

Is It Better To Be Alone Than Lonely Together? Scotland Is Voting On Whether Or Not To Become Independent

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On 18 September 2014 the Scots are voting on whether or not to sever their ties with the UK. And the pro-independence camp is catching up fast. A survey conducted at the beginning of the month revealed that for the first time 51 percent of the Scottish electorate say that they will be casting a Yes vote, i.e. that they are in favour of independence. The outcome is now in the hands of the undecided voters, who are currently being heavily courted by the various parties. If the Scots vote in favour of independence, it is bound to cast doubt on the future of the government of David Cameron, the Conservative Party leader. Who is fighting on which side? What are the arguments? And what will happen if the Scots decide to opt out of the United Kingdom? Here are some of the things that are a distinct possibility.

Who is Campaigning for Scottish Independence?

Alec Salmond, First Minister of Scotland and leader of the Scottish National Party, has described the vote as “a choice between two futures.” A Yes vote points the way ahead to a better future, whereas a No vote signifies stagnation. A Yes vote will put Scotland’s future in Scotland’s hands and will give it “the power to build a country that reflects our priorities as a society and our values as a people.” On the other hand, a No vote, as Salmond has said in the course of the campaign, will cement a state of affairs in which Scotland does not feel adequately represented in and by London.

His opponent, Alistair Darling, is a Scot born in London and once Chancellor of the Exchequer in a Labour government under Gordon Brown (who also happens to be Scottish). He has warned his fellow countrymen that after a Yes vote on independence there will be no way back. Darling

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is the leader of the “Better Together” campaign, which is supported by all three parties in the House of Commons, i.e. by the Tories, the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party. Darling has rejected Salmond’s exclusive emphasis on Scottish identity. “We’re positive about all of the identities that we share - Scottish, British, European, citizens of the world - and don’t see the need to abandon any of them.”

The two sides are not simply spelling out the opportunities and risks associated with the decision, but appealing to the feelings of the electorate. In contrast to this, David Cameron, the head of the London government, and Ed Milliband, the Leader of the Opposition, have hitherto merely pointed out to the Scots that there will be negative consequences if they decide to become independent. If the vote goes their way, the advocates of independence intend in the months leading up to the beginning of 2016 to negotiate with the government in London the various aspects of this very British divorce, which will be taking place 307 years after union with England.

Whither Scotland After Independence?

On the more than 600 pages of “Scotland’s Future” the advocates of independence have spelled out in detail how they envisage the future. There will be more social services and more social justice, and all this will be financed largely by North Sea oil and gas revenues. In the campaign the comparison with Norway, which is wealthy and has a high level of social welfare, has cropped up repeatedly. At the end of August “The Economist” concluded, “But *nationalists* and *unionists* hold to entirely *different views* of the *future riches*.” The disagreements are about oil and gas reserves and the tax revenues that will be generated after independence. The nationalists are expecting tax revenues to be twice as high as the estimates published by the

unionists. “The Economist” believes that “both sides are guessing.”

The opponents of independence point out that in Scotland one in six jobs is dependent on a company located on the other part of the island. Furthermore, Scotland has close trading links with rump UK, quite apart from friendships and ties of kinship. The advocates of independence emphasize that there is no reason why these ties have to be loosened or dissolved.

What Will Happen to the Queen, the Royal Mail and the Pound?

As in the case of Commonwealth countries, the Queen will continue to be the head of state. The British nuclear submarines will have to leave the harbour of Faslane, the Royal Mail will revert to being a public enterprise, and medical care will once again be exclusively in the hands of the National Health Service. The “Guide to an Independent Scotland” amounts to a total rejection of the kind of London-based policymaking seen in the last few decades, no matter whether the Prime Minister concerned was Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair. In addition to the numerous debates devoted to the issue of identity, the referendum is also about straightforward political preferences. For many Scots the governments of recent years have been too liberal when it comes to the economy, and much too close to the ideas espoused by the financial services sector and the City.

In two TV duels between Salmond and Darling the most contentious issue was the future of the pound sterling. Salmond wants to retain it after independence, but this is something that Darling and all of the parties in the British parliament categorically reject. The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung fears that the emergence of two economies may “destabilize Britain’s banking and financial sector and lead to a governmental

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crisis,” and believes that the risks of the referendum are underestimated by British policymakers and the financial sector.

In the run-up to the election it is difficult to see how the monetary issue can be resolved. In the television duel at the end of August Salmond made it clear that the best solution would be to continue to use the pound – with English approval. He did not rule out any of the alternatives – continued use of the pound sterling without UK approval, Scotland’s own currency, and membership of the euro, though these were not in the interests of either Scotland or rump UK. And incidentally, with indebtedness amounting to 86 percent of its gross domestic product Scotland, on the basis of the Maastricht criteria, would not qualify for the euro.

The parties down in London fear that a monetary union which is not underpinned by a political union could easily lead to a situation in which they are liable for debts over which they have no control. The parallels to what is happening in euroland are impossible to ignore. The members of the eurozone are fully aware of the kind of risks associated with a monetary union that is not based on a political union, and they can see them on a daily basis. Furthermore, the Yes vote advocates have failed to face up to the fact that in the sterling area every Scottish government would have to fall in line with the decisions of the Bank of England without being represented on its committees.

What Will Happen to England, Wales and Northern Ireland if Scotland Becomes Independent?

In these areas the political institutions and the rules of the game will remain unchanged. Yet it is very difficult to predict how Scottish independence might influence the psychopolitical

mood. Even though people in Wales and in Northern Ireland have a strong sense of identity, they are not in favour of independence, and so far they have been content with their regional parliaments. Unlike the Scots, their voting patterns are very similar to those of the English. Plaid Cymru, the Welsh nationalist party, is happy with the (rather weak) federalism that now exists in the United Kingdom, which in other respects is a highly centralized state.

The English, on the other hand, have been trying to find out for years what their identity is in the context of the United Kingdom. The bookshops on the island are full of weighty tomes on the subject, though none of them has come up with a satisfactory answer. Furthermore, there is an important and indeed crucial referendum in 2017, when the United Kingdom intends to vote on whether or not it wants to continue to be a member of the European Union. The English are now the only people in the United Kingdom who do not have a regional parliament.

At any rate, if Scotland chooses to become independent, it will have serious consequences for David Cameron, the Conservative Prime Minister. His approval ratings and those of the Tories in the House of Commons are not good. If Scotland votes to become independent, it will be seen to be his fault, and it will weaken his position. Since parliamentary elections are scheduled for 2015, he may well be fighting a losing battle. And then there is popular London mayor Boris Johnson, who is waiting in the wings and biding his time.

What Impact Would Scotland’s Independence Have on the EU?

At the beginning of the year José Manuel Barroso, the President of the European Commission, issued a note of warning to the Scots about independence.

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It would be very difficult for the country to become a member of the EU, and perhaps impossible, he told the BBC. Barroso compared the situation to Spain's refusal to recognize Kosovo. At the time the Spanish government was afraid that it might create a precedence for Catalonia.

Kosovo, of course, has never been a member of the EU. Scotland, on the other hand, is undoubtedly a member, and certainly wishes to remain one if it becomes independent. The Scots are in fact the (last?) of the pro-Europeans on the island. International law makes a distinction between a type of secession which leads to the creation of a new state (this was recently seen in the case of South Sudan), and a situation in which the process spawns two states, as was the case with Czechoslovakia in 1992. The British government and the majority of MPs see rump UK as the sole legal successor of the erstwhile combined state. However, lawyers at Edinburgh University believe that Scotland will retain its membership of the EU if it becomes independent. In any case it will set a precedent, since an event of this kind is not mentioned in the EU treaties.

It is worth pointing out that the Act of Union of 1707 was a union of equals. Both the English and Scottish parliaments were dissolved, and their powers were conferred on the new parliament of the United Kingdom.

Moreover, the decision to hold a referendum is not a unilateral act of secession on the part of Scotland, but is based on an agreement between the governments of the United Kingdom and Scotland that was reached on 15 October 2012. If the Scottish electorate come down in favour of independence, Salmond believes that the period before the beginning of 2016, when Scotland is supposed to stand on its own two feet at last, will be a kind of ongoing set of negotiations between London and Edinburgh in which all the issues ranging from membership of international organizations to nuclear weapons and pension

entitlements will be resolved. There are few rules in international law for dividing up assets, and those which do exist tend to be controversial. Most of this will be a matter for negotiation.

If Scotland chooses independence, it will be an important event for another reason. On 9 November Catalonia is planning to vote on the same issue – even though the central government in Madrid considers it to be illegal. In contrast to Scotland, this vote (Catalonian politicians have taken to avoiding the word referendum), which was not preceded by an agreement between Madrid and Barcelona, could in the final analysis lead to unilateral secession.

In Italy the dream of a Venetian republic in the prosperous north is becoming increasingly popular, and in Belgium the Flemish have for a long time been pursuing a path leading from federation to confederation, and thence to autonomy and indeed independence.

No matter what one thinks about such wishes and demands, or about the kind of identity politics that are based on non-participation, the fact remains that the legal framework now in force leads inexorably to a situation in which every additional member complicates decision-making and governance in the European Union. Taken to its logical conclusion, state-building of any kind simply undermines the whole idea of a Europe of the regions and indeed of a Europe of nations.

Scotland, a newcomer in the gatherings of the EU states, may well be proud of what it has achieved, but the other member states will quickly consider it to be counterproductive.

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Further Reading:

Deutsche Wirtschaftsnachrichten: Schottland darf auf bei Unabhängigkeit EU-Mitglied bleiben. August 2014. <http://deutsche-wirtschafts-nachrichten.de/2014/08/24/schottland-darf-auch-bei-unabhaengigkeit-eu-mitglied-bleiben>

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<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmfaff/643/64304.htm>

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: Großbritannien droht die Zerreißprobe. August 2014.
<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/wirtschaftspolitik/volksabstimmung-grossbritannien-droht-zerreißprobe-13084942.html>

The Scottish Government: Scotland's Future. Your guide to an Independent Scotland. November 2013
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