

No rules, great Scotch!

The Scottish National Party intends to hold a referendum among the Scottish electorate on the issue of independence from the United Kingdom. This exercise tackles questions on how autonomy can be materialised for a new Scottish federal state in Europe. The Scottish SNP and the Flemish N-VA-party are quite comparable. Both political parties have won the latest elections in their country. An independent Scottish state is no longer a mere romantic desire, it has become a real possibility. Flanders has to keep sight of how the independence issue will be handled overseas. Without a doubt the Flemish political landscape can draw interesting conclusions from the Scottish urge towards independence.

Scotland and Flanders : identical twins

In 1302, the Flemish people have shown the Scots the way during the “Gulden Sporenslag” (“Battle of the Golden Spurs”). After conquering the Scots during the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314, the Scots won back their freedom. The Scots’ pursuit of independence is as old as the hills are. In Belgium, the electoral evolution indicates one very clear tendency : a steady progress of the Flemish nationalist movement (as it is stated by professor Maddens, related to the Catholic University in Louvain in Flemish newspaper ‘*De Standaard*’ on 10th June 2009). The struggle for autonomy has been deeply embedded both in the Scottish and Flemish society.

Prime Minister Alex Salmond wants to consult the Scottish people in the fall of 2014. This will not be just a test case. Earlier, in 1998, 5,000,000 Scots opted for more autonomy. The establishment of a proper Scottish House of Parliament was only a logical consequence. As of today, only 39 % of the Scots support full independence. In Flanders public polls are rare, rather shallow and without engagement. Only once, a Flemish majority expressed itself in the polls for independence. A real referendum in which Flanders bends itself over independence is out of the question today.

Scotland will survive

Only based on historical – i.e. The Battle of Bannockburn - and romantic grounds, the Scots will not ask for more autonomy or independence. They will only claim for more autonomy because they consider themselves as a nation on its own, as a region well conscious of its own strengths and bright future. The Scots will ask themselves whether or not they are better off with or without the United Kingdom. Will the Scots manage to organize their own future ? According to Douglas Fraser, analyst for the BBC and an authority when it comes down to Scottish economical matters, the answer is easy : “of course they can.”

There is no financial or economical disaster scenario looming for Scotland. It is able to move on alone. Even more, if the Scots declare their independence, Hadrian's Wall will not be restored in order to remove the English. Prime minister Salmond predicts a positive relationship with the Brits after independence. Moreover, Scotland will still be located within the borders of Europe.

Of course, Scotland will develop gradually towards achieving independence. This will not be different from the existing structures within the UK. 5,000,000 million confident Scots should not be afraid of any change. An independent and sovereign Scotland will only emerge because of the support it receives from its people. If they want Scotland to govern itself, then why wouldn't the Scots be able to manage it ?

Anyway, a lot of negotiations will have to take place, obviously with the UK as a partner as well. About the repartition of the government debt for instance. Or the proceeds from the exploitation of oil generated out of the North Sea. Or what is to be said about the presence of British nuclear submarines in Scottish waters ? And will Scotland retire from the NATO ?

What does the future of Scotland look like within the European Union ? The birth of a new country, with its origins in an existing Member State, has no precedent. The EU-treaties do not prescribe a definitive solution. Even the European Commission does not want to answer to this so-called hypothetical question. Most likely, all EU Member States will have to ratify the Scottish application for membership. Spain, struggling with the upcoming Catalanian and Euskera movement itself will be obstructive.

In brief, the Flemish may soon have an example. Only this time the Scots might set the trend. For Flanders, "the Scottish Independence Issue" provides a very interesting case. At this point, there are no European rules : *no rules, only Scotch*. Whether or not the Scots choose for independence, it will undoubtedly show us all possibilities. Just as the Scots, the Flemish people must ask themselves where our future lies : within or without Belgium.

Peter Luykx

Member of the Belgian Parliament for the N-VA Party

Voting member in the Foreign Affairs Committee