

Westminster in Panic: In the Wake of The Scottish Referendum

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They won't be going anywhere. The Scottish "No" vote may well have had their day on Friday, but the genie of Britannic rejection is definitely out of its confined bottle. The United Kingdom is feeling the strain and stretch of secession sentiment, and those in London are scurrying about in a panic.

The figures are not entirely comforting for the unionists. Of 3,619,915 votes cast, 2,001,926 went for negative; with 1,617,989 for secession. The Yes vote may well have come second in the count, but there is a feeling that those attempting to quash the matter had to start that rather unimaginative trick called fear. The question most popularly thrown at the electorate was: "What if?" Leaving can be such a terrible business, and at a certain point, there was a sense that the Prime Minister was evoking the calamity of Nora walking out of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Do you really want to go on a voyage of self-discovery and leave husband and children behind?

Much of the campaign for the union ranged between disingenuousness to plain old sentimentality at a comfortably tired marriage that needed to persist in the usual, none too exciting conjugal rituals. There was nothing in the No campaign to suggest that they had found the spice - only the terror that rejection might well follow.

That fear was also saddled with the idea of terrible inconvenience. European Commission President José Manuel Barroso decided to abandon all pretence of being neutral, making it clear that an impetuous Scotland would have to go to the end of the European Union admission queue if it was to attain independence. Barroso saw the result as "good for a united, open, and stronger Europe, for which the Commission stands", making the almost daft suggestion that an independent Scotland was inconsistent with a unified Europe to begin with.

Caught with its pants down, the campaign for the union fought for the most part with an enthusiasm that comes with status quo indifference. But then, the emotive side got worked up with speculations about the UK's physical being. Scotland leaving would be like one's leg sauntering off into the distance, or an arm going on permanent holiday.

This image tended to play out in a structural sense on such forums as NATO and the United Nations Security Council. Exeunt Scotland, exeunt British presence and pro-US compliance. Even the US President, Barack Obama, was hoping via unholy social media that five million Scots would not be forming their own country, if only because he might have to do the work of subordinating another state. (Aircraft Carrier Britain sounds better than frigate Scotland.) NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen would second that: "I respect the choice of the Scottish people, I welcome the statement by Prime Minister Cameron that

the UK will go ahead as a united country.”

Prime Minister David Cameron could only fall back on grand statements about how the question had been settled. “The debate has been settled for a generation ... and there can be no disputes, no re-runs, we have heard the settled will of the Scottish people.”

Then came the oil and gas industry front men cooing at the result, the sort of thing that should make people break down parliament’s doors. Scottish oil services tycoon Sir Ian Wood and Shell CEO Ben van Beurden, hardly the doyens of democracy, were content that the issue had been postponed. Wood was “pleased the Scottish people had chosen the best of both worlds” which for such a figure tends to mean neither.[1] Wood could not wait to emphasise the recommendations made by his own “Maximising Economic Recovery Review”, which relegated Scotland to a natural resource salvager for cash-strapped Britain. The oil and gas industry, he warned, had been depleted “in the medium term and certainly areas like the North East of Scotland must begin to take this seriously”.

The effects of the vote have spilled off in numerous directions. There is the effect in the UK itself.

Devolution has been asymmetrical in effect – what the Scottish vote has also illuminated are issues of governance for the rest of the Union. There is already talk about England being for England, which goes to show that a vote about Scotland invariably becomes a debate about what the English themselves are going to do.

Even Cameron had to admit that, “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.”

Any sort of nationalism, even the good natured fluffy sort, is bound to get ugly, the sort of playground cowardice that passes for genuine debate, but there is only one issue on the cards here: self-governance. Cameron will have to cough up more, giving Scotland autonomy over everything short – and only just short – of foreign affairs and defence. And nothing he does will convince the voters in general that London is more distant than ever.

Then came the European spill off, frothing its way into other countries with that old secession bug. The Catalan regional parliament did not waste time, passing a vote (106-28) that would authorise the region to hold non-binding consultations regarding independence in November. Catalonia’s regional president, Artur Mas, was cheery. “What happened in Scotland and the United Kingdom is not a setback for us – because what we really want in Catalonia is to have the chance to vote, the same possibility.”[2] The Spanish Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, has preferred to get the legal briefs together and challenge the move in Spain’s Constitutional Court.

European separatists have certainly warmed to the result, despite it going against the Scottish nationalists. The recipe here is spiced by a confident assertion of greater autonomy. The central power is bound to be running scared – regional authorities are getting tetchy.

The New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) led by Bart De Wever and South Tyrolean separatists comprised of the South Tyrolean Freedom (STF) party, for instance, have taken heart, suggesting that Europe may have to head to more regionalist forms of government, something like continental devolution. The tremors of succession, in other words, are very

much on the wall - and that wall is hardly going to be washed anytime too soon.

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Notes:

[1]

http://www.rigzone.com/news/oil_gas/a/135103/Key_Oil_Gas_Figures_Welcome_Scotlands_No_Vote

[2] <http://www.dw.de/catalan-regional-parliament-passes-law-for-independence-vote/a-17936041>

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