

Scottish secession: The United Kingdom of the future



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1. Introduction

1.1. Research problem

Over the last few years, the Scottish strive for independence has been reinvigorated and is currently at the highest point in recent history. The failed referendum for Scottish independence in 2014 seemed to be evidence against the presumed popular support for secession from the United Kingdom. However, the outcome of the 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum on the United Kingdom’s membership of the European Union renewed Scottish sentiments for independence, as the Scottish people overwhelmingly voted ‘Remain’ whilst the majority (62,0%) of inhabitants in the UK voted ‘Leave’ (BBC¹, 2017). This discrepancy motivated the initiators of the original independence referendum in Scotland once more, as many had voted against independence in the 2014 referendum, fearing that this would lead to Scotland losing its membership of the EU.

As the support for Scottish independence has been renewed, the question arises what the consequences of independence will be for the stability and unity of the United Kingdom. The extent to which Scottish independence will affect the relations between the remaining countries within the United Kingdom (England, Northern Ireland, Wales) and the international (political) position of the United Kingdom is unclear.

1.2. Research question

This paper is going to analyse current and historical developments, which have an impact on Scottish independence. Moreover, it will focus on the consequences Scottish secession would have for the United Kingdom. It will pay special attention to the future of the United Kingdom without Scotland, by looking at the implications on the other countries in the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland, Wales) and the future relevance of the United Kingdom. This leads to the following research question:

“What is the influence of Scottish independence on the stability and unity of the United Kingdom?”

1.3. Structure

In order to answer this question, this essay will first analyse and assess the current situation around Scottish independence, focusing on the referendum on Scottish secession from the United Kingdom in 2014, the 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum and the likelihood of a new referendum on Scottish independence. In the third chapter, the relevance of Scottish independence for the possibility of Welsh and Northern Irish secession will be evaluated. Also, the impact of successful independence movements in multiple countries of the United Kingdom (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland) on the relevance of the United Kingdom in a political, economic, and cultural perspective will be analysed in chapter four, whilst chapter six covers the conclusion.

2. Scottish Independence

In order to produce a thorough and complete analysis of the current Scottish situation (in terms of possible independence), an adequate reflection on its historical development is necessary. This part will sketch the relevant historical background to contemporary issues, as well as describing current and future developments.

2.1. Historical background

The United Kingdom in its current composition (consisting of four countries: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) is relatively young, as it has only existed since 1921. While being a unitary state, it does not show the level of uniformity that characterises other unitary states, such as France. Moreover, it is hard to speak of a “single, exclusive national identity” in the United Kingdom (Keating, 1999, p.73). The unification of the four countries that comprise the United Kingdom has been a lengthy process which lasted several centuries, as Scotland was the third country to become part of the United Kingdom, after the Welsh had joined England in 1536 and before the unification of Ireland with the United Kingdom in 1800.

The history between England and Scotland is one of many conflicts, wars and diplomatic crises with both countries amongst the most hostile nations in Europe in the period until 1560. The development of a union of both countries dates back to the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century, when James VI of Scotland also became James I of England. James was son of Mary, Queen of Scots, who abdicated in favour of her son only five days after his birth in 1567 (Guy, 2004). When Henry VII, King of England and great-great-grandfather of James VI of Scotland died in 1603, James became King of England. Despite of this ‘union of the crowns’, both countries remained politically, socially, culturally and religiously different. It is incorrect to think that the conjunction of the Scottish and English throne led to further unification, as many historians argue that both countries grew apart during the seventeenth century. This claim is supported by several attempts of Scottish armies to invade England between 1639 and 1652 (Goldie, 1996).

After the union of the crowns, the unification of England and Scotland developed further after the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707, when the English and Scottish parliaments and economies were merged together. However, it has to be noted that this union did not include a union of law, religion or education. The exemption of these topics from the 1707 union can still be seen today, as the Presbyterian Kirk remains different from the English Anglican church and both educational systems each having their own distinct characteristics (Tes.com, n.d.). Moreover, during the Scottish Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, the “mental and institutional fabric of the law and the Church sustained an autonomous polity and national identity even without a Parliament” (Goldie, 1996, p.221).

It is important to note that the union between England and Scotland “sponsored convergence: it was not sponsored by it” (Goldie, 1996, p.222). The creation of a common heritage and the assimilation of the Scottish has been a deliberate project of social engineering. A striking example is the policy of enlisting Scottish into the British army and sending them on imperial missions abroad to redirect their loyalties towards the United Kingdom, rather than Scotland

(Goldie, 1996). During the eighteenth century, known for the Scottish Enlightenment with thinkers such as Adam Smith, David Hume and James Hutton, the idea developed that pre-union Scotland was an undeveloped, backward country in need of modernisation. In this way, Scotland acquired a complex of “dual identity, a civic Britishness overlying a Scottish cultural identity” (Goldie, 1996, p.222).

The period after the union of England and Scotland in 1707 has seen resistance against the union such as the ‘Home Rule’ movement of 1853. This movement argued that there was an unfair division of powers in the United Kingdom, as the several countries could only decide on issues which served the common interest. However, the individual countries could not decide on internal matters. In this light, the contemporary government (early 20th century) underlined the importance of a decentralised United Kingdom, resulting in the Scottish Home Rule bill which was presented to parliament in 1913 but was not adopted as parliament focused on emergency measures concerning the First World War (Marr, 2013).

The debate on increasing Scotland’s independence was stalled and only gained attention since the rise of nationalism in the 1970s and the liberty that the United Kingdom gave to former colonies who became independent in the period after 1960 (Scotsman.com, 2007). In this period, the Scottish National Party (SNP) gained parliamentary seats and pursued a referendum on enhancing the liberty of Scotland. However, the SNP did not succeed in bringing reform, resulting in a crushing defeat in the 1979 general election.

2.2. Current developments

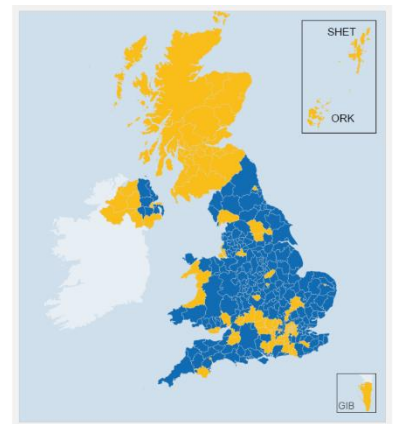
The recent debate on Scottish independence dates back to the 2007 Scottish Parliament election, in which the Scottish National Party ran on the promise of organising an independence referendum by 2010 (BBC², 2007). The SNP gained a narrow victory of 47 seats over Labour’s 46, who came in second. While the results of the Scottish Parliamentary election were interpreted by some as a desire for independence, the SNP did merely pledge to hold a referendum on independence. A research quoted in Guy Lodge and Katie Schmuecker’s piece (2007) shows that only a large minority supports independence, with a larger proportion favouring the current situation: Scotland as a part of the UK with its own parliament and some powers on raising taxes. However, the Scottish Parliament after the 2007 elections was still comprised of a majority of Unionist MSPs, making it impossible for the SNP to pursue a referendum on independence without the support of other parties (Lodge and Schmuecker, 2007). After the elections, the SNP formed a minority government (led by Alex Salmond) which published a white paper discussing the possible options for the future of Scotland, including independence (BBC³, 2007). This attempt failed as only a minority of the Scottish Parliament (only the SNP) supported this white paper.

After the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary elections, where the SNP had gained an absolute majority, First Minister Alex Salmond voiced his desire of holding a referendum on independence by 2015 (Daily Record, 2011). The two topics which dominated the campaign were (1) the tax revenue from the extraction of oil and natural gas in the North Sea and (2) the idea of the Scottish National Party that the London-based UK parliament interfered too much with the rule of Scotland. The independence movement voices their discontent with the UK collecting the tax revenue from the oil reserves that are located in Scottish territory, while the

government in London said that the “now the oil and gas is getting harder to recover, it’s more important than ever to back the industry with the ‘broad shoulders’ of the UK” (BBC⁴, 2014). The referendum, which took place on 18th of September 2014, showed a high turnout (84.6%) and saw a majority (55.3%) voting ‘no’ to secession from the UK, with 44.7% favouring independence (BBC⁵, 2017). Two of the main arguments against Scottish independence turned out to be the danger that independence would bring to Scottish membership of the EU and the uncertainty surrounding the currency that an independent Scotland were to use

After this referendum, the ideas of Scottish independence were (temporarily) discarded and the support for this cause decreased. However, the outcome of the 2016 United Kingdom European Union membership referendum, more commonly known as the ‘Brexit’-referendum, reinvigorated the Scottish call for independence. The Brexit-referendum showed that a majority (51.9%) voted to leave the European Union, while only 48.1% voted to remain in the EU. More interestingly, the map of voting results shows that in Scotland, every constituency was in favour of remaining in the EU, with only 38.0% of all citizens voting ‘leave’ and 62.0% favouring remaining in the EU (BBC¹, 2017).

In the run-up to the 2016 EU membership referendum, prominent Scottish politicians such as Nicola Sturgeon (First Minister of Scotland for the SNP) argued that a British ‘leave’ vote would, under circumstances legitimise a second independence referendum: “If Scotland had voted to stay in and the UK as a whole votes to come out, which therefore means Scotland faces being taken out of the EU when we don’t want to be, I have said before and I will say again, it is highly likely that would trigger an overwhelming demand for a second referendum on independence” (Huffington Post, 2016).



Key:
■ Majority leave ■ Majority remain
Figure 1: Results of 'Brexit'-referendum, per constituency (Source: BBC¹, 2017).

2.3. Future developments

After the Brexit-referendum in June 2016, the First Minister of Scotland (Nicola Sturgeon) announced that a renewed referendum for independence from the United Kingdom is “highly likely” (NBC News, 2016). The Scottish have voiced their concern on the UK leaving the European Union and value their union with Europe more than their union with the UK, leading to increasing calls for a second vote on their independence, which would allow them to join the European Union. The disagreement of the Scottish voters on the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU is shown by the Scottish National Parliament, who voted 90 versus 34 against triggering Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty (the article which sets the secession of member states from the European Union in motion) in February 2017. While this vote was non-binding, the outcome of this vote could serve as the groundwork for a second referendum on Scottish independence (DW, 2017).

While these trends suggest that a second independence referendum is just a matter of time and that a majority of Scottish will be in favour of secession from the UK, several issues have to be taken into account. For example, the debate on the currency that Scotland is going the use

is still very much undecided. An independent Scotland that joins the EU will most likely adopt the Euro as its currency, impeding trade between the United Kingdom and Scotland, which comprises over two thirds of all Scottish export. Moreover, the price of oil has dramatically decreased since the 2014 referendum, leaving Scotland with less of a stable financial groundwork for independence.

After reflecting on the current situation of Scotland and the likelihood of its independence in this chapter, the following chapters will elaborate on the consequences of a potential Scottish secession from the United Kingdom.

3. Effect of Scottish independence on Wales and Northern Ireland

As previously established we will now continue on the hypothesis that Scotland becomes a fully independent sovereign state. What will this mean for the other constituent countries of the United Kingdom and what will it mean for the survival of that United Kingdom? In this chapter, we will look at the effects on Wales and, more significantly, Northern Ireland.

3.1. Wales

Welsh nationalism has historically mostly focused on cultural affairs rather than political ones. As early as the 1770s there were pleas for a national academy, library and university. A hundred years later, in 1870, a national anthem was adopted: 'Land of My Fathers' (or 'Hen Wlad fy Nhadau'). As far as the political exploits were concerned however, the Welsh were overall firmly supportive of the London government and its colonial efforts. The Golden and Diamond Jubilees of Queen Victoria, in 1887 and 1897 respectively, were widely celebrated by the Welsh indicating they truly viewed her as their monarch. There was however an independence movement, initiated by liberals in 1886, called Cymru Fydd. This movement never gained much support though and was quickly abolished (Jenkins, 2007).

Starting in the early twentieth century, Welsh nationalism increased and expanded into the political sphere. Initially home rule was mostly advocated by the Labour Party and the Liberal Party but in 1925 a political party was founded that explicitly advocates Welsh independence from the United Kingdom: 'Plaid Cymru' or 'the Party of Wales'. As of May 2017, the party has eleven seats in the Welsh Assembly and three seats in the House of Commons of the Westminster Parliament (Plaid Cymru, 2017). Although Welsh nationalism has mostly been promoted in a peaceful manner, there have been a few violent incidents throughout the years, mostly in the 1960s and 1970s (Jenkins, 2007).

Most Welsh citizens voted to leave the European Union in the Brexit referendum of 23 June 2016 although it was not a large majority that did so, with only 52.5 % voting in favour of leaving (BBC⁶, 2016). When compared to the Scottish results as denoted in the first chapter, it is clear that Welsh people have a very different sense of their place within the United Kingdom and the European Union than the Scots. In 2007 only twenty per cent of the Welsh people wanted to leave the Union (BBC⁷, 2007) and a 2016 report by Scully (amongst Welsh citizens) showed only fifteen per cent support for Welsh independence. Interestingly, when the respondents were asked whether their opinion changed on the matter should Scotland become independent, the amount of support only increased to nineteen per cent. Therefore, it seems Scottish independence would not have a significant effect on the Welsh secessionist movement.

Overall, it seems Wales has no strong desire to secede from the United Kingdom but of course Scottish independence might motivate those in favour of Welsh independence and give a boost to secessionist sentiments in the country. It is nevertheless doubtful how effective an independent Wales would be, as their economy is only larger than those of Northeast England and Northern Ireland. Two future scenarios seem possible: a fully independent Wales or, far

more likely, a United Kingdom of England , Wales and Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is still included in that last scenario, at least for now. We will now elaborate on why this is the case.

3.2. Northern Ireland

The story of Northern Ireland is of course a very different one than Wales. The conflict that has separated the Irish island in two for so long finds its origins in the religious divide between the majority Protestant north (concentrated in the historical north-eastern province of Ulster) and the overwhelmingly Catholic other parts of Ireland. Between 1845 and 1852 the Great Famine, a massive occurrence of starvation, affected Ireland but did not affect Ulster to the same extent as the rest of the island, adding an economic and demographic differentiation on top of the religious one. Starting in the late nineteenth century more and more calls for self-rule emerged. However, unionism proved incredibly strong in Ulster with the Ulster Covenant of 1912 signed by almost half a million men and women. (O’Leary & McGarry, 2016).

The Easter Rebellion of 1916, which was decisively won by British forces, showcased that Irish separatists were willing to use violence to achieve their cause (Smith, 2000). This violence worsened with the Irish War of Independence of 1919-1921 with over 2000 deaths on both sides. The War resulted in the Anglo-Irish Treaty between the British Empire and the Irish which created the Irish Free State. This independent state nominally included Northern Ireland, but an opt-out option was included in the Treaty of which it was always certain that it would be employed by the North. The Free State continued its existence until 1937 when it reformed into the modern Republic of Ireland (Smith, 2000).

Although there was quite an amount of violence, mainly conducted by the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the period until the late 1960s was relatively peaceful for Northern Ireland. The so-called Troubles began at the end of that decade and is often described as a guerrilla war between three groups: British security forces, Irish republicans (mostly Catholic) and Ulster loyalists (mostly Protestant and more British in identity than Irish). Although religion certainly played an important role, it was more nationalistic and ethnic in nature (O’Leary & McGarry, 2016). Generally, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 is considered the end of the Troubles, although violence has not ceased completely.

A majority of voters in Northern Ireland decided against Brexit with 55.8% (BBC⁸, 2017). This shows a contrast with the Welsh result and it is a very real possibility that Northern Ireland will be motivated by the independence of Scotland to reshape its own constitution. An independent Northern Ireland is both unfeasible due to its small economy and mostly unwanted because the two main groups (Republicans and Unionists) do not advocate independence but focus on either joining the Republic or remaining a part of the United Kingdom. According to the Irish Republican party Sinn Féin, active both in Ireland and Northern Ireland, the Brexit result shows that “the British government has forfeited any mandate to represent economic or political interests of people in Northern Ireland” (NBC, 2016). Extending this to the hypothetical Scottish independence it would be a logical step to

organise a referendum in Northern Ireland on its future: join the Irish Republic or remain in the United Kingdom? Organising a referendum would however not be without risk of sparking renewed violence (The Guardian, 2017). An important factor to consider is that should Northern Ireland join Ireland it would not, unlike Scotland, have to reapply for EU membership (Independent, 2017). Given that 52% of the Northern Irish export is to the Republic with only 17% to the rest of the United Kingdom, an economic motivation is created for the Northern Irish people to vote in favour of joining the Republic of Ireland. It would certainly make trading within the EU easier. Of course, many people vote more with their hearts than their heads and in that sense it is very difficult to predict the outcome. Regardless of the Brexit result and the economic advantages denoted above, what seems likely on the short term is that Northern Ireland will wait and see how Scotland fares independently (and in applying for EU membership). Only then will Northern Ireland consider amending its own constitutional status. Before that process is started, at least a decade will likely have passed.

4. The United Kingdom of the future: politics, economy and culture

4.1. Politics

Hypothesising a United Kingdom of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, it would probably be wise to create an atmosphere of equality between the three countries. The best way to achieve this would be to give the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly complete authority over their respective countries while the Westminster Parliament would only concern itself with England. Of course this raises the question which institution would have ultimate supremacy over the United Kingdom as a sovereign state. Making the Assemblies into full-fledged parliaments would create de facto Welsh and Northern Irish independence. So another less drastic way must be found to create said atmosphere. Providing the two countries with more autonomy than they currently possess is an option. A relationship such as exists between Denmark and Greenland, with Denmark being responsible for defence, foreign relations and monetary policy, could be a good framework for the relationship between England on the one hand and Wales and Northern Ireland on the other. The fact that England's economy, as specified in chapter 4, is far larger than the Welsh and Northern Irish economies combined legitimises a dominant position for England in this situation, at least as far as monetary policy is concerned.

Another option is to reform the United Kingdom into some form of federal state, with the federal government in London being responsible for state as a whole, with the constituent federal states having large degrees of autonomy. This would require dividing England, Wales and Northern Ireland into an unspecified number of constituent states. A positive of this scenario is that the constituent states' governments will be better able to create and evaluate policies on a local or at least a regional scale. In how far the United Kingdom would still be 'United' is a fair question, although the same question could be asked for other federal states such as the United States of America. Comparing Northern Ireland to Alaska or Hawaii it is apparent that those two states are very much considered an integral part of the United States, despite the geographic distance to the other states. More importantly however, it seems a federal system, in which both England, Wales and Northern Ireland are divided into smaller constituencies, will affect the identities of Wales and Northern Ireland as separate countries in their own right too much.

As far as the international relevance of the United Kingdom of England, Wales and Northern Ireland is concerned it seems unlikely that it will be greatly affected by the loss of Scotland and Northern Ireland. England is and has always been politically and economically dominant and the diplomatic legitimacy of this United Kingdom would derive from Her Majesty's London based government, which is thus not a change from the current situation.

4.2. Economy

In 2016, the United Kingdom's economy ranked fifth globally, amounting to a GDP of 2,629.188 billion US dollars (International Monetary Fund, 2016). When dissecting the UK's GDP, it becomes clear that Scotland attributes 233.332 billion US dollars (gov.scot¹, 2015), while Northern Ireland brings in 48.680 billion US dollars (Eurostat, n.d.). This means that the direct impact of Scottish secession from the United Kingdom would lead to a loss of GDP of roughly 233 billion US dollars (11,3% of the total UK's GDP).

The secession of Scotland from the United Kingdom will have a major impact on the revenues that the London-based government receive from the extraction of oil and gas (as these natural resources are predominantly located in Scottish territory). However, the question rises as to how much oil is left in these reserves. The estimates vary greatly, with many different researches conducted, financed by organisations either favouring or opposing Scottish independence (Washington Post, 2014). Moreover, the recent decline in the price of crude oil (€94.64 in 2012 to €28.37 in 2016, per barrel) show the volatility of the price of natural resources in a world that is becoming increasingly reliant on durable energy resources (Indexmundi, n.d.). The importance of the tax revenues from oil and natural gas on United Kingdom is limited, as it contributes to only 1.5% of its total tax income. In contrast, the tax revenues based on oil and natural gas would amount to 10-20% of the tax income for an independent Scottish state (BBC⁹, 2013). Hence, it can be concluded that the consequences of losing natural resources (oil and natural gas) due to Scottish secession from the UK are limited and will not have a major impact on the United Kingdom's economy.

In terms of export, Scotland is highly reliant on the rest of the United Kingdom as it makes up for 63% of the total Scottish export (£49.8 billion). The export towards the other members of the UK has been increasing since 2002 and this trend is set to continue (gov.scot², 2017). These figures do show the intensive (especially for Scotland) trade relationship between Scotland with the rest of the United Kingdom. However, this dependency just goes one way: the total export of the United Kingdom in 2015 was dominated by the English who made up for 76% of the total export. In a United Kingdom of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, they would comprise an impressive 82% of export (in comparison to the total export of the current UK), with Scotland making up for only 6% (with 11% of export not bound to a certain area) (HM Revenue and Customs, 2016). Here again, we see that the economy of a United Kingdom of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, would be hurt by the secession of Scotland, but it would not prove to be a severe blow for the UK's economy.

4.3. Culture

Will the international cultural importance of the United Kingdom be greatly affected by Scotland's departure? Despite Scotland's scenery and whisky, it seems unlikely the rest of the UK will lose its cultural and touristic value, given the enormous significance which London possesses in that area with its countless landmarks, museums, theatres and other cultural attractions. Tourism to the UK will probably not suffer much from Scotland becoming independent.

It seems most people are English, Welsh, Scottish or Irish first and British second, with the notable exception of Northern Irish unionists. As most unionists are also Protestant, it makes sense for them to feel more connected to a British identity than to an Irish one, given that the citizens of the Republic and the Northern Irish Republicans are largely Roman Catholic. An important cultural question is what the meaning of the British identity will be. Will it be lost completely or will people still identify with the island of Great Britain, which would only have geographic meaning in this scenario? An example of an area where this matter applies is the Olympic Games, where Great Britain represents athletes from England, Wales and Scotland, while those from Northern Ireland may choose to participate for Great Britain or Ireland. Although the solution for Scotland is obvious (having it represent Scottish athletes), should the United Kingdom participate as such or should separate teams be formed for England, Wales and Northern Ireland as happens in football competitions? Either way, Great Britain is out of the picture for the three countries (in terms of representation at the Olympic Games). It seems for now Northern Irish athletes will continue to have to choose between Ireland or the United Kingdom and that the cultural meaning of Great Britain will largely disappear, with the exemption of Northern Irish Unionists who may continue to regard themselves as British.

Conclusion

Given that a second referendum on Scottish secession is likely to occur in the near future and that it will probably come out in favour of the independence of Scotland, a United Kingdom of England, Wales and Northern Ireland seems to be the most probable scenario. Both Welsh and Northern Irish independence is unrealistic, for economic and political reasons. Here, it has to be noted that Northern Ireland joining the Republic of Ireland is a possibility. However, in order for a unification of the Irish island, the history of political tensions has to be overcome. Furthermore, the success (or lack thereof) of Scottish independence will likely first be assessed by Northern Ireland, before it decides on its future (in terms of joining the Republic of Ireland as opposed to remaining in the United Kingdom).

As far as the stability and unity of a United Kingdom without Scotland is concerned, it has several consequences: the UK's loss of territory, the loss of GDP and possibly the loss of international prestige (as Scotland prefers independence above membership of the UK). However, these consequences will not have a major impact politically, economically or culturally. Therefore, Scottish independence will not have a decisive influence on the stability and unity of the United Kingdom as a sovereign state.



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