

The UK after the 2015 General Election: Doomed to Be a 'Failed State'?

Written by Christian Schweiger

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CHRISTIAN SCHWEIGER, JUN 11 2015

British politics has gone through turbulent times since the public referendum on Scottish independence took place in September 2014. A majority of Scottish voters narrowly backed remaining part of the United Kingdom after the opinion polls in the weeks before the referendum had indicated that the Scottish National Party (SNP) would succeed in its ambition to make Scotland independent from the rest of the UK (Nardelli, 2014). The 55 per cent no vote against Scottish independence was essentially achieved through a concerted effort made by the leaders of the three main Westminster parties. Conservative prime minister David Cameron, Labour leader Ed Miliband and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg signed a vow which was printed in the Scottish daily newspaper *Daily Record* on September 16th 2014, two days before the referendum took place. In the vow the three leaders publicly committed themselves to devolving 'permanent and extensive new powers' to Scotland (Clegg, 2014). Most significantly, the Labour Party in Scotland decided to throw their weight firmly behind the 'no' vote, with former prime minister Gordon Brown acting as an outspoken advocate of maintaining the Union in the final days of the campaign. In his firebrand speech for the pro-union 'better together' campaign Brown compared Scottish independence with an 'economic trapdoor' from which there would be no escape once the decision had been made (Watt, 2014).

Prime minister Cameron swiftly backtracked on the pledges made in the vow. Already in his first statement on the morning after the referendum he emphasised that the devolution of further powers to Scotland should only occur if voting rights of Scottish MPs in the House of Commons on English laws were restricted:

So, just as Scotland will vote separately in the Scottish Parliament on their issues of tax, spending and welfare, so too England, as well as Wales and Northern Ireland, should be able to vote on these issues and all this must take place in tandem with, and at the same pace as, the settlement for Scotland. (Cameron, 2014)

This statement resulted in a surge of SNP support in Scotland which most of all damaged Cameron's referendum allies, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats. Both parties lost all their seats but one to the SNP in the UK general election on May 7th. The SNP landslide and the almost complete collapse of electoral support for pro-union parties in Scotland could indeed be an indication that, as long as Westminster fails to deliver further devolution of powers, public support for independence will grow. Alistair Crighton argues that the long-term goal of the SNP is to hold a second referendum which, in the post-general election absence of strong and credible pro-union voices North of the border, is almost certain to result in a resounding 'yes' for independence (Crighton 2015).

The re-election of David Cameron as prime minister with a narrow Conservative majority has made it certain that a referendum on Britain's EU membership will be either held next year or by 2017. If the majority of voters in England opt for Brexit while a majority of Scots decide to stay in the EU, the SNP is almost certain to demand another independence referendum to be held in Scotland. SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon has warned the British government of a 'groundswell of anger' if Scotland was forced to leave the EU on the basis of a UK-wide overall majority. Sturgeon demands that the Brexit should only be possible if in all four regions of the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) a majority is in favour of leaving the EU (BBC News, 2015). Scotland has traditionally displayed a more pro-European attitude than many parts of England, which is reflected in opinion polls on EU membership. The latest major survey on attitudes towards EU membership in the UK, which was conducted by

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Populus in April this year, shows that 48 per cent of Scots would back staying in the EU. Support in English regions for staying in ranges between 34 and 44 per cent, with the Midlands showing a clear majority for Brexit (*Populus*, 2015). It is therefore quite possible that the EU referendum may result in a split between an overall majority support for Brexit in England and against in Scotland.

It is obvious why Scotland shows a stronger affiliation with the EU than most English regions. Britain's reputation as an 'awkward partner' in the EU (George, 1998) emerged mainly from the sceptical attitude of the English political class towards the project of institutionalised European integration. For the English eurosceptics, who can be mostly found in the Conservative Party and the English nationalist party UKIP, engagement in the EU's system of multi-level governance boils down to a constant and difficult battle to defend national sovereignty (Usherwood 2015). In the Westminster-focused and London-based media the perception that the EU's policies and regulations undermine Britain's national interest has been promoted for decades. At the same time no British government has been bold enough to make a sustained and outspoken argument in favour of the economic and political benefits EU membership offers to the UK. In contrast to the predominantly negative English public debate, people in Scotland seem to be more aware of the political and economic benefits that being part of the EU Single Market has for their region. These range from the export market for the Scottish whisky industry, gas and oil production (Springford, 2015) towards benefits for Scotland's business, society and the country's infrastructure provided by the financial support under the EU's Structural Fund Programmes. Scotland continues to receive substantial financial support under the EU's Social Fund and Regional Development Programmes (Scottish Government 2014).

Like in the case of the Irish Republic, Scotland seems to perceive EU membership as an indispensable tool to maintain economic and ultimately also political independence from England. For the Irish Republic joining the European Community in 1973 was an important symbolic political step to re-emphasise their political independence from the UK (Fitzgerald and Girvin, 2000, p. 273). Ultimately the significant financial support from the EU Ireland received since its accession in 1973 provided the platform for the development of its investment-friendly Celtic Tiger Economy in the 1990s. EU funds helped Irish governments to keep corporation tax on the lowest level in the whole of the EU and to invest in the infrastructure of business parks across the country (FitzGerald, 2004, p. 72). These attracted major North American high-tech companies in the computing sector as well as in the pharmaceutical industry. Major companies such as Dell, Google, Facebook, Bayer, Glaxo SmithKline and Roche positioned their European headquarters in the Irish Republic.

Former SNP leader Alex Salmond hence not only controversially compared Scotland's pro-independence movement to the 'Irish freedom struggle' (Peterkin 2015). Salmond also argued that an independent Scotland in the EU could replicate the pre-financial crisis economic dynamism of the Celtic Tiger by creating a 'Celtic Lion'. In his speech at Harvard University in 2008 Salmon argued that as a small nation Scotland, like the Irish Republic, could achieve economic success by offering investors a flexible environment that is built on a strong political consensus on the country's national interest and overall economic strategy. The crucial factor for this success would however be membership of the EU:

Where this occurs within the framework of a European Union and single market place of 600 million people, it creates the ideal environment within which small nations can take the most of their comparative advantage. (Salmond, 2008)

Scotland can of course not assume that it would automatically remain in the EU if another independence referendum was held in the aftermath of a Brexit decision. Former EU Commission president Barroso warned the Scottish government in 2014 that it would be 'extremely difficult' for an independent Scotland to join the EU (BBC News 2014). Barroso's intervention was nevertheless widely considered as an attempt to strengthen the pro-union camp in the September 2014 referendum rather than a statement of legal facts. In their assessment of the road to EU membership for an independent Scotland, constitutional experts Stephen Tierney and Katie Boyle from the *Centre on Constitutional Change* in Edinburgh point out that an independent Scotland would have to apply to join the EU. Accession of a independent Scottish state would ultimately depend on the unanimous agreement of all existing EU members (Centre on Constitutional Change 2014). The concerns raised in the report about potential hostility of the UK and other EU member state towards an the accession of an independent Scotland's appeared in the context of the circumstances of the 2014 referendum. If Scotland held another independence referendum after the UK

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referendum had opted for Brexit, the situation would be entirely different. The departing rump United Kingdom, consisting of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, would certainly no longer have the ability to veto Scottish accession to the EU. Moreover, it can be expected that the remaining 27 EU member states will show a positive attitude towards gaining Scotland as the new 28th member state. Rejecting Scotland would not only be against the EU's general spirit of national self-determination and devolution of power which it has been promoting under the *subsidiary* principle since the 1993 Maastricht Treaty. Most obviously the collective EU Council is unlikely to reject the application of a small country which has been part of the internal market since 1973 and could help to partly fill the economic gap that will be opened up by Brexit (Keating 2015, p. 204).

Brexit within the next two years, followed by another Scottish independence referendum is not an inevitability. The British public may overall turn out to be pragmatic about EU membership and decide to vote in support of continuing membership. This outcome is of course more likely if David Cameron manages to achieve the substantial renegotiation of British membership terms and possibly even wider institutional reform through the revision of the Lisbon Treaty. The latter is, however, unlikely to be achievable within the short timeframe of the next two years. It is therefore more realistic to assume that Cameron will return from Brussels with a half-baked compromise deal on the freedom of movement and further safeguards for the UK to be sucked into the deepening of political integration in the eurozone. The hard-line eurosceptics in the Conservative Party, UKIP and in large parts of the UK's foreign owned tabloid press are unlikely to be satisfied with such a deal. Cameron will therefore encounter great difficulties to sell a weak negotiation result to both his party and the British public, even more so because he will be a lone voice amongst what has become a rather deserted pro-European camp. In the absence of charismatic pro-European voices, such as Robin Cook, Mo Mowlam, Charlie Kennedy but also David Miliband, who continues to remain in the political exile in the US, the pro-EU camp will struggle to make its voice heard against a barrack of eurosceptic voices. If British pro-Europeans fail on this historic occasion to make the convincing case for staying inside the EU the days of the United Kingdom as we know it may indeed be over for good.

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