The Scottish Government sets out its big picture vision of independence in the White Paper, Scotland’s Future. The White Paper details how in some areas an independent Scotland would be markedly different from the UK now. For example, on welfare there would be a focus on ‘fairness’ and ‘social justice’ with the so-called ‘bedroom tax’ abolished immediately. There would be comprehensive pre-school childcare to support children’s well-being and enable mothers to return to work. And nuclear weapons would be removed from Scotland.

The White Paper also describes areas where policies would not so much be different from now, but better tailored to the situation in Scotland. An example is economic policy which would be driven by Scottish needs and not those of the South East of England which according to the White Paper attracts ‘jobs and investment away from other parts of the UK’.

And the Scottish Government also expects that an independent Scotland and the rest of the UK would share institutions and develop policies together in key areas including: a sterling currency union, a common travel area without border checks, and shared arrangements between the BBC and a new Scottish Broadcasting Service.

Independence is expected by March 2016, following preparations & negotiations with the UK Government and others, including those on continued membership of the EU and NATO.

The UK Government argues in its Scotland Analysis papers that current arrangements serve Scotland well. They give Scotland ‘the best of both worlds’—powerful devolved government plus the strength and resources of all the UK.

In contrast, Scottish independence would bring economic risks which membership of the UK helps to insure against, for example, supporting Scottish banks through the financial crisis. There would also be additional costs in setting up an independent state’s institutions, and Scotland would have a weaker position in international affairs compared to what the UK offers.

The Scotland Analysis series argues that it would be difficult to run shared institutions between two states whose priorities would differ over time. In one area—currency union—the UK Government has clearly ruled shared institutions out.

The Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats have each produced separate reports on how devolution could be strengthened if Scotland votes No. There are differences in the reports but the pro-Union parties agree that Scotland should have more powers to set taxes and welfare policies.

Each party plans to put its proposals in its manifesto for the May 2015 UK General Election and to work to put them into practice after that.

Neither side in this debate can guarantee what precisely a Yes or a No vote will bring.

On the Yes side it would clearly be possible to introduce new policies in welfare, childcare, or other areas which would be different to those delivered now in the UK, though there would be some question marks over how they would be afforded. And it is possible in principle for two independent countries to share institutions, but this could be complex to negotiate and the UK Government might not want to have shared arrangements. Even if it did, getting everything agreed by March 2016 would be hard to do.

In one area—currency union—the UK Government has said it will not agree shared arrangements with an independent Scotland. The Scottish Government believes this position would change after a Yes vote. But there is no way now of knowing for sure what currency system Scotland would have in a few years time if it voted Yes. Likewise we can’t know before the referendum exactly what a No vote would mean. The pro-union parties have all set out plans for more devolution if Scots vote No. But they have not agreed a single common position on more devolution and would only move towards implementing more devolution after the 2015 UK election.

But we cannot now predict who will win the next UK election and what pledges they will put into practice. With this uncertainty the Scottish Government is sceptical that more devolution would be delivered. In other words voters will not be fully clear before the referendum about what would happen after. They cannot know precisely what would follow a Yes or No vote. Rather, they will need to vote in September on the ability and commitment they see in each side to deliver its ‘big picture’.

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