

Things Fall Apart

Why the Future of Europe Rests on Scotland

staff writer
NICHOLAS WOOD

On September 18th, Scotland's electorate will head to the polls to answer the question: "Should Scotland be an independent country?" The date has been selected with special care and consideration to mark the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn, a legendary victory in the First War of Scottish Independence. The referendum will also closely follow the 2014 Commonwealth Games, to be held in Glasgow (the country's largest city). The Scottish National Party, the primary backer of the referendum, hopes that all of these factors will work together to ignite a feeling of Scottish pride and nudge people to vote "yes" in the referendum. This vote on the future of the United Kingdom is significant not only in its potential to divide one of the world's oldest united territories, but also in the precedent that it sets for other independence and right-wing movements throughout Europe.

In the Scottish case, the outcome of the referendum seems to be leaning in the direction of remaining in the union. In a recent You Gov poll, only 30 percent of respondents said that they supported complete Scottish independence, with 61 percent reporting that they would opt to stay in the UK. However, the outcome of the vote is expected to rest on whether the Scottish population believes that they will gain economically as a result of complete independence. The pro-independence campaign is currently mired in uncertainties, such as the question of whether an independent Scotland would be automatically granted membership to the European Union and the lack of monetary autonomy that would result from Scotland keeping the pound as its currency. Both of these points, along with

the murky estimates for North Sea oil production into the next decade, make forecasting Scotland's future prosperity difficult. The campaign is therefore largely based upon assertions that Scotland, a once proud nation, must shake off the subjugation of the English and rise to fulfill its potential as an independent nation. Such arguments are not completely without substance. According to *The Economist*, Scottish output per capita is at 98 percent of the UK average and

the highest outside of London and the South East of England. However, Scotland is not so successful within the UK that one would deem it wise to opt for total independence—it would, after all, stand as a very small player in the European and world economies. In reality, Scotland has had a relatively high level of autonomy over its domestic affairs since the passage of the 1998 Scotland Act, which resulted in a devolution of powers. Furthermore, given the small amount of Scottish protest over UK legislation since the devolution of powers in 1998—the question of the location of the UK's nuclear deterrent in Scotland notwithstanding—there seem to be few actual examples of UK legislation with which the Scottish popu-

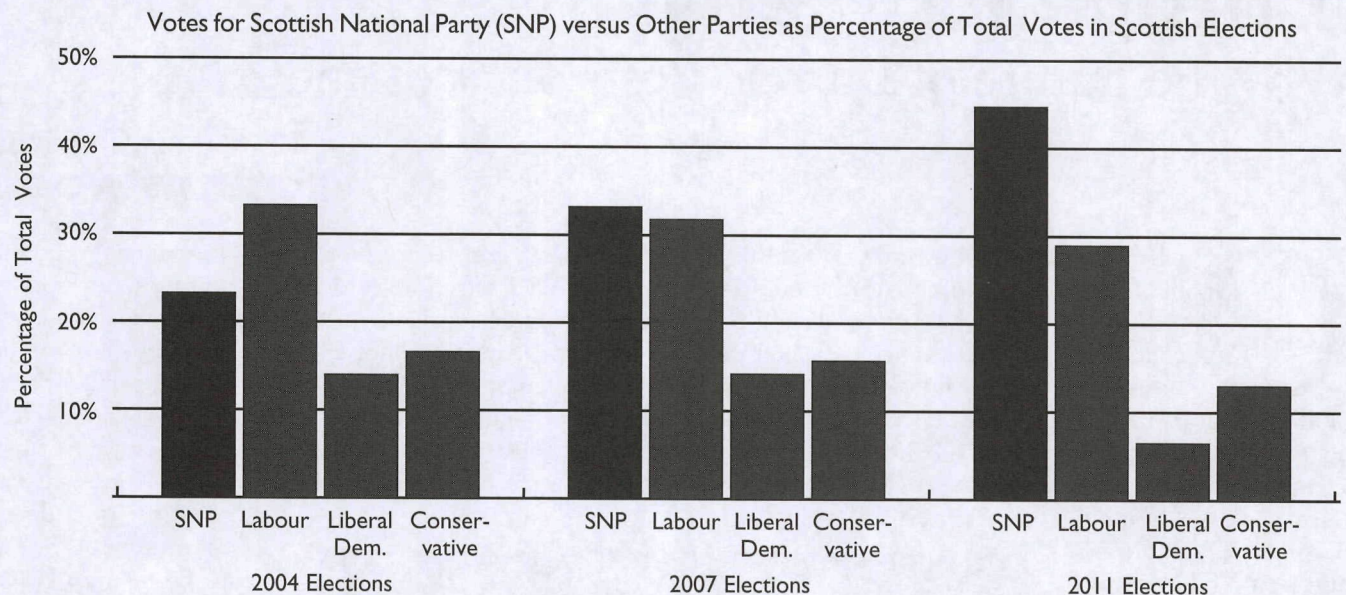


A young girl and her father at a pro-independence rally in Edinburgh, Scotland. Thousands of supporters of Scottish independence rallied to support 2014's independence referendum.

lace has taken issue.

But the implications of Scottish independence stretch far beyond domestic borders. The Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has previously made clear that there is no possibility of automatic EU membership for an independent Scotland, and that should Scotland secede, he will advocate for the pursuit of the normal process for entry, whereby all 28 member states would have to assent to Scotland becoming a part of the EU. His statement is largely seen as an attempt to dissuade Catalan residents from seceding from Spain.

Riding the Separatist Tide: The Rise in Support for the SNP



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Scottish Parliament

The argument for Catalonia to break away from the rest of Spain is arguably stronger than that which is used to justify Scottish secession. Due to the prosperity of Barcelona and its surrounding metropolitan area, tax revenues from Catalonia actually subsidize the rest of Spain, as the region is granted less of a budget from the Spanish government than it collects in tax revenue. According to *La Vanguardia*, of every euro collected in tax revenue from the region, only 57 cents are allocated to it in budget allocations by the central Spanish government. Proponents of Catalan independence are also supported by the fact that the region speaks Catalan, a different language than the rest of Spain, whereas English is spoken throughout Scotland. Therefore it makes sense that Spain would be the staunchest opponent of Scottish secession because of the possibility that a successful Scottish breakaway could ignite a stronger Catalan independence movement.

The independence movements in the UK and Spain are the most interesting and, indeed, worrying, because they illustrate a trend towards the breakup of European nations. The hardships brought about by the recession of 2008-9 and the Eurozone crisis that followed a couple of years later have exacerbated feelings of oppression and disadvantage within regions of Europe that were historically separate states. From Bavaria to Brittany, years of economic stagnation and pessimism have been strengthening separatist movements throughout Europe. While these movements lack the strength and fame of those in Spain and the UK, they provide an interesting perspective since they lie at the very heart of Europe. The separatist movements are exacerbated and compounded by the problem of the rise of far-right political groups across the EU, an independent but complementary trend to that of secessionism. Recent times have brought clamors for separation from the EU from within the UK, France, and Germany, arguably the three biggest players in

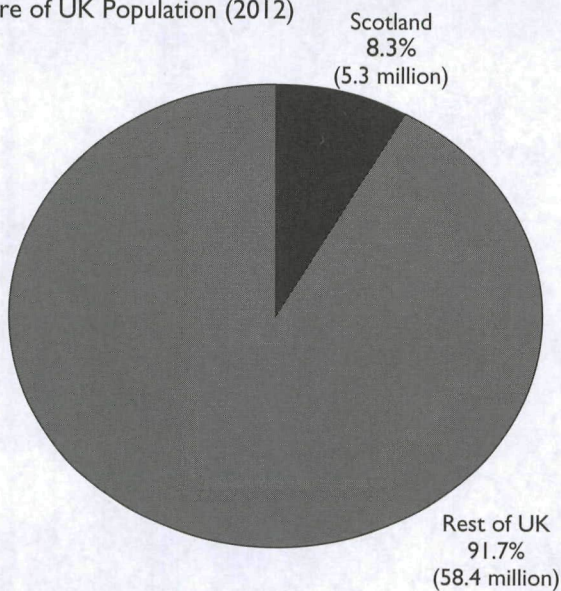
the European landscape; this is yet another symptom of a worrying discontent throughout the continent. Among the right wing groups that have gained political influence, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) stands as one of the most influential. While it is not an extremist group like Greece's Golden Dawn, for example, UKIP's political platform is based on anti-immigration and anti-EU policies. If Scotland were to vote for independence, then the relative instability that accompanies the split could cause right-leaning voters to turn to UKIP's isolationist policies. The possibility of this happening throughout the continent has the potential to cause the EU to begin to fracture and divide. Whereas the independence movements could cause the fragmentation of several states within the union, the

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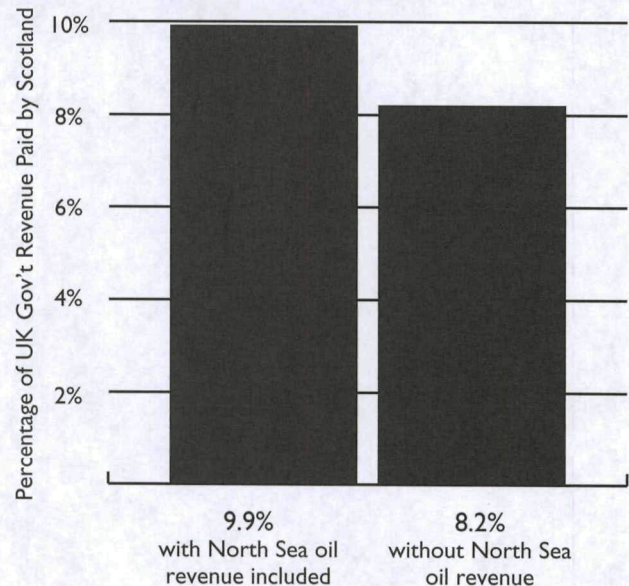
political turmoil that would undoubtedly follow could give extremist parties an opportunity to seize power on the promise of stability. As history shows us, political movements have a way of spreading across Europe with great speed, as occurred with fascism in the 1930s. UKIP's recent successes in the UK House of Commons and the European parliament have raised the Europe-wide awareness for right-wing parties such as the National Front in France. However, the EU is still growing (its most recent inductee, Croatia, joined in

Pulling Its Weight: Scotland Pays More than its Share of Taxes

Share of UK Population (2012)



Share of UK Government Revenue (2011)



Office of National Statistics, BBC

July 2013) and the crisis in the Eurozone has also sparked a debate as to the need for further European integration in order to avoid a similar crisis in the future.

This point of economic practicality is one of the largest problems facing the EU currently. As it stands, the EU as an entity proves very difficult to manage. With 28 member states, reaching agreements as to the policies and laws that govern the union is a painfully slow and stunted process. The secession of several regions within different countries in the union has the potential to burden the system further. First, all of these countries gaining entrance into the EU would likely take a very long time, since all other member states have to agree upon a new member. This means that even the smallest objection can indefinitely stall a bid for entrance, as was the case with Spain refusing to recognize Kosovo and thus, in essence, exercising a veto of its entrance into the union.

There could be a situation in which there are several swathes of continental Europe that exist outside the union. This would seriously hinder the practical, day-to-day functioning of the single market, largely because, by EU law, the Common External Tariff must be imposed upon imported goods from countries outside of the union. This could prove economically detrimental to the EU as a whole, especially given that it would require the erection of costly barriers to trade and would undoubtedly decrease economic activity, both within countries in the club, and within those excluded from it. Even attempting to avoid trade barriers by negotiating free trade deals between these new states and the EU would likely be a long and complicated endeavor, resulting in ill feeling and hardship for all parties involved. Given that the current amount of trade that goes on unmeasured and unnoticed over the borders between England and Scotland

and between Spain and Catalonia is likely quite large, secessionists in both countries should consider the economic repercussions of their actions.

The outlook, therefore, is uncertain. While these movements towards independence for certain European regions do indeed exemplify an abandonment of national solidarity following the economic hardships of the past two years, they are also, at this point, only movements. There is every possibility that Scotland could vote "no" in September, and that the Spanish economy could improve, alleviating the Catalanian pressure for independence.

However, these separatist movements, from the UK and Spain to Germany and France, are gaining in strength and political influence, and this desire to divide and isolate is worrying. In France, the UDB, a party that advocates Brittany's independence, won its first seat in the French National Assembly. And in Germany, frustration with the continuing need for German taxpayers to pick up the bill for bailouts awarded to the southern European states led the separatist Bavaria party to have its best election results since 1966 in the fall of 2013. The heart of the European project has always been to break down barriers, and these efforts across the union to erect them are directly contrary to this mission, signifying a desire from certain strata of the European population to become more insular.

The growing power of far-right extremist political movements across the union adds another dimension to this desire from some parts of the union to separate from their parent states and become fully independent. The residents of Scotland should realize that the way they vote this September could have implications that reach far beyond the ancient streets of Edinburgh to the heart of the continent. ■

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