



# Scotland's probable choice to remain part of the UK will not necessarily mean the end of the road to autonomy

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Analysis

## Abstract:

"Should Scotland be an independent country?", this is question that 4 million voters living in Scotland will have to answer, with either "yes" or "no" on 18th September (people born in Scotland but not registered on the electoral rolls are not allowed to vote whilst those born in England but living in Scotland will be able to vote) – this affects around 500,000 Britons living in Scotland and 800,000 Scots living in England. Young people aged 16 to 18 are also allowed to vote in this referendum. Unlike the 1997 referendum, there is no minimum turnout threshold required for the validation of this election.

If the "yes" wins, Scotland will become independent 18 months later, i.e. on 24th March 2016. This date has not been chosen at random since it is the anniversary of the signature of the Acts of Union by Scotland and England which led to the formation of Great Britain in 1707 – it is also the date when James VI of the Scotland became the King of England and Ireland.

This referendum, the third in Scotland after those in 1979 and 1997, is already proving positive for the leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), Alex Salmond and his party. Indeed whatever the result of the vote on 18th September - and according to the polls it is not to turn in favour of the secessionists – the road to autonomy is due to continue.

Alex Salmond, who fears that he will become locked in a Quebec-like "neverendum" (referendum after referendum on the same issue), who has said that the popular vote on 18th September will be a one off event, should emerge strengthened after the vote and will quickly request further budgetary and legal powers. "Alex Salmond will win because he will achieve maximum devolution, greater autonomy for Scotland," maintains Ben Page, the director of the pollster Ipsos Mori.

Indeed the process that was launched in 1997 by the

then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, comprises ever increasing powers. Just one month before the referendum even those least in favour of a further transfer of power are not planning for the option of maintaining the status quo. Even if the answer to the referendum is negative this will herald the start of a further round of negotiations between Edinburgh and London.

To date no poll has ever forecast the majority for the supporters of independence and analysts indicate a narrow victory for the "no" vote on 18th September.

## BRITISH SCOTLAND

Scotland is a region with a strong personality. Leaning more to the left and being more European than neighbouring England, it has its own bank notes and its own rugby and football teams. The Church of Scotland is separate from the Church of England and the region has a strong Catholics majority. Scotland comprises 5.3 million inhabitants, i.e. 8.4% of the UK's population.

Scotland has been united with England since 1707, the year saw the merger of the parliaments and crowns of England and Scotland and the formation of the

kingdom of Great Britain. The two kingdoms had already become closer together in 1603 when the King of Scotland James VI was crowned king of England following the death of Queen Elizabeth of England who died without leaving an heir.

Scotland, which enjoys the autonomy in the legal, educational and religious areas and which prospered thanks to the development of the British Empire, barely took part in the rise of nations that took place in Europe in the 19th century. The aspiration to self-government increased over the following century. In the 1960's Labour governments tried to find a solution and impede the breakthrough of the SNP in the ballot box (the SNP entered the Chamber of Commons thanks to the general elections on 18th June 1970). Devolution then became a political issue. Regional, a fortiori secessionist tendencies were severely repressed by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who governed the UK between 1979 and 1990. For their part the Scots, who supported rather more Labour than the average Briton rejected "Thatcherite nee-liberalism". As a result at that time the SNP turned to social democracy.

On March 1st 1979 51.6% of the Scots accepted the creation of a regional parliament via referendum but low turnout, below 40% of those registered (32.9%) meant that the election was invalidated.

When Tony Blair entered office on 2nd May 1997 he reduced secessionist pressure. On 11th September 1997, 74.3% the electorate accepted the creation of a regional parliament via referendum. Scotland became autonomous in terms of healthcare, education, the environment and the police forces. Defence, foreign affairs and economic policy remained in London's hands. However this progress did not decrease demands for independence and the Scots who were disappointed by Tony Blair, notably because of the British intervention in Iraq, increasingly turned towards the SNP, which adopted a great share of social democratic ideology. It finally drew ahead of Labour which had enjoyed a monopoly over this industrial region for a long time – although it failed to anticipate and understand developments in Scottish society. On 5th May 2011 the SNP achieved an historic victory with 44.04% of the vote and 69 seats in the regional election. It undertook a discreet campaign on a potentially independent Scot-

land and the promotion of economic issues and the problems in education and healthcare.

The issue of the region's independence, which has been the SNP's goal since 1942, was set by Alex Salmond in 2007. The electoral victory of 2011 forced London to plan the organisation of a referendum on Scotland's status. On 15th October 2012 Prime Minister David Cameron and the head of the Scottish government Alex Salmond signed the Edinburgh Agreement at St Andrew's House, the Scottish government's HQ, which enabled the organisation of a popular consultation on the independence of Scotland before the end of 2014.

### THE "YES" VOTE

"This referendum is not about a party or a Prime Minister – it is about the future of Scotland in Scottish hands ... People who live in Scotland and those for whom Scotland really means something are the best placed to take decisions about Scotland," repeats Alex Salmond. He likes to say that there are more pandas in Edinburgh Zoo than Scottish conservatives in the House of Commons. He often recalls that Scotland has voted mainly for Labour over the last few decades but has been governed by the Conservatives in London who have led an austerity policy with the aim of destroying the Welfare State and privatising public services. "By becoming independent we shall have the government we have voted for," he claims.

Those in favour of independence, who want to "free Scotland's energies," has rallied under the name "Yes Scotland", a coalition led by Blair Jenkins, who is not an SNP member. The coalition rallies the SNP, the Green Party and several personalities from civil society. Alex Salmond aims to show that the desire for independence – which he wants to portray as a hope and not as a threat, extends beyond the ranks of the SNP. On 26th November 2013 the SNP published a 670-page White Paper, divided into five parts and 10 chapters which lays out its vision of independence and explains in detail the modifications that a change in status would lead to and the solutions provided by the future government of Scotland.

Alex Salmond stands as a unifier and maintains that the

government of an independent Scotland might be led by the SNP, by Labour and even by the two. Likewise, the man who was excluded from the SNP for a month in 1982 with several other Group 79 supporters for his stance in support of the Socialist Republic of Scotland, is now proposing a gentle split: he is advocating the upkeep of the sovereignty of the British monarchy over Scotland, maintaining that he will not introduce a physical border with England (he wants Edinburgh and London to sign an agreement of free movement) and says that he wants to keep the pound sterling, an option which is absolutely out of the question for David Cameron's government.

According to Alex Salmond an independent Scotland would feature 14th in the OECD's ranking in terms of its GDP/capita with 29,000€ ie +3,500 in comparison with the UK which takes 17th place.

To do this those who support independence are counting on the gas that lies in Scottish waters under the North Sea (58% of the kingdom's reserves) but they are especially counting on the oil which represents 97% of British hydrocarbon reserves generating 7 billion € between 2012-2013. Alex Salmond maintains that the oil would generate £54 billion over five years. The figures have been challenged by several analysts who say that production from the Scottish oil and gas fields – which are increasingly difficult to exploit – are running dry; they have dropped by half over the last ten years. In 2012-2013 the revenues generated by gas and oil decreased by 5.7 billion € in comparison with 2011 and 2012.

The SNP, which is counting on new technologies in terms of energy maintains that Scotland has 25% of Europe's potential offshore wind and hydraulic power.

Living standards seem to be one of the decisive issues for the electorate; this is why Alex Salmond has declared that each inhabitant would receive £1,000 more per year in the event of victory of the "yes" vote in the referendum. "We have forecast the profits to be made over a 15 year period and calculated that each inhabitant would earn £1000 more per year in the event of the victory of the "yes". An independent Scotland would start its existence with sound public finances and might then witness the growth of its economy by

£5 billion per year by 2029-2030," indicated Charlie Jeffrey, a professor of political science at the University of Edinburgh.

The figure has been challenged by the British government and notably the Secretary of State to the Treasury Danny Alexander, who highlights that the Scots have less resources, for their public services for example. "The future of Scotland in the UK will be safer, with sounder finances and a more developed society," he maintains. David Cameron's government has indicated that each Scot would have £1,400 more if the region remained in the UK.

At present the Scots enjoy a per capita revenue which is higher than the average Briton. The present Scottish GDP is comparable to that of Ireland or Portugal, totalling 150 billion €.

The supporters of independence are quick to promise a great deal: reduction of corporate taxes in the ilk of Ireland, the guarantee of wage equality between men and women and a minimum of 40% of women on company boards (Alex Salmond has noted that women are more reticent about independence), free nurseries for all children aged under 2 etc.

The "yes" camp is promoting a vision – and matters are harder for the "no" camp, which is defending the status quo. Alex Salmond is promising optimistic tomorrows whilst the unionists are forecasting disaster in the event of victory by the "yes" camp.

Although until present no poll has ever forecast that the "yes" vote would win on 18th September, those who support independence might draw closer to the majority if those who want to express their rejection of the elites and the traditional political classes joined forces with the discontented, the poorest, those who have nothing to lose. The middle classes and business leaders, who fear the economic consequences of a potentially independent Scotland, support the status quo. "They told us that there would never be a Scottish parliament, there is one now. We were told that we would never win the elections and we won in 2007. We were told that we would never win an absolute majority and we have it. Today we are told that we will never win a referendum on independence," repeats Alex Salmond, who hopes to prove the polls wrong on 18th September.

The “yes” vote in the referendum has the support of several personalities: actor Sean Connery for whom “it is too good an opportunity to miss”, film director Ken Loach and author Irvine Welsh amongst others.

### THE “NO” VOTE

United under the slogan “Better Together,” the three main British parties – Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats – have joined to forces to defend a British Scotland. The British authorities have painted a dark picture of the future if the region becomes independent. They speak of a weakened country, one which is poorer and marginalised in the international arena and one which would have no links to international organisations. David Cameron speaks of a “leap into the unknown” when he speaks of an independent Scotland.

The Secretary of State responsible for Scotland, Alistair Carmichael has recalled that monetary union between London and Edinburgh was an unthinkable option. “If Scotland is to become a foreign country to the UK it will be treated as one,” he stressed. “If Scotland leaves the UK it will quit the pound sterling,” indicated the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne.

At the beginning of August, the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats committed to increasing Scotland’s autonomy in the event of a victory by the “no” vote on 18th September. Edinburgh would enjoy extended powers from a fiscal point of view (ability to increase taxes) and in terms of social security after the next general elections planned for spring 2015 in the UK. The Liberal Democrats would even like to allow the region to borrow money on the financial markets. A document signed by David Cameron, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and opposition leader Ed Miliband and the Scottish leaders of the three main British political parties –was published on 5th August on the Better Together group’s Facebook page. “No one in Scotland will be hoodwinked by the new bid by Westminster to make vague promises about strengthening unspecified powers in the event of a negative vote – the Conservatives already tried to do this before,” answered Alex Salmond’s spokesperson.

These promises may however weigh in the balance when the votes are cast: indeed why take the risk of

independence if more powers are being guaranteed if the project for independence fails?

To maintain their advantage the unionists have to avoid all types of radical or condescending discourse that might suggest that the Scots are too poor and/or too weak to hope to solve their problems alone.

Amongst the supporters of the status quo feature J.K. Rowling, author of Harry Potter, resident in Edinburgh for the last 21 years and who donated one million pounds to the unionist camp, singer David Bowie, actors Mike Myers, Ewan McGregor and Emma Thompson and singer Susan Boyle.

On 7th August more than 200 personalities published an open letter expressing their hope that the Scots would reject independence. “The decision is obviously wholly yours. But it will greatly affect everyone in the UK. We want to express how much we esteem the links of citizenship that we share and that we hope that you will vote in support of their renewal,” reads the text. Actors Michael Douglas, Louise Linton, Helena Bonham-Carter and Judi Dench, singer Mick Jagger, astrophysicist Stephen Hawking, the Olympic rowing champion Steve Redgrave and former rugby player, Kenny Logan have also signed the letter.

### THE EUROPEAN ISSUE

Many questions remain about the future of an independent Scotland within the European Union. The Scots, who are clearly more Europhile than their English neighbours want to remain in the EU but membership is not guaranteed; the country might indeed be forced to renegotiate its membership; this is a process that requires unanimity which certain States like Spain might impede – since it is threatened itself by the secession of Catalonia – out of fear that Scotland’s independence would count as jurisprudence.

In 2012, the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso said that the European treaties would no longer apply to a part of a Member State’s territory which was no longer part of that State. On 16th February 2014 he declared that in the event of victory of the supporters of independence, Scotland’s membership of the EU would be difficult, if not impossible.

England believes itself to be the successor to the present UK in the event of the country's dislocation and because of this it should remain an EU member if the "yes" vote wins on 18th September. The Scottish nationalists maintain that the UK is not an indivisible country – like Spain – and that Scotland is a nation in its own right having signed an (international) act in 1707 of union with England. In their opinion the European treaties place London and Edinburgh on an equal footing and Scotland might deem itself – like England – to be the successor to the present UK.

Scotland's achievement of independence would be a first in the Union. Until now this kind of event has not happened and was not planned for in the European treaties. Article 34 of the Convention on the Succession of States in terms of the treaties adopted in Vienna on 23rd August 1978 by the United Nations Convention (which entered into force on 6th November 1996), provides that any treaty in force on the date of the succession of States in respect of the entire territory of the predecessor State remains in force in respect of the successor State that is subsequently formed. However neither the UK nor Spain signed this convention.

"An independent Scotland would be treated separately and as a special case amongst the nations that want to join the European Union because it already satisfies the Union's fundamental rules," declared Jean-Claude Juncker in the newspaper, Scotland on Sunday at the end of July, (the latter will replace José-Manuel Barroso as head of the European Commission in November next). The decision might lie in the hands of the Euro-

pean Court of Justice, which is competent in terms of the interpretation of the treaties.

Alex Salmond is defending a denuclearised Scotland, both from a civilian and military point of view. Scotland is home to the naval base of Faslane and its British nuclear submarines.

Finally Scotland's potential independence would not be without effect on the rest of the UK. How will the Welsh and the Northern Irish react if the "yes" vote wins on 18th September?

The most recent poll by YouGov for the daily The Times published on 14th August forecasts a victory for the "no" vote with 45.1% of the vote. 38% of the electorate say they will vote in support of independence and 11% are still undecided.

On 5th August the first TV debate of the campaign was broadcast by the Scottish channel STV and for two hours Alistair Darling and Alex Salmond engaged in debate. The latter was put to the test over the question of the currency and was accused of not having a plan B, whilst London is refusing the upkeep of the sterling pound in an independent Scotland. The Secretary of State for Scotland explained to the Scots that they had a choice between greater devolution and separation – a word that Alex Salmond did not pronounce. According to the pollster ICM, the debate leaned more in favour of Alistair Darling: 47% of viewers deemed him more convincing than Alex Salmond (37%). A second TV debate will be organised on 25th August and broadcast by the BBC.

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