

Queen Helped Stop Scottish ‘Ominous’ Independence Yes Vote

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Here are two intriguing, related articles in the Guardian on the Scottish independence referendum that achieve two seemingly contradictory goals.

First, they reveal that under pressure from the British PM, David Cameron, the Queen intervened in the referendum back in September by staging a “spontaneous moment” in which she suggested publicly to a well-wisher she had great foreboding about a yes vote for independence.

Second, the articles, while clearly alerting us to the news of this violation of Britain’s supposed constitutional and democratic principles, at the same time present this act by the Queen as “no biggy”.

It’s this kind of reporting that illustrates how the Guardian creates an aura of “leftishness” that wins it plaudits and online clicks precisely while it plays down the true implications of the news it has discovered. To get a sense of how successful a formula it is one only needs to read the talkback section below the news article, where the gravity of what has just been revealed to readers appears to go over most of their heads .

That is because the three authors subtly suggest (against the evidence) both that this was a one-off political intervention by the Queen and that the stakes were so grave that any right-thinking person would have approved of the move.

The mood of the pieces is created through the repeated claim that the Queen is “scrupulously impartial”. Here, early in the news story, for example, we find the line:

The Queen, who has been scrupulous during her 62-year reign in observing the impartiality expected of a constitutional monarch, intervened publicly on 14 September.

I shouldn’t need to point out that that sentence does not qualify as “objective” news reporting by any of the usual definitions accepted in professional journalism.

It could easily have been rephrased in a way that would have maintained the necessary critical distance: e.g.

The Queen, who is supposed according to her constitutional role as monarch to remain impartial at all times, intervened publicly on 14 September.

See how differently that second formulation reads: the language is far more neutral, but it is also far more damning because it juxtaposes the Queen's supposed role with the fact of her intervention.

Notice also this next par:

She spoke out after senior Whitehall figures, who were apprised of David Cameron's concerns that the yes camp was developing an ominous momentum in the final period of the campaign, suggested to the palace that an intervention by the Queen would be helpful.

Remove that one word "ominous" and absolutely nothing is lost of what needs to be conveyed. Add it and the reader is left with the subtle impression that the Guardian agrees with Cameron and the Queen that the yes campaign's late "momentum" was ominous.

This becomes a nervous tic throughout the two pieces, with the writers adopting the perspective of the Queen and Cameron. With a poll showing a surge of support for the yes campaign,

The news was even worse that Sunday morning as the prime minister and his wife came down to breakfast with the Queen.

Worse, for whom? The Scottish people?

Look at this par too:

It turned out that it was not just the prime minister who had his work cut out that week, as No 10 went into "meltdown" – in the words of one senior Downing Street source – as the full (peaceful) force of the British state was mustered to save the union. Senior figures in Whitehall were so worried by the prospect of a collapse of the union that it was suggested to the palace that it would be immensely helpful if the Queen could say something publicly.

Look at how respectful the language used here is: "work cut out", "mustering peaceful force", "saving the union", "immensely helpful", "say something publicly". All of this Guardian curtsying conceals the reality of the situation: over the marmalade, Cameron and the Queen were plotting to subvert a democratic referendum.

I am not suggesting that the Guardian writers and editors are involved in some sort of linguistic conspiracy here. But I am suggesting that we need to examine examples like this of their unthinking use of language (and there are dozens of examples every day in the paper's news reports) to understand the deeper values of the paper.

The Guardian is billed as the most "leftwing" newspaper in Britain and yet the concerns I raised above occurred to none of its most senior staff – those who wrote this piece, edited it, lawyered it and approved it (including Alan Rusbridger himself). How is that possible in a truly leftwing newspaper?

It isn't. And that is because the senior staff of the Guardian are part of the outer fringes of the establishment. They may be critical of particular instances of misdeeds by British

institutions and individual office holders, but such criticism invariably occurs within a wider respect, often verging on reverence, for the system itself.

www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/dec/16/scottish-independence-queen-intervene-yes-vote-fears

www.theguardian.com/news/2014/dec/16/-sp-real-story-scottish-referendum-final-days-fight-for-independence

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