland Analysis: Science and Research*, warns against the exit of Scotland from the "large, heavily integrated, and thriving research base" of the present UK — whose funds may not be available to Scottish institutions, post-independence. In 2012–2013 Scotland-based researchers were awarded £307 million from the UK Research Councils, as well as winning a 13% chunk of the more than £1 billion annual research investment made by charitable organizations, such as Cancer Research UK.

But pro-independence campaigners have countered with arguments to maintain collaboration, as a single research area, between the two nations. The Scottish government promises "no adverse funding impact" and also that "independence will bring opportunities for increased research funding through wider collaborations with partners in Europe and beyond"[1].

Until 18 September, the way forward for Scotland and its science is uncertain, and rhetoric on both sides of the debate is doing little to clarify the issues. Either way, yes or no, it is history in the making. Such a short question, but a big one. ❐

References

1. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-28174633
2. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/scotland-analysis-science-and-research

In with the new

As the ninth year of *Nature Physics* draws to a close, we say goodbye to our launching Chief Editor, Alison Wright, and welcome her successor, Andrea Taroni, to the team.

In October 2005, Nature Publishing Group expanded its coverage of the physical sciences by launching *Nature Physics*. Prior to that, *Nature Materials* sat alone alongside the biological titles, collectively known as the Nature Research Journals. Since then we have welcomed *Nature Photonics*, *Nature Nanotechnology*, *Nature Geoscience*, *Nature Chemistry* and *Nature Climate Change* to the mix — with *Nature Plants* set to launch in early 2015.

Andrea Taroni joins the *Nature Physics* team from *Nature Materials*, where he has handled much of the journal's condensed-matter physics coverage for the past two years, with a special focus on magnetism and spintronics. Having begun his editorial career at *Nature Communications* in 2011, following postdoctoral work on magnetic systems, Andrea brings renewed drive to the team. His leadership promises to build on the legacy Alison Wright leaves behind, as she takes on a new role as Executive Editor of Nature Research Journals in the physical sciences.

Alison's departure will be felt by all involved in *Nature Physics*, but perhaps most keenly by those familiar with her passion for particle physics — and her flair for the written word. After working on the *Nature* News & Views team, Alison took up the challenge of leading the editorial team of *Nature Physics* at the time of its launch, and has spent close to a decade navigating the journal through the rise of graphene, cold atomic gases and complex networks — as well as the search for an infamous boson.

The original team of four editors became five in November 2008 due to a steep rise in submission levels. And we are happy to report that submissions have continued to rise, more than doubling since 2005, so we have again increased the number of editors as of February 2014.

Now the team is up to full strength and we hope that the level of service that we provide will be better than ever. Indeed, as a company we are redoubling focus on our authors; Alison's new position reflects this drive. Together with her counterpart in the biological sciences, Kalyani Narasimhan, she will be looking at improving the author experience, which includes making sure that editors have sufficient resources to do their jobs efficiently and thoroughly.

We at *Nature Physics* welcome the change, looking forward to the new energy that Andrea's appointment brings, while bidding a reluctant farewell to our former Chief. ❐