

FINESTRA D'OPORTUNITAT

Brexit's silver lining and the SNP

by Jen Cranwell



On March 28, 2017, the Scottish parliament voted to back an official legislative request to the U.K. parliament to hold a second referendum on the question of an independent Scotland. The call for independence has always been an aim of the ruling SNP party in Scotland but had suffered a setback in the 2014 referendum in which the country voted to remain part of the U.K. However, the unexpected result of the Brexit vote in 2016 justified the SNP in calling for a second referendum, on a faster timescale than otherwise might have been the case.

Although David Cameron, the former U.K. Prime Minister had promised to hold a referendum on E.U. membership during the electoral campaign in 2013, the idea of the vote, much less the idea of Brexit as a probable outcome seemed distant for many in Scotland. The remain campaign in the Scottish referendum of 2014 used the idea that a vote to leave the U.K. would mean a vote to leave the E.U. because an independent Scotland would, by all accounts have to fight to join the E.U. under opposition from major members such as Spain who would resist, due to obvious reasons. One could argue that this was an opportunity missed by the Scottish independence campaign, for if they had played up the possibility that a vote to remain in the U.K. was a vote to leave the E.U., then the results could have been different given Scotland's vote to remain in the E.U. by a 24-point margin. However, the results of

the E.U. referendum were shock to many (apparently not least to the U.K. government who had called the vote), with perhaps misplaced complacency a factor in the relatively low voter turnout of 62.7 % compared to the record 84.6% turnout for the Scottish referendum, which the public generally believed could go either way. Although the SNP manifesto for the 2016 Holyrood election stated that a second Scottish independence referendum would not be held without "clear public support" it contained a specific clause that allowed for another referendum if material circumstances changed. At the moment, both of these statements appear to be valid.

In Catalonia Artur Mas has said that when you have a million people marching every year in support of independence then something has to be done about it- in relative terms the independence movement does not have the same support in Scotland. Of course, this may be the result of the need for protests in order to hold a vote that is deemed legal by the ruling government. There is a general consensus in the mainstream media that people in Scotland are "tired" of the independence argument and that while support for Scottish independence remains relatively stable, support for a second vote on the question has fallen. However, it is worth noting that in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit vote, the question of holding a second Scottish referendum was given much more importance and coverage by the media and other political parties, who perhaps hoped to distract from the lack of a comprehensive or coherent plan following a vote to leave the E.U., than by the SNP itself.

The First Minister for Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, refrained from making any rash statements or decisions on the issue- simply saying that it would need to be addressed and instead turned the table on the U.K. government to provide a detailed plan on what the result would mean for Scotland. Sturgeon has subsequently said that her decision to request a second independence referendum after the terms of Brexit are made clear between Autumn 2018 and Spring 2019 was not the result of the Brexit vote in and of itself, but rather the failure of the U.K government to provide any compromise on issues such as the single market. The SNP has been accused of courting both Brexit supporters and detractors by saying that an independent Scotland would not apply for full E.U. membership but rather access to the European Free Trade Association.

However, Sturgeon has never shied away from confirming her belief in and support for the E.U. The timing of Sturgeon's announcement that the SNP would move forward in requesting a second independence referendum was seen by many as a challenge to the current U.K. Prime Minister, Theresa May, coming as it did shortly before May was due to trigger article 50, into responding to the question of whether it would be allowed by the U.K government. While some have said this caught May off guard and forced her to take a conclusive stance in denying the possibility of a second independence referendum in the timing proposed by Sturgeon (which may in turn galvanise support for a referendum to be held), it could be argued that allowing a "hard" Brexit to be set in motion by article 50 without the "distraction" of the question of a second Scottish referendum might have been more detrimental to May. Critics of Sturgeon, perhaps hoping to capitalise on the idea that people prefer the status quo

in a scaremongering tactic that appears to have worked in the first independence referendum, claim that she is echoing the Conservatives in calling for a leave vote for which she has no clear plan in the event of an affirmative result. However, this argument falls flat given the authoritative way in which she responded to the Brexit vote in seeking to obtain a clear view of the U.K. government's strategy for leaving the E.U., which by all accounts it could not provide. In denying the SNP a comprehensive and clear answer in what the result would mean for Scotland, the U.K. government not only highlighted its own incompetency but suggested a dismissal of the importance of Scottish concerns.

The campaign for independence in 2014 cited an end to a (Scottish) unelected Conservative rule from Westminster as a reason to leave the U.K. which seems to be more relevant than ever given the increasingly right-wing policies of the U.K. government and the contrary left-wing policies of the SNP. In an ironic twist, the SNP has been given the justification and backing it needs to call a second referendum based on the results of the Brexit vote which as a country, it had voted against. Politicians across the board have criticized the idea of another Scottish referendum on the basis it would be divisive, in a paradoxical viewpoint that denies the arguably more divisive Brexit vote which set in motion the SNP's call a new vote in the first place. Furthermore, given May's unexpected call for a general election in June, this year has brought the idea of tactical voting to the forefront of British politics.

The Scottish conservative party have now grasped the notion that they are the only viable party in the present climate that can convincingly defeat the SNP and are hoping to garner support from those who wish to see the Scotland remain in the U.K. The problem with this idea is twofold in that a higher majority of those who hope for a United Kingdom are also against leaving the European Union, which is what a vote for the Scottish Conservatives would mean. Also in apparently pitting the Scottish Conservatives against the SNP in a two/party race, May presumably aims to eliminate the struggling Labour and Liberal Democrat parties. While this may be a tactic that works for the Conservative party as a whole in the long run and it is true that the Scottish Tories have gained approval points since the last election, it is extremely unlikely to end in anything other than a SNP majority for Scotland in Westminster. Perhaps even more so, May's hypocrisy in denying the Scottish government's request to hold a second referendum because of the "uncertainty" before the full Brexit terms have been agreed and the subsequent announcement that there will be a general election (earlier than Sturgeon had requested her referendum) cannot be ignored.

In a complete turnaround of the 2014 Scottish referendum a vote for independence in any subsequent referendum will not guarantee E.U. membership but a vote to remain in the U.K. will mean definite exclusion, which just might give the SNP the extra support it needs- in a great part, thanks to Brexit.



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