

Strolling along the seafront here ticks every cliché in the bonny Scotland book. There are cosy hotels with endless selections of single malts, there is delicious seafood fresh off the boat, and the Caledonian MacBrayne ferries steaming in and out of port are straight out of *Local Hero*. It's enough to make you want to buy a cottage by the bay, a wardrobe based around Aran sweaters and wellies, and leave the city behind forever.

This summer, however, not even holing up in a pretty hotel on the west coast of Scotland is enough to escape politics. The roads in and out of Oban are decorated with "Yes" signs. Car stickers, badges and leaflets are ubiquitous. On the high street, the "Yes" shop offers a warm welcome to holidaymakers and locals, with posters and signs in Catalan, Polish and Flemish – as well as English and Scots Gaelic.

"The more information you give people, the more inclined they are to vote 'Yes'," explains Cathryn Wilkie, one of the volunteers in the shop. "The 'No' campaign don't engage in the debate, except on their own terms."

The shops are entirely volunteer run and have popped up all over the region, from Dunoon on the Clyde Estuary to Campbeltown on the Mull of Kintyre. One is even in an independent whisky distillery. The "Yes" team hosts coffee mornings and organises ceilidhs, and debates – although Wilkie is disappointed the "No crowd" sent only one speaker to the last one, as she wanted a fair fight. Indeed, while strolling through town looking for local mussels, your correspondent spotted just one "No thanks" car sticker and lost count of the "Yes" ones.

Scots vote on September 18 to decide "Should Scotland be an independent country?"

LETTER FROM



Oban: 'No' the noo would not mean no for aye

with the volunteers keen to see the answer Bu Chòir. That's Gaelic for "we should" because, as Wilkie's colleague Colin Morrison explains, there are no words for "yes" or "no".

However you put it, since devolution in 1999, Scotland has pursued different policies to England in areas including education – with no tuition fees for Scottish students attending university in the country – and free NHS care for the elderly, a particularly important factor in this area, which has a significant population of older people.

An independent Scotland would be nuclear-free, with the Trident submarine base at Faslane a thing of the past, Morrison adds. Then there's the temptation of never having another Conservative government. As Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond is fond of pointing out, Scotland has more giant pandas (two) than Tory MPs (one).

"Scotland is a socialist country," says Morrison. "It'll be interesting to see what happens when we get our independence."

It's true that public services are remarkable. Fifteen miles

south-west of Oban is Seil Island. It is reached by winding single-track roads, and 'The Bridge over the Atlantic' – an 18th century humpback masonry bridge over a narrow sound. The island has six buses a day to Oban, operated by West Coast Motors on behalf of Argyll and Bute Council.

The "Yes" volunteers also cite the gap between rich and poor, an end to zero-hour contracts (under which employers don't have to guarantee employees any work) and the proximity of Edinburgh compared with London as valid reasons for moving control there. They don't even mention the oil, preferring to discuss renewable energy options.

Whatever happens – the population of Oban and its neighbouring islands is dwarfed by that of Edinburgh and Glasgow, where a few more "No" stickers are seen on the drive back down – it

will not be the end of the debate. The visitors' book in the shop reflects the fact Scotland isn't the only place in Europe where separatists are voting. "Yes to Flanders, Yes to Schotland" (sic) some Belgian visitors who'd rather be Flemish have written.

A "No" vote now – which still looks the most likely option, but only just – wouldn't shut down the debate. After the drive for more independence, there's no reason there couldn't be more devolution, as in Belgium, where powers were transferred to regional level. Westminster has made a last-minute offer of greater devolution. The campaigners in Oban are determined to push for it.

"Young people are thinking about it, and there's a lot of strong women involved, we're not just going to go home and sit on the sofa," Wilkie says. "We're not going away."

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