



UNDERSTANDING SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM

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The long aspired dream of Scottish Independence became a mere 'day dream' for its supporters on September 18, 2014, when the Scottish majority of 55.3% voted against Scotland's independence from the United Kingdom. The Scottish Independence Referendum held on September 18, 2014 was eagerly watched by the whole world not only for its political implications on UK, but also because the historical event held too much at stake on several other fronts. An overview on the Scottish Independence movement and the contemporary situation of Scotland in the cultural and political scenario of UK enables a clear understanding of the issue.

A Historical Overview

The initial Scottish struggle for independence dates back to late 13th century after the death of Alexander III, the then king of Scotland. Using the unsolved power struggle between many noble families, Edward II, the king of England initially appointed John Balliol, a noble, as the king of Scotland and later became the king himself. After a series of wars and political skirmishes between the Scottish and English forces, the struggle for independence finally came to an end in 1328 A.D. with the conclusion of the Treaty of Edinburgh, which recognized Scotland and its King entirely independent of the kingdom of England.¹

Later, when the Queen of England, Elizabeth I died on March 24, 1603 without leaving a heir to the throne of England, King James VI of Scotland became the King of England and Ireland under the Union of Scottish and English Crowns on the same day and ruled till his death.² Although, the crowns came under one union, Scotland remained a sovereign state with its own Parliament until 1707. On May 1, 1707 Scotland and England were united as one Kingdom called Great Britain with one Parliament under the reign of Queen Anne thus ending the sovereignty of Scotland.³

In 1853, National Association for the Vindication of Scottish Rights, a body inclined towards the Conservative Party started a movement named "Home Rule" for the Scottish Assembly. This movement did not get its momentum till 1960s due to lack of proper political support in the form of supportive representatives for the Scots in the Parliament. However, in 1967, the Scottish National Party (SNP) won a Parliamentary seat and its leader Winnie Ewing became a member of the Parliament. His election brought forth the Scottish Independence movement again to the forefront and it gained more vigor with the discovery of North Sea Oil off the east coast of Scotland in the 1970.⁴ The McCrone Report written by Professor Gavin McCrone

commissioned in 1971 by the Conservative Government to assess the viability of an Independent Scotland concluded by saying that the newly discovered oil would give an Independent Scotland one of the strongest currencies in Europe, and that Scotland would have 'embarrassingly' large tax surplus.⁵ This report was kept secret as a classified document until 2005 when the SNP gained access to it through Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Scotland unsuccessfully went for referendum on its devolution in 1979. Although 52% voted in favour of the devolution of Scotland, a referendum rule which demanded 40% of the electorate to vote in favour of the referendum was not fulfilled. The turnout for the referendum was 63.6% which is equal to 32.9% electorate voting for "Yes", therefore, unable to fulfil the requirement of 40%.⁶ While the first devolution failed, Scotland pushed for a second devolution referendum in 1997 for a Scottish Parliament. This time the Scots gained a majority by 74.3% voting in favour of devolution, i.e. 44.87% of electorate in favour. As a result, Scotland held its first election for its Parliament in 1999 which was won by Labour Party and Donald Dewar became the First Minister of Scotland.⁷ With the successful formation of Scottish Parliament, the Scots achieved in gaining a sort of autonomy for self governance which boosted them to enter into the 21st century with a new hope in the field of politics.

Economic and Strategic Significance of Scotland to UK

Traditionally, Scotland received its economy from Shipbuilding, Coal Mining and Steel industries. While shipbuilding is still a state of the art industry in Scotland, it also enjoys many other revenue sources like oil reserves, renewable energy, whisky industry, tourism and various

other financial services. According to the Scottish Government sources, the international exports from Scotland excluding oil are estimated at £26 billion, of which £15.4 billion was from the manufacturing sector and £8.7 billion from the services sector.⁸

The overall Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth for the period of first quarter of 2014 of United Kingdom, which includes Scotland, is at 0.8% which is estimated to be £390 billion in total.⁹ Through this, the Scottish GDP alone grew at 1% for the same period with the estimated onshore GDP amount of £130 billion in total, and £24,300 per capita.¹⁰ Moreover, Scotland is geo-strategically located on huge oil reserves where it has 90% of the total oil reserves of the United Kingdom well within its geographical borders.¹¹

According to the claims of 'Yes Campaign' supporters, had the referendum worked in favour of the Yes votes, Scotland would have inherited 8% of all the defence assets of UK, especially naval assets...The implications of this would have meant a sudden loss in the defence inventory of UK that would have weakened one of the world's strongest military power's defence capabilities in a major way.

The revenues from oil reserves and the renewable energy resources like the tidal and offshore wind energy would have also contributed in a major way to the economy of Scotland if the result of the referendum favoured independence. This clearly demonstrates the importance of Scotland's revenue sources for the economic development of UK. Although Scotland may

not have inherited the whole 90% of oil reserves had they opted for independence, the share they would have inherited, will be the loss for rest of United Kingdom. Even if Scotland had voted for independence, UK would have remained the sixth largest economy of the world but, the growth of GDP and per capita would have been affected in the subsequent years.

On the defence sector, Scotland plays an important role in United Kingdom. Scotland contributed a total of around £3.3billion¹² out of the total £42billion¹³ defence budget of UK in 2013. Also, Scotland houses many shipbuilding docks including the one in Clyde where ships are built for BAE Systems, a leading defence manufacturer. Apart from HMNB Clyde, the Naval

Dockyard, other naval establishments like Rosyth Dockyard: the Naval Dock which houses Elizabeth Class Aircraft Carrier and RM Condor: the Royal Marines establishment also exists in Scotland. Also, Scotland is located with Royal Air Force bases like RRH Benbecula: Remote Radar Head operating base of Royal Air Force, RAF Kirknewtown: a flying training base, RAF Lossiemouth: one of the largest RAF bases and the main base for Tornado GR4 Fighter planes, RAF Leuchars and RAF Tain: an air weaponry range where RAF personnel train air weaponry along with NATO forces.

Moreover, with a population of more than 5,295,000 people (2011 census) in Scotland, there are more than 15,340 Scottish people serving in the three services of the armed forces of UK especially in the Royal Army in its various units like 51 (Scottish) Brigade, Scots Guards, Royal Scots Dragoon Guards, 19th Regiment Royal Artillery, 40th Regiment Royal Artillery, 32 (Scottish) Signal Regiment and The Scottish Transport Regiment¹⁴ Besides, defence equipment manufacturing companies like BAE Systems, Raytheon, Thales, Babcock and Rolls-Royce have their manufacturing units in Scotland, where more than 30,000 people are employed.

According to the claims of 'Yes Campaign' supporters, had the referendum worked in favour of the Yes votes, Scotland would have inherited 8% of all the defence assets of UK, especially naval assets.¹⁵ According to the suggested data, Scotland then would have at least acquired two Frigates, a command platform, four mine-countermeasure vessels, two offshore patrol vessels, and six smaller patrol vessels and auxiliary support ships along with 12 Typhoon fighter jets and six Hercules C-130Js.¹⁶ The

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implications of this would have meant a sudden loss in the defence inventory of UK that would have weakened one of the world's strongest military power's defence capabilities in a major way. Also, the fate of Trident nuclear submarines in Faslane base and the nuclear warheads from RAND Coulport both bases located in Scotland would have remained uncertain, which would have jeopardized Britain's relations with the US and other NATO member countries too. Although the SNP's policy is not to inherit these nuclear submarines and warheads, the decision of an independent Scotland may not have been the same. This spells out the strategic importance of Scotland to UK, and also, why UK stressed so much on the union of Scotland with the rest of United Kingdom.

Domestic and Global Impact of Scotland's 'No' Voting

To begin with, the image and office of David Cameron, the Prime Minister of UK, has been saved, since he permitted the Scottish referendum, Cameron's popularity was at a fall especially at a crucial time when he is contesting for the second time for his office in the upcoming May 2015 polls.

Further, it is a moment of defeat in the history of the Scottish National Party and in particular to Alex Salmond, the leader of SNP and the First Minister of Scotland. Till the final opinion polls SNP was confident of Scottish Independence but the final referendum results made their decade long struggle go in vein. Nevertheless, it is believed that due to the close pattern in voting where the YES Campaign have gained 44.7% in support for them would help SNP to struggle more authoritatively for more autonomy for Scotland in the coming years. Interestingly, the result of this referendum will also have an impact on the

future of SNP coming back to power in Scotland when the country goes for polls the next time.

The fact that the 307 years of England's Union with Scotland is still alive, which has also been proven democratically with the referendum, might boost UK's morale in the international arena.

In recent history, the Scottish Referendum is an exception in terms of its result as no other territory which went for polls deciding its fate for independence favoured a 'No'. Territories like East Timor in 1999, South Sudan in 2011, and Crimea in 2014 have all opted for independence from their Union, whereas, Scotland remains an exceptional case by voting in favour of staying with the Union. This pattern might make the territories, at least in the western world, opting for referendum in the future for their independence to think twice. For instance, Catalans and Basques, the two different territories of Spain are struggling for independence. Similarly, Flemish Separatists in Belgium and Northern League in Italy are also looking towards referendum option to make their territories an independent state. Now that the Scots have clearly made their verdict, the above mentioned territories and more regions which seek for independence might think twice before going for polls.

The 2014 Scottish Referendum for Independence – is an interesting case study for the subject of democracy and freedom. The people's verdict to stay with the union has not only saved the 307 years of unity but has also saved the image of one of the world's most powerful country, United Kingdom, by preserving it from disintegrating. This has also led to safeguarding UK's position in European Union and in other trade and economic organisations, which, in any other case would have brought down its current superior position. The fact that UK's armed forces will stay together is a relieving factor for the country as it is facing serious cases of home grown terrorism and is also fighting terrorism in the Middle East along with the coalition forces. The referendum result may also be in favour of the Prime Minister of UK, David Cameron, in particular, and his

Conservative Party in general, when they go for polls in May 2015. At the same time, it might affect the popularity of SNP in Scottish Parliament for their inability to get a favourable result in the referendum. Nevertheless, the kind of more autonomy and legal leverages that Scotland expects from UK as a result of favourable referendum is a serious case to watch for as, it would decide the fate of future Scotland. Finally, the referendum has retained the geopolitical scenario where UK's alliances in the global platform with its various allies are unchanged and unaltered.

Notes:

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⁶ Department of the Official Report (Hansard), House of Commons, Westminster, April 26, 1996, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199596/cmhansrd/vo960426/debtext/60426-18.htm>, accessed on September 20, 2014.

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¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Macalister, Terry. "Who would get the oil revenues if Scotland became independent?", *The Guardian*, March 2, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/reality-check-with-polly-curtis/2012/mar/02/oil-revenues-if-scotland-became-independent>, accessed on September 21, 2014.

¹² "What would happen with Scottish defence?", *Yes Scotland*, <http://www.yesscotland.net/answers/what-would-happen-scottish-defence>, accessed on September 21, 2014.

¹³ UK Public Spending, Government of United Kingdom, http://www.ukpublicspending.co.uk/spending_chart_2004_2018UKb_30t, accessed on September 21, 2014.

¹⁴ "Scotland's Future – Your Guide to an Independent Scotland", *The Scottish Government Parliament Publications*, November 2013.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "What would happen with Scottish defence?", *Yes Scotland*, <http://www.yesscotland.net/answers/what-would-happen-scottish-defence>, accessed on September 21, 2014.



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