

Shetland, Orkney and the Outer Hebrides demand independence referendums of their own if Scotland votes 'yes'

Calls for a vote on breaking links with Edinburgh are growing among the island communities

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After spending more than half a millennium under Norse rule, it is little surprise the people of Shetland and Orkney might not consider themselves to be British in the same way as the good folk of Surrey.

But an unexpected question has crept into the narrowing independence referendum campaign – exactly how Scottish do they feel? Lerwick, the capital of Shetland, for example, is 18 hours by road and boat from Edinburgh – more than double the journey time from the Scottish capital to Westminster.

A petition currently before the Scottish Parliament is seeking referendums to be held on all three islands exactly a week after the rest of the nation votes on the future of the union with Westminster.

In the event it should get the go-ahead, the 70,000 inhabitants will be given the choice of either staying in Scotland or seeking independence of their own. A third question following a successful yes vote will offer the possibility of staying within the UK while seceding from control of Holyrood.

So far nearly 800 people have put their name to the call, and the suggestion has been generating interest all over the world – not least in other small islands, and even in Venice.

Catriona Murray of "Referenda on the Islands", which organised the petition, said supporters straddled all points of view although the petition had deliberately not included an option of reunification with Norway which, although sometimes discussed, did not garner serious support.

"We exist only to bring about a referendum to give islanders the chance to decide. What unites us is the view that islanders should have that right. We are certainly not making mischief," said retiree Ms Murray in an email to *The Independent*.

"Monaco, Liechtenstein and San Marino all thrive well as independent members of the United Nations. Any of the three island groups currently in Scotland could easily fit on to a list including those countries. Not as rich as the first two, but with more resources than the third," she added.

It is estimated that up to 67 per cent of Scotland's oil and gas reserves lie within the waters off Shetland and Orkney. All the islands have lucrative off shore renewable energy potential although bringing it down to population areas remains contentious.

Since last summer, the councils of Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles have been negotiating with the SNP government in Edinburgh and Westminster and the Labour Party to see what extra powers they might gain. There have already been successes.

Last July, First Minister Alex Salmond held a Scottish cabinet meeting in Shetland, where he issued the Lerwick Declaration, agreeing in principle to greater autonomy for the islands. Since then island leaders have met ministers five times.

The Scottish Labour Devolution Commission has agreed to grant the islands greater control over energy, transport and fishing policy as well as a bigger say in health and economic planning. Talks have also been held with the Secretary of State for Scotland.

But Shetland's Liberal Democrat MSP Tavish Scott said demands for referendums within the islands were "entirely understandable".

(560 words)