

## Of course the pandemic was political: the Covid Inquiry and the constitutional question

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The [UK Covid Inquiry](#) has turned its attention to devolution, recently visiting Scotland, before continuing this week in Wales. Like earlier sessions, the Inquiry, and certainly much of the [media coverage](#), focused on the retention of WhatsApp messages. But also at the fore has been the Union-independence dynamic that has dominated Scottish politics and indeed Scottish-UK relations for more than a decade. On this front, much has been made of whether ministers in the SNP government instrumentalised the pandemic in pursuit of their goal of Scottish independence. But promoting the Union was also a central tenet of UK government rhetoric during the crisis.

The Covid Inquiry's sessions in Edinburgh highlighted that *both* the UK and Scottish governments incorporated constitutional politics into their response to Covid, triggering [negative headlines](#) about politicians 'playing politics' during a pandemic. But this should not come as a surprise, nor should it necessarily be seen as inappropriate or a problem.

#### The 'broad shoulders' of the Union

Since the near-death experience of the Union in 2014, Unionist politicians have been in campaign mode, typically advancing an economic case for staying together. The pandemic was no exception. The UK government's messaging focused on the economic might of the UK Treasury and '[broad shoulders](#)' of the Union to weather the Covid crisis, with the furlough scheme being a case in point.

The Covid Inquiry revealed further evidence that promoting the Union impacted UK government decisions. The Inquiry highlighted a report titled '[State of the Union](#)' presented to Cabinet in July 2020, which stated that: 'There is a real opportunity to outline how being part of the Union has significantly reduced the hardship faced by individuals and businesses across the UK, and will continue to do so'.

Two days later, then-PM Boris Johnson travelled to Scotland and in a speech in Orkney referenced the economic support of the UK Treasury in demonstrating the '[sheer might](#)' of the Union.

Furthermore, the UK's effort in procuring a Covid vaccine was consistently presented as a distinctly British project, with Michael Gove, the Levelling Up Secretary also in charge of relations with the devolved governments, [saying](#) in the Commons at the time that it was 'thanks to the efforts of the UK government' that all citizens had access to the vaccine, continuing that it was 'proof that our NHS means we are stronger together'.

During Gove's evidence session to the Inquiry, he was challenged on the relevance of his repeated references to the vaccine. But he rejected claims that in so doing he was seeking to talk up the benefits of political partnership. Instead, he argued that it was the Scottish government that looked at the pandemic through a 'particular political prism with respect to whether or not the case [for independence] could be made'.

### **The Scottish government – difference for difference's sake?**

Throughout the questioning at the Inquiry, there was an implicit assumption that the Scottish government had capitalised on the pandemic for political gain, a premise that former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon similarly rejected.

Sturgeon and Scottish Secretary Alister Jack disagreed over whether Scotland chose to be different 'for the sake of it' – as with the banning of mass gatherings in early March 2020, ahead of the other UK governments – or whether it was the UK government that was in fact the outlier, such as when it chose to unilaterally alter the core message from 'stay at home' to 'stay alert' in May 2020.

This latter move was contested by the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish governments. Indeed, the pandemic saw extensive cooperation between 'Unionist' Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford, and 'nationalist' Nicola Sturgeon. Pandemic relations between Scotland and Wales transcended binary constitutional arguments and foregrounded other ideological similarities, such as with Drakeford and Sturgeon regularly joining forces to criticise the premature lifting of Covid restrictions by the UK government and set out alternative plans.

It's clear, though, that constitutional objectives remained on the minds of the SNP's leadership and political advisors, as well as the voting public, with [support for independence repeatedly passing the 50% mark](#) in the summer 2020, largely attributed to voters' perceived confidence in Nicola Sturgeon due to her management of the pandemic.

Both Michael Gove and Alister Jack suggested that independence remained a priority for the Scottish government throughout the crisis. Their case was aided by the emergence of documents which suggested that work should restart on independence in 2020, and Liz Lloyd, a close advisor to Nicola Sturgeon describing a desire for an "old-fashioned rammy" with the UK government.

Constitutional questions, it seems, were not far from the minds of *either* the Scottish or UK governments.

### **It's always political!**

The Inquiry laid bare the interpersonal dynamics between and within Edinburgh and London and exposed the challenges of multilevel governance at a time of crisis. It has revealed more concrete evidence that both the UK and Scottish governments considered how their response to Covid would affect constitutional politics. As a

result, the headlines have often denigrated politicians [for 'playing politics'](#) during the pandemic.

But we should remember that government decisions touched on the very core of politics, sometimes affecting who lived and who died during a grave and rapidly developing situation. Politicians have always been tasked with making decisions about the distribution of (often scarce) resources and in doing so, regularly make cost-benefit calculations that affect citizens' lives and livelihoods.

The choices made across different nations in the UK diverged because the ideologies of elected officials, and their resulting calculations about costs and benefits, differed. In this sense, the Covid-19 pandemic and the constitutional dynamics surrounding it were understandably and inevitably about politics, despite the negative implications often associated with the term.

For more, see their [paper](#) 'State making or state breaking?' Crisis, COVID-19 and the constitution in Belgium, Spain and the United Kingdom' examining the impact of the pandemic on state and substate nationalism in Belgium, Spain and the UK.