

A Tale of Two Unions

[Niamh Carroll](#) explores the space between the Brexit and Scottish independence campaigns

Saturday 1 April 2017



Image: Scottish Government images

The day after Theresa May wrote her letter to the European Union, a photo was tweeted from the Scottish Government Twitter account of Nicola Sturgeon writing her own letter to the Prime Minister. The photo shows the Scottish First Minister working on a letter formally requesting that Theresa May grant her Section 30 powers to call another independence referendum. The picture invites comparison to those released earlier in the week showing the PM working on the Article 50 letter. The message from these photos seems to be that given Brexit, it would be hypocritical of the British government to prevent Scotland pursuing their own referendum. On the day that Article 50 was triggered Sturgeon stated that “the prime minister has hailed Brexit as an exercise in autonomy. To prevent Scotland from seeking the same would be indefensible”.

Despite the comparison between the “exercise in autonomy” which Britain is attempting with Brexit and that which Scotland would wish to pursue with a second independence referendum, a paradox between the two events is evident. The SNP are calling for a referendum on Scottish independence, on the basis that Britain is now exiting the EU despite Scotland’s vote to remain. It is now the curious case that the SNP wish to achieve sovereignty by exiting a Union with the rest of the UK, in order to re-join a Union which the UK is exiting in order to re-gain its sovereignty.

If they were granted an independence referendum, the odds would still be that Scotland would remain part of the UK, given the decisive outcome less than three years ago. However, many now consider predicted outcomes and pollsters redundant, given their failure to anticipate the shocking results in major votes over the last year. Perhaps these pollster-defying outcomes have given the SNP cause for optimism.

Yet, Sturgeon's emphasis on the impact Brexit will have on Scotland seems to suggest that the voters they will target are Remainers who voted No to independence in 2014. In order to win these Scots over, independence campaigners will require a different type of argument than the populist rhetoric used by odds-defying UK and US politicians in recent times. Instead, Sturgeon and her allies will need to appeal to the rational side of Scottish voters and convince them that their economic interests are better served in an independent Scotland than in a post-Brexit UK. This rational argument rather than the emotional sentiments which drove voters in the UK and US, make Scottish independence a fundamentally different cause than the successful populist campaigns of the last year.

The position of the UK is greatly changed from the first independence referendum in 2014, given the country's imminent exit from the European Union, a decision which the Scottish electorate opposed. The SNP do then have a mandate to call a second independence referendum, and given the Scottish Parliament have now approved the plans it seems unlikely that Theresa May will be able to justify blocking a second independence referendum for much longer. It is easy to see why May is reluctant to grant Nicola Sturgeon the powers to call a second referendum; she has declared her determination to "make Brexit" a success, and the potential break-up of the UK is far from what Leave voters anticipated when they cast their ballot.

While the 2014 Scottish referendum was praised for being a measured testament to democracy, the impact of the divisive EU referendum is still being felt. In a post-Brexit climate, the Government probably feel that the risk of a second independence referendum widening these divides is too great. Furthermore, if Scotland were granted a referendum it could have a knock-on effect in the other devolved assemblies. In Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin have already called for a referendum on Irish unity. They feel this is justified as, like Scotland, Northern Ireland also voted to remain in the EU. Sinn Féin's argument will become increasingly difficult to ignore if Scotland are granted a second independence vote, but it could also be potentially disastrous to heed calls for a border poll given the volatile nature of Northern Irish politics.

The prospect of parts of the United Kingdom shearing off would frighten a great proportion of British citizens. It seems particularly ironic that this could be the potential outcome of Brexit, which so many voted for due to patriotic sentiments and is contrary to the vision many in the Leave campaign had for a post-EU Britain. Even if referendums for independence in parts of the UK are not successful, the very discussion of them brings up powerful divisions which will be difficult to bury.



One comment

Dc

1 Apr '17 at 5:38 pm

Excellent analysis! Ironic if union falls apart on the back of white english nationalist sentiment reflected in the brexit vote

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