

London Calling

How The BBC Stole The Referendum

By G.A.Ponsonby

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This book is dedicated to my wife who has had to put up with six years of my near obsession with politics.

Acknowledgments:

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Chapter 1 - Turning Yes into No

The 2014 independence referendum was an historic event. The SNP landslide victory in May 2011 meant that for almost three years it captivated a nation, dominated the news agenda and influenced almost every aspect of Scottish and UK politics. Ordinary people who had never before engaged in the democratic process discovered an unknown thirst for information. The referendum seeped into the Scottish psyche and gave rebirth to real democracy. A nation went through a political re-awakening.

Our media should have reflected this inspirational period. Newspapers should have thrived, broadcasters should have excelled and journalists should have become heroes. But that didn't happen. Instead agendas were pursued, news was manipulated and old allegiances maintained. At the helm of what I consider to be the media corruption that poisoned the independence debate was the BBC. At the eleventh hour, when Yes appeared to be on course for victory, the broadcaster pulled out all the stops to prevent a Yes triumph.

The BBC is a global institution which has its headquarters in London. All major decisions are taken there. It is officially free from interference from the Westminster government of the day and by extension is apolitical – or is supposed to be. At the time of writing, it is policed by an organisation called the BBC Trust.

The BBC is renowned the world over, it was the first public service broadcaster. For decades the BBC was unrivalled as its global reputation grew. The arrival of other broadcasters such as the US based CNN and the Middle East broadcaster Al-Jazeera has witnessed a gradual decline in the status of the BBC. Nevertheless, for most people across the world it remains a trusted and respected source of news and information.

This image of the BBC is one that endures in the minds of the UK public who, by and large, trust the corporation to report matters honestly and without fear or favour. For many the BBC doesn't just report, it validates. The broadcaster's reputation has survived several scandals. Andrew Gilligan's infamous 'sexed up' dossier report relating to the role of the Blair government in the lead up to the Iraq war ended with the resignation of BBC Director General Greg Dyke. More recently the BBC has had to endure the fallout over its role in harbouring sex offenders such as Jimmy Savile and Stuart Hall.

It's a testimony to the power and influence of the BBC that it has managed to emerge virtually unscathed from each and every scandal. People across the UK seem content to pay an annual licence fee, essentially a tax, of £145.50 in order to ensure the BBC continues in its role as the main provider of news and entertainment. In Scotland however, that contentment is showing signs of cracking.

The broadcaster's Scottish branch is called, not surprisingly, BBC Scotland. It has its own headquarters at Pacific Quay in Glasgow. Its presenters are part of everyday life north of the border with familiar faces and voices presenting a daily snapshot of the country.

The main evening news programme is called Reporting Scotland. Broadcast at 6:30 pm each weekday evening with shorter bulletins at the weekend, it rarely ventures beyond Scotland's border for the days' news, which means it has limited scope in terms of content. An over reliance on central-belt violence and football has earned it the nickname 'the murder and fitba show'. [The murder and football show]

In 2004 a bid to replace Reporting Scotland with a 'Scottish Six' news programme, produced and edited in Scotland, led to a pilot being commissioned. The plan was to provide Scottish viewers with a news programme that presented national and international events through a Scottish lens. It would replace both the UK national news programme and the out-dated Reporting Scotland.

Scotland had voted in favour of devolution seven years earlier and now had its own parliament. However despite this political evolution, broadcasting had remained firmly stuck in the pre-devolution age. A 'Scottish Six' news programme would partially address this devolution deficit. According to those who saw the initial pilot, it was a success. However the plan was shelved after bosses in London refused to give it the green light. Writing in 2007 respected journalist and broadcaster Iain MacWhirter said:

"I'm one of the few people in this debate who has actually seen a Scottish Six. In 2004, BBC Scotland produced pilot programmes, for internal consumption only, to show what a Scottish-generated national news bulletin might look like. Surprise, surprise, it worked extremely well. The programmes were well presented and gave excellent UK and foreign coverage while treating devolved Scottish issues with the respect and authority they deserved.

I can well understand why the BBC didn't show them to the public. As soon as you actually see a Scottish Six, you wonder how we could have tolerated the present arrangement for so long."

MacWhirter went on to lament the lack of funding for the corporation in Scotland, which he said led to inferior quality productions.

"There is an assumption that if it is Scottish it must necessarily be inferior, local, trivial. This is understandable given the poor quality of much existing Scottish output, which is systematically under-resourced. But that hasn't happened by accident.

Continued:

BBC budgets are structured in a way that ensures Scottish programmes are technically inferior, and have lower production values. Funding, like the Scottish Six, is a political issue.

I know this only too well. Back in the 1990's I presented the BBC 2 network programme, Westminster Live, from the BBC's parliamentary complex at Millbank in London. This had an entire department devoted to it, with dedicated film crews and editing suites, graphics, transport, countless producers, researchers.

The comparable Scottish programme, Holyrood Live, which I returned to present in Scotland in 1999, had a man and a dog. A brilliant man and a brilliant dog, as it happened - highly professional and incredibly hardworking producers, but people who were ground down by lack of resources and constant cuts.

When I complained about underfunding, as I frequently did, the response was always the same from BBC executives: 'Well, this is Scotland. We have a tenth of the population so we only get a tenth of the budget for programmes'. I could never accept this kind of regionalist defeatism, which seemed to me an insult to the Scottish people. Why should political programmes be of inferior quality just because they happen to be made in Scotland?"

It later emerged that senior Scottish figures in the Labour party had fought against the plan. One of those was Blair McDougall, a Labour party special adviser who would later go on to become campaign director of the anti-independence group Better Together. In November 2007 McDougall sent an internal memo to the then Secretary of State for Scotland Des Browne. In the communication McDougall warned against allowing BBC Scotland to create an evening news programme that would have presented events home and abroad from a Scottish perspective. Six months earlier Alex Salmond had led the SNP to a narrow one seat victory over Jack McConnell's Labour party. The new First Minister was keen to address what many felt were shortcomings in the BBC's output in Scotland. This worried the UK Labour Government.

McDougall wrote:

"We also need to be clear about what he [Salmond] means by the 'Scottish Six'. They [Scottish Govt] do not mean Scottish news first followed by UK news (as STV does at present).

They want a totally separate programme where the world and some UK news is covered but by (sic) a Scottish perspective."

The Better Together Chief added:

"The argument against it is best made by anybody who ever watches Newsnight Scotland – that in a TV and internet age people access news in a range of different ways and plenty of people will find what they want without having a parochial and expensive duplication of what they have already with some stories cut out."

Labour party opposition to the 'Scottish Six' had been confirmed by former BBC Director General John Birt who admitted in his own memoirs that he "worked hand in glove" with Tony Blair in 1998 to stop the creation of a Scottish Six main evening news bulletin.

Birt revealed he had made a direct approach to the Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to keep the powerful cohort of Scottish Labour MPs on side. A Scottish Six would "encourage separatist tendencies", Birt argued. Blair agreed, and asked Peter Mandelson to marshal Labour's forces; later James Purnell, then an adviser at No 10, and now the BBC's director of strategy and digital, took on the task.

In *The Harder Path*, Mr Birt's memoirs, he claimed that Blair agreed to 'fight' against a 'Scottish Six' for political reasons - even though the proposal carried broad support in terms of improving the BBC's output in Scotland, including the support of the Broadcasting Council for Scotland.

Birt said:

"I was deeply resistant to the proposal (of a Scottish Six) It could have dire consequences for the BBC and unintended consequences for the United Kingdom ... once the Six was conceded there would be no argument for resisting the takeover of the One and the Nine as well."

By the time of the independence referendum, and fully seventeen years after Scotland voted for devolution, the BBC remains firmly controlled from London. News and current affairs output at BBC Scotland had regressed in terms of quality and quantity.

The only current affairs TV programme on the BBC that deals specifically with Scottish issues is a late night broadcast called *Scotland 2014*, which replaced its forerunner *Newsnight Scotland* months before the independence referendum. *Scotland 2014* was widely panned when it first aired with claims it had been rushed out with minimal preparation. Its presenter is Sarah Smith. London based Smith was parachuted into BBC Scotland after being recruited from Channel 4. Smith is the daughter of the former Labour party leader John Smith. You didn't need them, but connections with the Labour party were not seen as a barrier to career advancement at BBC Scotland.

On radio, Scots can listen to either Good Morning Scotland and/or Newsdrive for their daily news. Both follow a similar unambitious template of news bulletins, traffic reports, weather forecasts and interviews. Unlike their TV counterpart Reporting Scotland, both radio shows are allowed to provide some coverage of world events. There is one current affairs debate show a week, which is an hour long radio programme broadcast at midday Friday, called 'The Big Debate'. There is no weekly prime time TV programme on the BBC specifically dealing with Scottish current affairs.

The setup means that Scottish issues are, more often than not, eclipsed by issues south of the border which dominate the BBC's UK wide news and current affairs scheduling. It also means that political parties with relevance in England can command significant coverage in Scotland despite there being nowhere near the same level of support. A major example of this is UKIP, which had no elected political representation in Scotland prior to the 2014 EU elections but which enjoyed more BBC coverage in Scotland during that campaign than the party of Government in Scotland at the time - the SNP. It is widely believed that UKIP's first elected representative in Scotland, MEP David Coburn, benefited from the massive over-exposure provided by the BBC.

All international news coverage is presented through the lens of the BBC's English based operation. There is in reality no such organisation called BBC Scotland, there is only the BBC *in* Scotland.

It may come as a surprise, but the BBC is not subject to Scottish Freedom of Information law. Submit a Freedom of Information request to BBC Scotland and you will be diverted to the London HQ. Challenge the response and it will not be referred to the Scottish information commissioner. The appeal will fall under English law.

The BBC's management in Scotland cannot be summoned by members of the Scottish Parliament. In January 2013 BBC Scotland chiefs had to be ordered to appear before a Holyrood Committee after initially refusing to do so. The Head of the BBC Trust, Lord Patten, stepped in to force BBC Scotland director Ken MacQuarrie, head of news and current affairs John Boothman and head of 2014 Commonwealth Games coverage Bruce Malcolm to appear in order to face questions from Holyrood's Culture Committee.

The intervention by Patten followed not one, but two refusals by the management team to appear before the Committee which wanted to question them over cutbacks in staff at the BBC's Scottish operation and deterioration in quality. The BBC acts with near impunity north of the border and is virtually indistinguishable from a colonial broadcaster. Scotland is the only country in the world which has a government that has no authority over its own national broadcaster. It's against this backdrop that the Scottish independence referendum was presented.

When the SNP won the 2011 Scottish election by a landslide, it meant an independence referendum was guaranteed. However the massive support for Alex Salmond's party was not reflected in independence polls which showed an overwhelming lead for the No campaign.

There was no sign of any improvement for the Yes campaign over the next two years, as poll after poll suggested No was comfortably ahead. In August 2013 a survey by pollsters Yougov gave the No campaign an incredible 30 point lead – 59% to 29%. However towards the end of 2013 pollsters started picking up a discernable shift to Yes. But had the pro-independence campaign left it too late? In the early months of 2014 and into the Spring of that year Yes continued to eat away at the No campaign lead. But No maintained a clear, although slowly diminishing, lead right up until the final few weeks of the referendum.

Then came the news Unionists had been dreading and independence supporters had been praying for. In the final days of the 2014 independence referendum campaign, Yes suddenly moved ahead. A shock Yougov poll put independence ahead by 51% to 49%.

The No campaign had been criticised for its relentless negativity. In January UK Chancellor George Osborne had announced that he would block a newly independent Scotland from using the pound. Labour's Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls joined his Conservative counterpart and insisted Labour would also refuse to share the pound if Scotland voted Yes. Labour's stance did not go down well with traditional Labour voters. The threat backfired spectacularly.

The Yes campaign had also highlighted threats to the Scottish NHS from creeping privatisation and budget cuts from Westminster. The strategy had proved effective. Now with barely two weeks before the vote, the pollster which almost exactly one year earlier had given the No campaign a thirty point lead, revealed Yes was now two points in front. A BBC reporter - Laura Kuenssberg - would later reveal that a private poll carried out on behalf of the pro-Union No campaign showed an even bigger lead for Yes, 53% against 47%.

The polls sent shock waves throughout the UK establishment. Should the result be replicated less than two weeks later then Scotland would become independent. The 307 year old Union with England would end. North Sea oil revenue would flow into a Scottish Exchequer and the Trident Nuclear weapon system would be removed from Scottish soil.

The poll caused panic amongst the three main London based parties. It also triggered one of the biggest propaganda efforts ever witnessed in a peacetime UK. At the centre of the propaganda was the BBC. Speaking to former BBC reporter Derek Bateman in November, eight weeks after the referendum, Head of the NUJ Paul Holleran revealed that the day after the Yougov poll which showed Yes ahead, the BBC went into panic.

Holleran, who had been down in Broadcasting House on the Monday following the poll, described how the London based BBC had "invaded" Scotland in the final days in an attempt at preventing the outcome the Yougov poll suggested was imminent. He described the BBC as "mobilising to come to Scotland to ensure that the vote never went that way".

With less than two weeks campaigning left, the BBC's reputation in Scotland was already in tatters. Examples of biased and one sided reporting of the referendum had led to protests outside the broadcaster's Scottish HQ. Thousands had taken part in demonstrations and marches and there were calls for a mass withholding of the TV licence fee.

The broadcaster had repeatedly denied being anything other than balanced and impartial. Complaints were routinely dismissed and few people were prepared to go through the marathon, and at times impenetrable, complaints process. But evidence in the form of academic studies and one-sided news reports had lent weight to a growing feeling that the London controlled corporation had taken the side of the No campaign. Now with the surveys showing Yes in the lead, the BBC ditched any pretence of impartiality. With the Union under threat it turned itself into a campaign vehicle for No.

It was widely believed that the traditional Labour vote was key to the Yes campaign succeeding. A significant number of Labour voters were known to support independence, however a mistrust of the SNP meant that there could be no guarantee these people would back Yes. Moreover the Labour party was vociferously opposed to independence and one of its most high-profile Scottish MPs, Alistair Darling, led the official No campaign.

Despite this, survey after survey found Labour voters were increasingly attracted to Yes. Now a survey showed Yes in front. Within 24 hours of the Yes campaign taking the lead in the polls, a pro-Union speech from former Labour party leader Gordon Brown was broadcast live by the BBC into homes throughout Scotland. TV sets and radios were relaying apparent pledges of Home Rule from the former Labour leader.

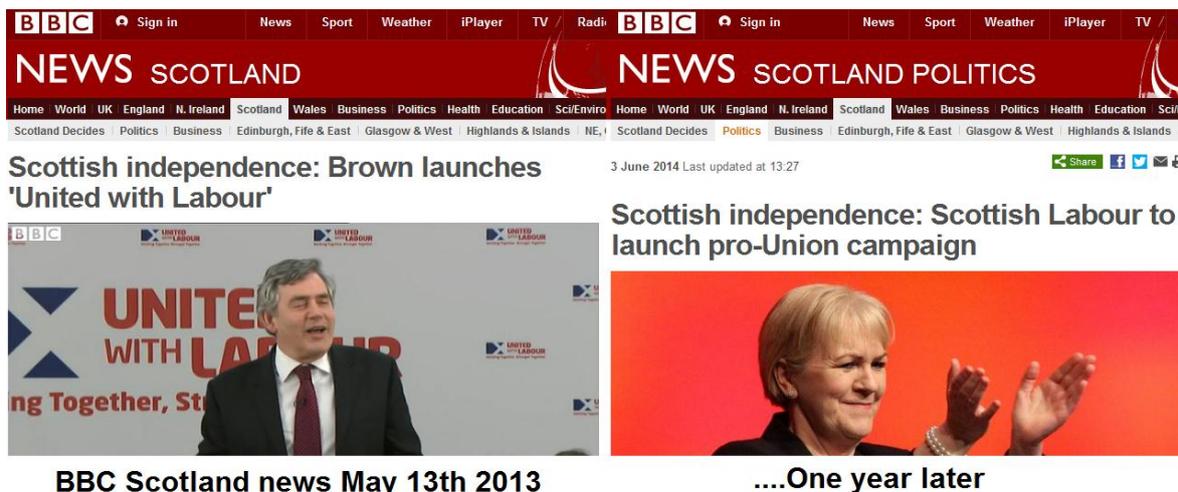
In his speech, the Kirkcaldy MP made a series of pledges to the Scottish people. Two key guarantees were made. That legislation for new powers would be drafted within a timetable set out by Brown himself and that these new powers would amount to Home Rule. Brown's pledges were broadcast unchallenged. His speech was, in essence, a state broadcast to the nation. Key sections of Brown's speech were repeated at regular intervals on BBC news bulletins. Few seemed to question why the BBC was treating a backbench Labour MP as though he was the nation's elected leader. Fewer still sought to determine if the pledges Brown was making had been agreed by the leaders of the three UK parties.

Gordon Brown was the former UK Prime Minister and former leader of the Labour party. However he had long since left front line politics and rarely even turned up in the UK Parliament to represent his constituents, earning criticism from opponents. Brown's absence from the Commons allowed him to indulge his lucrative speech-making events. In 2013 Brown generated £1.37m from talks and writing and, in a trip to Qatar that same year, had even joked that he was now an "ex-politician".

He held no official position in the anti-independence campaign. Not only was Brown powerless to speak on behalf of the No campaign, he no longer held any official position within the Labour party. Yet here he was live on the BBC making vague promises he had no authority to make and on which he had apparently sought no guarantees.

Brown's relationship with the BBC throughout the referendum campaign was peculiar. His sporadic statements and speeches were regularly relayed to the public by the broadcaster in a manner normally reserved for elder statesmen. Despite this readiness to headline the Labour MP, the corporation routinely failed to question him. The broadcaster accommodated Brown to the point of helping portray a second launch of a Labour party initiative he fronted as though it was its first launch. Brown had launched the anti-independence initiative *United with Labour* in May 2013. The BBC had provided high-profile coverage of the launch at the time. It was afforded a top spot on that evening's Reporting Scotland.

So it was odd that in June 2014 Gordon Brown appeared again on the BBC at the launch of an anti-independence vehicle called ... *United with Labour*. This was the same organisation he had launched in 2013. Bizarrely the BBC, despite having covered the original launch, reported the re-launch as though it was a brand new Labour initiative.



BBC Scotland news May 13th 2013

....One year later

The coverage of Gordon Brown's 'Home Rule' speech was in keeping with BBC Scotland's obsession with the former Labour leader.

The day after Brown's unchallenged pledges were broadcast live by the BBC, a now notorious interview took place. The pre-recorded interview on Reporting Scotland featured Mr Brown's party colleague Alistair Darling who led the pro-Union Better Together campaign. Interviewing Mr Darling was long time Reporting Scotland presenter Jackie Bird. The interview was unremarkable until Bird decided to introduce a term which was, and still is, critical to the constitutional debate. The term was Devo Max. Below is a transcript of the crucial segment of the interview:

Jackie Bird:

“OK, let's assume that you do all come together and you agree these proposals. Let's call them Devo Max for example. Now Devo Max, a third option, is something that the coalition in this Better Together group to which belong throughout, didn't want. Now it seems you are offering effectively voters a chance to vote Yes or for Devo Max.”

Alistair Darling:

“Yeh, when I launched our campaign...” [Darling then meanders into campaign speak.]

Were voters being offered the chance to vote for either independence or Devo Max? Devo Max is also known as 'independence light' because it involves the devolution of considerable power to Holyrood, but stops short of full independence. The widely accepted definition of Devo Max is the return to Scotland of all powers with the exception of Foreign Affairs and Defence. This - crucially - means control over oil and gas revenue coming to Scotland.

The term Devo Max was defined by the BBC in 2011 when the broadcaster commissioned pollsters ICM to carry out a survey. The poll showed Devo Max was the most popular choice of three options. The other two options were full independence or the status quo. The image below was used in an item which was broadcast in November 2011 on the BBC's Politics Show and very clearly shows the accepted definition of Devo Max.



Also appearing on the same 2011 broadcast was Alistair Darling who explained what he believed to be the pitfalls of implementing Devo Max. It is therefore inconceivable that Bird and Darling were unaware of the implications of using the term when describing what extra powers people could expect in the event of a No vote. In essence, Scottish voters were - courtesy of the BBC - being told; Vote No and you'll get Devo Max.

That the Bird/Darling interview was beamed live at tea-time into homes the length and breadth of Scotland ensured it received the widest possible audience. Many of those who watched the interview relied on Reporting Scotland for their main source of referendum information.

The importance of the interview cannot be overstated. Reporting Scotland is the most watched TV news programme in Scotland, commanding a total of almost one third of TV viewers. In January 2012 the evening news programme was watched by over 900,000 people. Bird had anchored the programme for almost twenty five years. Both the presenter and the programme are trusted by its legions of regular viewers.

But Devo Max, as Jackie Bird well knew, was not on offer. The truth was of course that Labour, the Conservatives and the Lib Dems had consistently rejected Devo Max. Indeed at the signing of the Edinburgh Agreement which legitimised the referendum, David Cameron had specifically ruled out Devo Max as a third option on the ballot paper.

Two weeks after the referendum result, Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson confirmed this when she demanded Devo Max be removed as an option from the commission chaired by Lord Smith which was to examine what new powers might be devolved to the Scottish Parliament.

There's no doubt the injection of the term into the prime-time interview was misleading. Given her role as a newsreader and presenter of many years, Jackie Bird would have been all too aware of the effect her choice of words would have. The possibility cannot be discounted that the BBC Scotland presenter deliberately sought to mislead viewers by describing powers being offered by the No campaign as Devo Max.

Darling, in refusing to deny Bird's suggestion, was a party to what amounted to an act of deception. The interview raised further questions relating the role of the BBC in the final days of the campaign. Darling's interview, coupled with Brown's 'Home Rule' speech, ensured that pledges made by senior Labour party figures dominated the news agenda in the final days of the campaign. Both promises - Home Rule and Devo Max - were presented to the public as though fresh new offers from the pro-Union camp.

Nine days later the entire Scottish media joined the act of deceit.

No one is absolutely sure who was behind 'The Vow'. What we do know is that two days before the independence referendum the leaders of the three Unionist parties appeared together on the front page of the Daily Record newspaper in an apparent joint declaration to the Scottish people.



On September 16th the newspaper published on its front page what appeared to be an official document which it said had been signed by all three UK Party leaders. It bore the signatures of Ed Miliband, David Cameron and Nick Clegg. The document pledged "extensive new powers" for the Scottish Parliament which would be set out by "the timetable agreed".

The Vow took on a life of its own. It wasn't long before the entire Scottish media were portraying the 'document' as a meaningful pledge of more powers and a significant contribution to the independence debate. Voters would find out after the vote that the vow was in fact completely worthless. There was no document. Cameron, Clegg and Miliband had in fact signed nothing. Their signatures had been sent electronically to the newspaper along with the text of 'The Vow'.

The BBC headlined the newspaper front page. BBC News bulletins and reports repeated the claims contained in the Daily Record.



In an online article the BBC reported:

The leaders of the three main parties at Westminster have signed a pledge to devolve more powers to Scotland, if Scots reject independence.

The pledge, which appears on the front of the Daily Record newspaper, has been signed by David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg. It has three parts and also commits to preserving the Barnett funding formula. The "Yes" campaign has argued the only guarantee of more powers is a vote for independence.

The first part of the agreement promises "extensive new powers" for the Scottish Parliament "delivered by the process and to the timetable agreed" by the three parties.

The second says the leaders agree that "the UK exists to ensure opportunity and security for all by sharing our resources equitably".

The third "categorically states" that the final say on funding for the NHS will lie with the Scottish government "because of the continuation of the Barnett allocation for resources, and the powers of the Scottish Parliament to raise revenue".

In what was a clear attempt to persuade voters that the pledges contained in 'The Vow', and those made by Gordon Brown were one and the same, the BBC added:

The pledges were first outlined by the former prime minister, Gordon Brown, on Monday.

The so-called 'Vow' given by the three leaders of the main pro-Union parties and which had appeared on the front page of the Daily Record, dominated the news agenda for the last two days of the referendum campaign. Many believe it was key to persuading enough people to vote No in the referendum.

Brown's pledge was repeatedly conflated with 'The Vow'. BBC Scotland presenters and colleagues from across the UK also began to make further reference to Devo Max. In news broadcasts voters were specifically told that the Conservatives and the Lib Dems backed a Devo Max package.

It wasn't just the issue of more powers that saw the BBC seek to help the anti-independence alliance. In the final week of the campaign, the BBC also broke a story claiming the Royal Bank of Scotland would relocate to England in the event of a Yes vote, the BBC story implied significant job losses. Hours after the BBC broke the story, RBS's chairman was forced to issue a memo to staff insisting a Yes vote would not affect jobs or operations.

The following morning an angry Alex Salmond appeared on Radio Scotland and demanded the BBC correct its reporting and clarify that that no jobs were at risk. The story though had already been picked up by other media outlets which were running with the initial BBC line regarding job losses.

It later emerged that the BBC had reported the story after having been contacted by someone at the UK Treasury. It also emerged that the Treasury had passed information to the broadcaster whilst senior management at RBS were still holding their board meeting and had yet to make any public announcement. Salmond claimed that by passing market sensitive information to the BBC, the UK Treasury may have broken the law.

The episode also led to an extraordinary exchange involving BBC Political Editor Nick Robinson and Mr Salmond at an international news conference when the BBC reporter was heard heckling the First Minister off-camera after Mr Salmond had responded to a question from the correspondent.

In his response, Mr Salmond had highlighted his concerns over the role of the BBC in the release of the RBS plan prior to the markets themselves being informed. Despite his question being answered by Mr Salmond, a bruised Robinson bizarrely claimed on that evening's BBC news that the First Minister had refused to answer his question. Months later the BBC would concede that Robinson's news report had been inaccurate.

The RBS story wasn't the only BBC inspired story to appear in the days leading up to the referendum. Two days before the vote, on the same day that the now notorious vow was published, a BBC Scotland reporter claimed to have obtained a document she said suggested the SNP was secretly planning £400m of cuts to the Scottish NHS. Eleanor Bradford also suggested the SNP had reversed its long standing opposition to the closing of Accident & Emergency Departments.

Bradford appeared across the BBC spectrum reporting her dramatic 'leak'. However she hadn't been handed the document by a concerned politically neutral official. The document had in fact been leaked by someone said to be frustrated at the Yes campaign's claims regarding threats to the NHS. One newspaper, The Telegraph, reported that the document had been distributed by the Labour party. In other words someone who appeared to have sympathies with the No campaign had leaked an NHS document which had fallen into the hands of a BBC reporter.

The SNP and Yes campaign had both highlighted moves south of the border towards privatisation of the English NHS, which had implications for the Scottish budget. Privatisation, said the SNP, meant a cut in English NHS spending which meant a proportional cut to the Scottish NHS budget. The strategy had gained traction amongst voters and had caused problems for the No camp.

The document though was not what the BBC reporter was implying. It was a document which contained the concerns and views of NHS managers. Such reports are commonplace and are certainly not secret in the way suggested by Bradford. It was also most certainly not an SNP policy document.

There was more though. Bradford's suggestion that the SNP had now reversed its long standing policy against A&E closures was entirely false. The SNP had made no such policy U-turn. Bradford's claim resulted in an official complaint being lodged with the BBC.

The response from the BBC was incredible. A BBC official denied the reporter had claimed the SNP's stance on closing A&E wards had changed. Responding to the complaint, the editor of Newsdrive said:

"...what Eleanor simply meant was that their continuing, consistent, stated policy up till the present time has been no A&E closures."

It was a bizarre interpretation of Bradford's radio report. In the radio news bulletin, talking about the leaked document, the BBC reporter had said:

"It could mean the closure of things that are very dear to people, like accident and emergency departments, something that the SNP has refused to allow until now."

The response from the BBC would be undermined by Bradford's own words as they appeared in an online article at the time.

The documents suggest that health boards will have to consider centralising hospitals and closing services - a measure which the SNP vowed to stop when it was elected in 2007.

The Scottish government reversed the closure of Accident and Emergency departments at Monklands and Ayr hospitals, but the papers suggest such dramatic measures may be back on the table.

What Bradford wrote in her online article the same day

It wasn't the first time the reporter had made controversial claims relating to the Scottish NHS - more on that later in the book - but it was probably the most significant news report of Bradford's career.

Two days before the independence referendum and thanks to the BBC, Bradford's 'secret document' and 'The Vow' were both headline news. The SNP - the standard bearer of the independence movement - was portrayed as a party secretly planning hundreds of millions of pounds of cuts to the NHS, and which was going to close Accident & Emergency Departments.

On Thursday September 18th the referendum took place. The count showed the Yes lead had evaporated and the final twelve days had resulted in a swing back to No. The campaign against Scottish independence won the vote by 55% to 45%.

The BBC had stolen the referendum from under the noses of the Scottish electorate. So bad had been the BBC's behaviour that former BBC reporter Paul Mason tweeted the following:

“Not since Iraq have I seen BBC News working at propaganda strength like this. So glad I’m out of there.”

The actions in the final two weeks of the referendum, although brazen and somewhat shocking, were not entirely unexpected.