

# Would Scottish Independence Matter to Basques?

Written by Atsuko Ichijo

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ATSUKO ICHIOJO, JUL 12 2012

While no specific date has been announced for a national independence referendum in Scotland, the campaign for Scottish citizens' hearts and minds is well underway with the launch of the 'Better Together' campaign by the unionists (who want to stay in the Union) on 25 June 2012, and the 'Yes Scotland' campaign by nationalists a month earlier. A range of issues have already been brought up during the independence debate, with the economy appearing to be the number one concern given the current gloomy economic climate.

Concerns over banking – namely, whether an independent Scotland would be big enough to support its banking system – looms large in this debate. Unionists point to the fact that the Royal Bank of Scotland had to be bailed out by the UK Treasury to argue against independence. The Scottish National Party (SNP), on the other hand, cites small, prosperous Northern European countries such as Norway and Denmark to argue that 'being small and independent is better'.

Indeed, on many issues both sides have referred to other countries and international organisations in making their case. Nonetheless, neither side has discussed the fate of Basque Country in Spain during this debate. Clearly participants in the current Scottish independence debate are not concerned with the potential impact their own independence might have on the Basque separatist movement.

Scholars and analysts have also failed to adequately explore the relationship between Scottish and Basque nationalism. If these two cases are mentioned together, it's typically in the context of a general discussion of an 'ethnic revival' in Western Europe since 1970s. For instance, Milton Esman's *Ethnic Conflict in the Western World* (1977) has one chapter each on the Basque Country and Scotland; Anthony Smith's *Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (1979) has a chapter on the 'Ethnic resurgence in the West' in which both Basque and Scottish cases are mentioned along with the Bretons, Corsicans, and the Wallons to name but a few. Smith draws the reader's attention to the fact that these separatist movements share certain commonalities such as claims for autonomy based on historicity in the context of industrialised and often advanced economies (Smith 1979: 153). In a rare instance of the Scottish and Basque movements being directly compared, Cyrus Zirakzadeh (1989) suggests that the surge in voting for nationalist parties in Scotland and the Basque Country in the 1970s was probably in large part due to the acute economic instability both regions faced at that time. Even in this case, however, the two cases are examined in order to gauge the extent of economic influence on voting behaviour, with the interaction between the two nationalistic movements being only a peripheral concern.

This is not to say there has been a lack of comparative analysis of the Scottish and Basque movements. Indeed, each case is often analyzed alongside other separatist movements. Specifically, the Scottish case is often paired with the Catalan or Quebecois cases while the Basque case is compared and contrasted with the Northern Irish case. Michael Keating (2001), for example, uses Quebec, Catalonia and Scotland to point out the emergence of new, post-sovereignty nationhood and Montserrat Guibernau (2006) used Canada, Britain and Spain in arguing that devolution does not necessarily weaken overarching national identity. These cases share a number of features, which makes them ideal for conducting a comparative case study. However, scholarly focus tends to be on pointing out similarities between these cases, not on analysing the interaction each movement has on the other.

When the Basque case is examined in a comparative light, on the other hand, terrorism tends to come to fore. Jeff

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Justice (2005) examined attitudes of Sinn Féin and Herri Batasuna supporters and concluded that they have less confidence in democratic institutions and are more accommodating of unconventional political behaviour; hence explaining their stronger, if tacit, support for terrorism. The terrorist commonality notwithstanding, the majority of scholarly literature tends to highlight differences between the two cases. Given the success of the Northern Ireland Peace Process, much attention has been paid to the question 'why hasn't it worked in the Basque Country?'. Rorgelio Alonso (2004) argues that the reason is that the Peace Process in Northern Ireland has been developed along the lines of the constitutionalisation of radical nationalism. By contrast, in the Basque Country trend has gone the other way; namely, the radicalisation of constitutional nationalism has been taking place, which undermines the possibility of achieving peace. John Brew et al. (2009) has also highlighted a range of differences between the two cases to explain why peace has not been achieved in the Basque Country.

In short, comparative case studies of Scottish and Basque independence movements abound. What is lacking, however, is any focus on the relationship between Scottish and Basque independence movements, presumably because there are not much similarities between the two cases.

That is not to suggest, however, that no ties bind Scotland and the Basque Country. For one thing, the SNP and the Basque Solidarity (EA) - a splinter party from the more dominant Basque National Party (PNV) - belong to the same parliamentary group in the European Parliament - the European Free Alliance. There is therefore an institutional platform for these two parties to collaborate. Nonetheless, this prospect is currently being hampered by the fact that the EA doesn't have a single MEP. The SNP continues to support the Basque Peace Process and its MEPs are members of the Basque Friendship Group of the European Parliament, but it is fair to say the Basque country rarely features into the SNP's pronouncements on the benefits of independence.

It was also recently reported that the PNV pleaded to be annexed to Scotland as 'Euskotland' as part of their annual carnival fun (Daily Record, 22 February 2012). One of the explanations put forth to explain the Basque country's action is that Scots might be given the opportunity to vote for independence while there is no such prospect for the Basques themselves in the near future. This reality is the result of many changes that have taken place in the UK and Spain during the past few decades.

When the post-Franco constitution came into force in Spain in 1978, Spanish regions were given much more power than any regions in the UK could hope to obtain under what many then considered a centralising state in the U.K. The 1978 Spanish constitution, on the other hand, gave the Basque Country significant autonomy including the ability to control law enforcement and public finances without interference from the central government. The current devolutionary settlement in the UK, however, grants less power and competence to the Scottish government. Paradoxically, then, given the speed with which devolution is evolving in Scotland, Scots now have a prospect of obtaining independent while the Basques do not.

Nonetheless, an independent Scotland is unlikely to have more than a symbolic impact on Basque separatism. The Scottish and Basque cases do have similarities but their movements for autonomy have been evolving in a different context with different drivers. Of course, if the Scottish voters choose independence, it would provide a moral boost to nationalists/separatists across Europe and beyond. As the preceding paragraphs indicated, however, in order for Scottish independence to have a tangible effect on other separatist movements, much more conversion of the conditions under which each movement operates would be necessary.

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