

Scottish Independence: The Thistle in Europe's Side

By Elia Francesco Nigris and James Lees

On the 18th of September 2014, the citizens of Scotland voted to remain a part of the United Kingdom. Independence was rejected by a margin of over 10%, with the 'No' campaign taking 55.3% of the votes, and winning majorities in all but four of the 32 constituencies. Scotland has been part of the United Kingdom since the Acts of Union of 1707, and while the independence referendum did not lead to the creation of the 197th country, it does have major implications within the United Kingdom, and both across and beyond Europe. Domestically, it has sparked a fresh debate on the devolution of powers, which may in fact be a positive outcome. However, the referendum has set a precedent for independence movements across Europe, which could result in continental instability. In this paper the authors will outline why the referendum took place, and consider its potential consequences within both the domestic sphere and the European continent.

The referendum's outcome, one of the first of its kind in recent history, is recognized by both the government of the United Kingdom and by the regional government of Scotland. The decision to hold a referendum was agreed upon in October 2012 by David Cameron, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and Alex Salmond, the nationalist First Minister of Scotland, through the Edinburgh Agreement.

Many wonder why David Cameron decided to allow this referendum to happen; the most common answer being that the question of Scottish independence had to finally be answered. Mr. Cameron, a true believer in the right of self-determination and democratic and liberal ideals, deemed a referendum the most noble and definitive way to find a permanent solution to the problem, as leaving the issue unsettled could have weakened the entire Union. While Cameron's own political ideals may have played a part, there are additional arguments that can be made. The most important factor that needs to be considered is that, at the time of the signing of the Edinburgh Agreement, there was little to suggest that a Yes vote in favor of independence could actually win. Mr. Cameron, along with many pundits and British politicians, believed the No vote would easily prevail. Hence, on the one hand, the risk of allowing a vote on the issue seemed minimal and, on the other, the gains for him, politically speaking, could have been extremely high.

In Mr. Cameron's thinking, the issue of Scottish independence could be addressed once and for all, while he could be hailed as a truly democratic leader, not afraid to let 'the People' decide their own fate. Furthermore, the vote on Scottish independence could have locked up his re-election

campaign for 2015, suggesting that the decision may have had an internal, political motive. It is no secret that Scotland is a strongly pro-Labour stronghold, and Ed Miliband would need the region's support in order to defeat the incumbent Prime Minister. Mr. Cameron believed that a vote on Scottish independence could gain him some popularity among nationalist voters and, even more importantly, undermine the support for Labour in the region. This strategy seems to have partially worked: even though Tories have not racked up much support in Scotland, Labour seems to be losing a good deal of its own.¹ In an October 2014 poll, support for the Scottish National Party had reached a historical peak of 52%, meaning they could feasibly win 54 seats in the British parliament, leaving Labour with only 4 in the region—an historical low.² With these numbers, it is extremely hard to imagine that Mr. Miliband could become the next Prime Minister, unless he forms a coalition government with the SNP.

In addition to the potential changes in Parliamentary composition, the referendum has inspired shifts in the amount of power devolved to regional parliaments. Scotland and Wales were first given devolved powers in 1998, as the fulfillment of one of Tony Blair's campaign promises. Since that time, decentralized power has gradually increased in all the regional parliaments. But in the final weeks before the referendum, the leaders of the three major parties—David Cameron, Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband—all promised that they would deliver 'devo-max', should Scotland remain a part of the United Kingdom³. This would give the Scottish government greater power over taxation, spending and welfare policies. While these vows were heavily attacked by the Yes campaigners as 'too little too late', once the results came in both No and Yes activists alike called for their fulfillment. But it is not just Scotland who now expects greater devolved powers. The Welsh, Northern Irish and even the English are looking for changes. England is now the only region that has no devolved powers; any 'English-only' laws can still be voted on by MPs in Westminster whose constituents are not impacted by changes.

¹ Indeed, as of the writing of this report, Mr. Miliband has attempted and largely failed in recouping Labour support throughout Scotland in the wake of the referendum. See Simon Johnson, "Ed Miliband attempts to win back Yes voters in Scotland." *The Telegraph*. November 28 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/ed-miliband/11260800/Ed-Miliband-attempts-to-win-back-Yes-voters-in-Scotland.html>

² Severin Carrell, "Labour faces massive losses to SNP at UK general election, poll shows," *The Guardian*, Oct 30, 2014, accessed Nov 24, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/oct/30/scottish-labour-snp-general-election-poll>

³ David Clegg, "David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg sign joint historic promise which guarantees more devolved powers for Scotland and protection of NHS if we vote No," *The Daily Record*, Sep 15, 2014, accessed Nov 24, 2014, <http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron-ed-miliband-nick-4265992>

While this may be an outcome Mr. Cameron did not expect, it may well prove beneficial him. By modernizing the *unwritten* constitution to decentralize certain power, it may be possible to create policies that are more broadly supported, as policy can be targeted to smaller groups. Many policies unevenly benefit a certain area, be it a city or a region. By allowing for devolved policy making, political parties may actually be able to deliver more of what people want in specific areas. This could certainly be the case in regards to different welfare benefits, such as housing, where needs and costs significantly change from region to region. In an age where disengagement with political parties is rampant, finding a way to interest people in the political process is vital. Indeed, the high 84.6% voter turnout in the Scottish referendum proved that people still care about high-level political decisions, especially when they can understand and relate to how these decisions affect them.

Outside of the UK, there have been considerable effects for other independence movements. It seems Mr. Cameron, when he made his decision, did not take into consideration that he does not live in a vacuum; the referendum has set a precedent for other independence movements across Europe, providing them with legitimacy. The better known, of course, is the case of Catalonia, an eastern region in Spain that has unsuccessfully tried to become an independent nation for many years. On the 9th of November 2014 they held a straw poll on independence “defying legal and political objections from Madrid.”⁴ The poll returned with 80.7% in favor of independence, and with a turnout of approximately 50%. It had originally been planned as a non-binding referendum, but the Constitutional Court of Spain had deemed this illegal. One voter, Maria Pilar Lahoz, was quoted as saying independence is “unstoppable and the door has now at least been opened.”⁵ The Spanish government, unlike the British one, has no intention of recognizing this result, but it seems those who support independence have been emboldened by the Scottish referendum.

Of course, Catalonia is not the only region in Spain that would like to free itself from the government of Madrid; the Basques have had a long history of deep separatist sentiments. The same is true for the Flemish region in Belgium, where the Dutch speaking part of the country has sought

⁴ Raphael Minder, “Catalonia Overwhelmingly votes for Independence From Spain in Straw Poll,” *The New York Times*, Nov 9. 2014, accessed Nov 24, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/10/world/europe/catalans-vote-in-straw-poll-on-independence-from-spain.html>

⁵ Ibid

to gain independence from the government of Brussels⁶, and independence movements can be found in the Italian regions of Veneto and Sardinia, among numerous others. Together, these independence movements pose larger challenges to the stability of Europe. It is clear that allowing an independence referendum for every single linguistic and cultural minority in Europe would be impossible, but it would be equally impossible, once Pandora's box has been opened, to allow some to vote on the issue and not to allow others. Where is the line drawn? Granting independence to numerous separatist groups would feasibly result in the formation of many small nations, offsetting a balance of power that has, even in a period of crisis, given Europe welfare and prosperity since the end of the Second World War. This realization helps one understand why Mr. Cameron's decision sets such a dangerous precedent: it indirectly legitimized the demands of every single independence movement in Europe, even when most other governments do not intend to grant the same concession Mr. Cameron has made to the Scottish people. And despite his belief that the referendum would answer the Scottish question once and for all, it has not. Many expect that talks on a new referendum will become prominent in the coming years, especially if the UK goes ahead with a planned referendum on EU membership. Scotland is far more pro-European than England, but may find they have little power to sway the result of the referendum, due to England's far greater number of voters.⁷ Thus, it is reasonable to wonder whether a second referendum may come around far sooner than was expected.

The consequences for other countries, if or when their governments refuse to follow in the steps of the UK, could be significant: social tensions could arise (indeed, they have emerged under similar circumstances in the past); independence movements, receiving rebuttals to their referenda demands, could prove more vocal and the resulting social turmoil could boil over into violence. After all, there have been multiple incidents of terrorist movements in Europe killing innocent civilians in the name of independence—the Basque Homeland and Freedom movement (ETA) in Spain, for example, as well as the National Liberation Front of Corsica, France and the Committee for the liberation of South Tyrol (BAS), in Italy. Moreover, it is feasible that the implications of the Scottish referendum could extend outside Europe, concerning other ethnic or religious minority groups fighting for autonomy, such as the Uyghur people living in the Xinjiang Uyghur

⁶ Katrin Bennhold, "Separatists around the world draw inspiration from Scotland", *CNBC*, Sep. 10, 2014, accessed Nov 30, 2014, <http://www.cnbc.com/id/101990463#>

⁷ Libby Brooks, "Nicola Sturgeon calls for Scottish veto on EU referendum," *The Guardian*, Oct 29, 2014 accessed Nov 24, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/oct/29/nicola-sturgeon-scottish-veto-eu-referendum>

Autonomous Region within the People's Republic of China, or the separatist movement in Quebec, Canada. It is not difficult to perceive how the precedent of an official referendum in Scotland, which might be upheld as a shining example of democracy in the United Kingdom, may very well cause tension and tragedy elsewhere.

It is without doubt that the consequences of the Scottish referendum lie in contrast to some initial expectations. While many assumed the referendum would serve as a final answer to the question of independence, it has instead increased the number of those in Scotland calling for self-rule and indirectly legitimized other independence movements, in Europe and beyond. It has also forced the United Kingdom to examine its constitutional set up and seek ways to modernize its institutions, while ensuring that the most significant decision-making remains centralized. While Scotland voted “no” to independence this time, there have already been numerous calls for another referendum. This is in part because, as suggested above, should the referendum on Britain’s EU membership move forward, the Scottish may well be virtually powerless to influence the decision. The Scottish referendum may indeed prove to be an enduring thistle in the side of Mr. Cameron and in Europe.

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