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SCOTLAND'S INDEPENDENCE BID: History, Prospects, Challenges

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# SCOTLAND'S INDEPENDENCE BID

*History, Prospects, Challenges*

*Roland Flamini*

At exactly 17:14 on the evening of September 15, 2012, in Barcelona's Camp Nou stadium, thousands of fans at a packed soccer game stood up as one and chanted, "Independence!" The timing was chosen to coincide with the year 1714, when Spanish troops annexed Catalonia—of which Barcelona is the capital—to Spain. Catalonia has its own distinct language and culture, and Catalan activists have been fanning the flames of separatism ever since.

Cut to Edinburgh one month later, where British Prime Minister David Cameron and Alex Salmond, first minister of the Scottish Parliament and leader of the left-of-center Scottish National Party (SNP), signed an agreement for a 2014 referendum that could end the Act of Union of 1707 and allow Scotland to leave the United Kingdom and become an independent country. Unlike the government in Madrid, which has flatly refused to agree to a referendum on Catalonia gaining its independence, the UK government at Westminster has pragmatically agreed to a referendum—and, in effect, committed itself to accepting the outcome.

With most polls showing that only a third of Scotland's four million plus voters currently favor Scottish independence, Cameron may think

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that agreeing to a referendum is not much of a political gamble: if the referendum were held today, a majority in favor of remaining in the union—a “no” vote, as the referendum question is expected to be phrased—would

**“What the referendum agreement has done is to impose a political deadline one way or the other on the hot issue of independence. Underneath the British reserve, there is a growing concern in London over how separation could weaken Britain’s position in the world.”**

be the most likely outcome. But as Nicola McEwan, director of Public Policy at the University of Edinburgh’s Academy of Government, points out, “two years is a long time in politics, and it is impossible to predict how opinion will develop.”

What the referendum agreement has done is to impose a political deadline one way or the other on the hot issue of independence. Underneath the British reserve, there is a growing concern in London over how

separation could weaken Britain’s position in the world. For example, could the “Disunited Kingdom” justify retaining a seat on the UN Security Council? On the Scottish side, Salmond is seen as betting independence on one throw of the dice. The referendum, he has said, is “a once-in-a-generation event.”

Both sides have launched major efforts at a cost of millions of dollars to win over “the heart and the head” (as Cameron put it) of the Scottish electorate; a dozen organizations are now engaged in the fight over Scotland’s constitutional future. “Yes Scotland” is the largest pro-independence group spearheading the breakaway campaign. Its main opponent, “Better Together,” advocates remaining in the union.

Yes Scotland has launched a drive to collect a million signatures in support of the referendum by voting day. The declaration the Scots are being asked to sign says, in part, “I believe that it is fundamentally better for us if all decisions about Scotland’s future are taken by the people who care most about Scotland, that is, by the people of Scotland. Being independent means Scotland’s future will be in Scotland’s hands.” Inevitably, celebrities add luster to the cause: the actors Sean Connery (a.k.a. James

Bond), Alan Cumming (who introduces *Masterpiece Mystery* on PBS), and Brian Cox are highly visible supporters of independence.

Within weeks of signing the referendum agreement, the British government published the first of a series of what it calls “analysis papers” about Scotland’s importance to the union, and the benefits it derives from the affiliation. The SNP responded by releasing a “road map” outlining the steps from the referendum to full statehood early in 2016.

Salmond picked the autumn of 2014 as the referendum date because it coincides with a series of major sporting events that he hopes will make Scots feel more patriotic—the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, the Ryder Cup golf tournament at Gleneagles, and a Year of Homecoming for the Scottish diaspora. David Cameron has since announced a series of events, marking the hundredth anniversary of World War I, to focus attention on the joint British effort in that conflict.

There are no such prospects for separatism—as it’s described in the Spanish version—for the semi-autonomous region of Catalonia, where a festering issue is its major contribution to the national economy (nineteen percent of Spain’s GDP) and of course a bitterness stretching back to the Civil War and beyond. The situation has been worsened by Catalan protests over twenty-six percent unemployment and the way Madrid is mishandling—as the Catalans see it—the country’s economic crisis. The Spanish government’s gamble is that separatist sentiment will calm down once the grim economy improves, allowing the national government to be more generous with subsidies and unemployment-reducing public works.

The Scottish and Catalan situations are by no means similar, but both pro-independence movements have learned to deal with the analogy they pose to each other. When the pro-independence Catalan ruling party *Convergència i Unió* (CiU) did less well than expected in elections last November, and its leader, Artur Mas, had to form a coalition to remain in power, Salmond’s SNP distanced itself from the Catalans, and SNP leaders sought to reassure their own supporters by stressing the different circumstances of the two parties. A success in Scotland will encourage the Catalans as well as other European independence movements such as the Walloons and the Flemish in Belgium; but a decisive “No” by the Scots could dent “Yes” sentiment on the continent.

Salmond’s “prosperous and successful European country, reflecting Scottish values of fairness and opportunity, promoting equality and social cohesion, with a new place in the world as an independent nation,” would

be a country with its own fifteen-thousand-strong standing army (plus five thousand reserves), navy, and air force, the pound sterling for its currency, and North Sea oil and gas revenues from ninety percent of the offshore fields, plus membership of NATO, the European Union, and the British Commonwealth, with the queen as head of state.

Queen Elizabeth II, who spends two months every autumn at Balmoral Castle, in the Scottish Highlands, has not commented on Scotland's desire for independence, but if the outcome of the referendum releases Scotland from the union and the British Parliament ratifies the separation, there would surely be no obstacle to the queen remaining head of state, just as she is of Australia, Canada, and other Commonwealth countries.

Doubts over whether an independent Scotland could remain a member of the European Union—and have access to its agriculture subsidies—are said to be discouraging many potential supporters. The EU's ruling European Commission has tried to stay out of the Scottish referendum argument, but the signs are that Scotland would have to move to the back of the line and go through the so-called accession—the lengthy process of applying for membership—which typically takes years. The same would apply to a seat in the United Nations.

“We are going to be simply arguing for a transition from membership as part of the UK to membership as an independent country, but on the same terms,” Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's deputy first minister, recently told the *Times* of London, sketching Edinburgh's case. “We're simply arguing for a continuation of the status quo.” But in December, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso told the BBC that Scotland would be treated as a new applicant. If “one part of a country” was to become independent “it has to apply to the European Union for membership according to the rules,” Barroso said. “That's obvious.” And Spanish government officials have hinted strongly that Spain would exercise its veto right in the European Union to block Scotland's entry as a warning to the Catalans.

Yet an off-the-cuff statement to the BBC is hardly conclusive, and the battle over EU membership is way down in the sequence of events on the road to independence. First the Scots have to go to the polls to answer the single question on the ballot, which, according to press reports, is expected to be: “Should Scotland be an independent country?”

The referendum is another historic landmark in the complex and often turbulent relationship between the two neighbors going back to Roman times, when the Roman emperor Hadrian built a wall at the northern end of Britain to keep out the marauding Scottish tribes. But for centuries after that it was more a matter of the Scots fighting off attempts by their larger neighbor to subjugate their country than of their own marauding.

Early Scottish heroes in these wars of independence included William Wallace (subject of the Academy Award-winning film *Braveheart*) and Robert the Bruce, who, in 1314, defeated the English king, Edward II, at Bannockburn. (Next year's centenary celebrations of this victory will provide a symbolic backdrop for the referendum.) In 1613, King James VI of Scotland also became king of England, but the move from regal union to parliamentary union was far from seamless and wasn't actually locked up until ninety-four years later.

Scottish acceptance of the 1707 Act of Union, after endless negotiations, was the result of a combination of factors, including the economic fallout from a failed attempt by Scotland to set up an *entrepôt* base in Panama, which had ruined the country financially. The Scottish Parliament was abolished in return for a mere forty-five seats in the House of Commons at Westminster, and fourteen Scottish lords permitted in the upper house. The Scots began to pay English taxes, but retained their own legal system, churches, and universities. Resentment simmered, especially among the Jacobites, secret supporters of "the Young Pretender," the Catholic son of James II, who had been forced, in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, to abdicate in favor of a succession of Protestant princes from Europe, ultimately leading to the Hanoverian dynasty. The poet Robert Burns angrily accused the Scottish signatories of the Act of Union as being "bought and sold for English gold."

The Jacobites mounted two serious challenges to the Union in 1715 and 1745, both of which failed. The Jacobite threat ended with the latter—an attempted invasion by James II's grandson, Prince Charles, better known in history and folklore as Bonnie Prince Charlie, was crushed at Culloden, and his remaining followers hunted down with extraordinary ferocity.

In the nineteenth century, the Scots developed a taste for empire building as soldiers, colonizers, and traders, and Scotland played a signif-

icant role in the emergence of imperial Britain. But Scottish nationalism was always present, just under the surface of daily life, as the Scots continued to campaign for some form of “home rule.” In 1998, the government of Tony Blair, responding to growing demands, agreed to so-called “devolution” in which the Scottish Parliament would be directly elected with wide legislative powers. Edinburgh got a regional government with wide-ranging powers over education, justice, and health policies, but with the UK government in charge of most taxation, social welfare, and the economy, plus defense and foreign policy issues.

Then, in 2011, Alex Salmond and the Scottish National Party won a sweeping electoral victory. The time had come to move to the next level—a demand for independence.

If the Scots vote “yes” in 2014, lengthy negotiations with London are expected to follow, covering the many issues requiring agreement, and an independent Scotland is not likely to be declared before 2016. Defense will be a big question. The SNP wants a nuclear-free Scotland, and will therefore be expected to request the withdrawal of the Royal Navy’s nuclear submarines, armed with Trident missiles, from their base at Faslane, near Glasgow. The new Scottish defense force will be formed from some of the most famous regiments in the British army, troops that covered themselves in glory fighting for the empire in Spain and Portugal, in Africa, Asia, and in India. But the SNP intends to apply for NATO membership, so close cooperation with UK forces is expected to continue under the NATO umbrella.

The Scots will also have to negotiate with Britain to stay in the pound sterling zone. But such an outcome could be complicated if they manage to overcome the obstacles to joining the European Union because only the UK and Denmark have been allowed to opt out of the eurozone, and Brussels is determined not to make that same concession again.

A battery of polls this year have produced results ranging from twenty-six percent in favor of independence at the lower end, to a high end of forty-one percent, depending on the wording of the question. When the question mentions leaving the UK, the “yes” vote drops. But in all the polls, the percentage of respondents who wish to remain in the union never goes below fifty percent. “The Scots are a practical people

and Salmond's challenge is to persuade them that they would be better off on their own than as part of the UK," says a European diplomat in London, "that independence would be good for their pockets."

So would it? What makes Scottish independence even remotely realistic is oil and gas revenue that currently flows into the UK treasury. The SNP says Scotland is entitled to income from about ninety percent of the oil and gas platforms in the North Sea—or \$14.2 billion a year in recent years. Of that, Scotland's planned defense budget would eat up \$3.7 billion, about the same as Denmark's or Norway's.

Salmond remains confident that Scotland would continue to have close economic ties with Britain, and he says foreign investors have not been scared away by the prospect of independence. According to a report by the global accounting firm of Ernst & Young, more new foreign businesses were established in Scotland in 2011 than in any other part of the United Kingdom, and the companies included Amazon and Toshiba.

Scottish Americans have rallied behind the idea of an independent Scotland, but official Washington is less enthusiastic. "An independent Scotland would significantly weaken the foremost military and diplomatic ally of the United States, while creating another European mini-state unable to contribute meaningfully to global security," the *Washington Post* stated in a recent editorial. But while Washington may play a modest behind-the-scenes role in the referendum, the matter now is in other hands. ●