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## Why Would Scotland Leave the U.K.? by Iain Marin (Wall Street Journal 25/01/12)

*Going independent inside the EU no longer makes sense.*

Wednesday night is Burns night, that annual celebration of the poet Robert Burns's birthday, when obsessives gather to eat haggis and listen to rambling speeches about Burns's work and life. In Scotland, Nationalists will raise a dram and recite the passages that support the claim that Burns wanted Scotland to be independent from England.

Equally fervent Unionists, who do not want the United Kingdom ripped apart, can point to stanzas that suggest Burns was proudly British. The poet, like many of his countrymen today, was conflicted.

My fellow Scots love nothing more than romanticizing the long Scottish story—reveling in ancient victories over the English that demonstrate national virtue and cursing the defeats, which they blame on bad luck. But the Scots have tended to take a fairly hard-headed approach when it comes to the practical business of the country's constitutional arrangements.

Scotland has done very well being part of a bigger, common endeavor. Its people and industry played a disproportionately large role in the British empire, and even since the empire's decline they have enjoyed considerable clout as part of the U.K. Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown and his chancellor of the exchequer, Alistair Darling, both sit for Scottish constituencies at Westminster and bailed out the stricken Royal Bank of Scotland to the tune of £45 billion during the financial crisis.

When they voted under New Labour in 1997 for "home-rule," it was for limited self-government within the United Kingdom. A parliament was established in Edinburgh for the first time since 1707, but Westminster continues to collect all taxes and handle defense, foreign affairs and welfare provision.

Scotland's nationalist first minister, Alex Salmond, thinks he stands on the brink of changing that. He seeks to persuade Scotland to vote for full independence. Mr. Salmond, having eviscerated the Unionist parties in Scotland at last year's devolved election, has a parliamentary majority in Edinburgh and will hold a referendum on separation in 2014. Not entirely coincidentally, that year will mark the 700th anniversary of the greatest Scottish military victory of them all, when Robert the Bruce routed the forces of England's Edward II. But Mr. Salmond is no anti-English rabble-rouser. Indeed, the first minister was just in London to deliver a lecture to the English, a sport at which he usually excels.

Independence, he claimed, would be good for England as well as Scotland. Rather oddly, he argued that this would make England more left-wing because it would look north to his tartan progressive utopia for inspiration. Ever since Scots opposed the much-needed economic reforms of the Thatcher government, the pompous notion of Scottish exceptionalism has found expression in the bogus idea that the Scots are somehow more compassionate because they are more statist.

Mr. Salmond also presents the proposed breakup of the U.K. as part of an inevitable historical process, arguing that just as the empire came to a natural end, so Britain should be wound up in a spirit of calm in order that both countries become better friends afterwards.

The Scottish National Party certainly has a commanding lead and its leader remains popular, but the polls show that Scots are still not warming to its central policy. Support for independence remains stuck, as it has long been, around the mid-30% mark.

Mr. Salmond's biggest difficulty is Europe and the economic crisis in the euro zone. Since the late 1980s, the nationalist case has been built on the claim that the rise of the European Union meant Scotland could safely opt to leave the supposedly broken-down old partnership with England and join instead the wave of the future: the EU. Independence was recast as outward-looking and internationalist rather than narrow-minded and dangerous.

But today, with the euro zone in such a mess, what exactly is Mr. Salmond asking the Scots to join? The first minister now says he wants an independent Scotland to keep the pound, for the moment, but join the queue to get into the European single currency. The new fiscal rules demanded by Germany mean that Scotland would be swapping London oversight for control by the much more distant Brussels and Berlin. Just ask the Irish, whose draft budgets are already perused in the German capital long before anyone deigns to show the voters in Dublin.

Mr. Salmond also wants England to take on all the liabilities of the nationalized Royal Bank of Scotland, yet after independence he insists it will remain a Scottish institution headquartered in Edinburgh, employing thousands of Scots. Is that credible?

There are a plethora of such questions. I am a fair- and foul-weather Unionist, relishing my dual identity as a patriotic Scot who is also British. But I recognize that many Scots are pragmatists on the subject. In a time of economic stability and prosperity, perhaps they could be persuaded to grant Mr. Salmond his wish. But with Europe and the economy so troubled it is much less likely.

### **À L'ATTENTION DES CANDIDATS**

- Ne rien écrire sur le texte

- Rendre l'article à l'examineur avant de quitter la salle