



## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

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### Disunited Kingdom: The UK and the 'Scottish Question'

  
Fondation Pierre du Bois  
pour l'histoire du temps présent

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A spectre is haunting UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson: the spectre of Scottish independence. Now that Brexit has allegedly been delivered and the Covid lockdown is easing, one of the (many) remaining challenges for the UK government will be its relationship with one of the four 'nations' that make up the United Kingdom: Scotland. As the Scottish Parliament elections on 6 May are approaching, the governing Scottish National Party (SNP) under its charismatic leader and head of the Scottish government, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, is [set to win a majority of seats](#). Sturgeon's party is running on a platform that is built around independence and she promised to pave the way for another referendum ('Indyref2') on this vital question. While Scotland held an independence referendum only seven years ago, in 2014, the situation has changed dramatically since then. One of the reasons for many Scots (55%) to vote to remain in the UK in 2014 was the uncertainty about a Scottish EU membership, which was considered essential. Yet the Brexit referendum in 2016 (with its minuscule majority of 3.8% for Brexit; hardly a mandate for a 'hard Brexit') changed the status quo dramatically. Almost two-thirds of Scots voted to remain in the EU and yet subsequent UK governments proceeded to push for ever harder Brexits without any concessions to the significant part of the country that wanted to stay in the EU. This fundamental change of circumstances, it is claimed, justifies another independence referendum. Other factors – such as a clear divide in both political views and party voting patterns, and the long shadow of history – matter as well and will be explored in more detail below. Opponents of another referendum (and of independence more broadly) claim that the referendum of 2014 was a 'once-in-a-lifetime' endeavour and British Prime Ministers Theresa May and Boris Johnson have each said that they would not 'allow' another referendum to take place. The leaders of the biggest UK opposition party, the Labour Party, seem to be equally hostile to Scottish independence. Yet recent [opinion surveys](#), indicate a majority for another referendum in Scotland, putting the will of many Scots in clear opposition to the UK political leadership.

The problem is that the best (and most legally watertight) route towards another referendum leads through the British Parliament. It needs to provide the legal basis for the vote to take place (a so-called Section 30 order). Yet, no majority for such a decision is likely to materialise anytime soon. The Scottish Parliament and Government, it is claimed, do not have the rights to instigate a legally binding referendum. In a nutshell, if a majority of Scots were willing to hold another vote on Scottish independence, currently, they would have no legal right to set their country on this path. It appears that, at least at the moment and unless a new legal situation emerges, all ways towards independence lead through London.

One of the complications surrounding this issue derives from the fact that the UK is not a federal state (unlike Switzerland, Germany or the US for instance). While four nations officially exist, a significant amount of power has been – and still is – centralised in London. Devolution – or some limited local governance and home rule – is a fairly new development of the past 20 years in Scotland and many significant competences, such as the power to borrow money, still rest solely with the UK government. Perhaps even more importantly, as Brexit has shown, the UK government can make decisions that hugely impact the nations without those governments having any say on the matter whatsoever. Moreover, with the UK's exit from the EU, the UK government seems to be on a course to restrict devolved powers even further by [relocating competences](#) to London that had formerly been held in



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Brussels. No institutions such as the German Bundesrat exist, for instance, in which the German states have their influence on legislation and have to be consenting to bills.<sup>1</sup> This lack of influence of the nations on vital decision-making processes is often cited as a reason for the need for independence by those in favour of such a policy.<sup>2</sup> But how did such a seemingly peculiar situation evolve? Why is Scotland a part of the UK to begin with? What is the current situation? And what are some of the issues around independence at the moment?

### **Auld Lang Syne; or When Two Became One**

As Scotland and England are both located on the same island, the mutual relationship has always been (in)tense. Although the merger of England and Scotland only materialised through the 1707 Acts of Union, there were periods before when both kingdoms shared the same ruler. The ties between Scotland and continental Europe have always been close too. In the late 1200s and early 1300s, for instance, against the threat of an English invasion, the warring Scottish clans sealed an alliance with France, the Auld Alliance of 1295. This pact was never officially revoked, and Charles de Gaulle described it once as 'the oldest alliance in the world'. It even gave people from both countries dual citizenship until the French government in 1903 revoked this privilege.<sup>3</sup> When, in 1296, English King Edward I occupied Scotland, this led to a period of fierce resistance, best known to non-Scots perhaps through the 1995 film 'Braveheart', which is very loosely based on the leader of the Scottish resistance, William Wallace. Robert the Bruce (recently the topic of another film, 'The King') succeeded Wallace as Scottish leader and secured a victory over England in 1314. This led to the Declaration of Arbroath, purportedly the first declaration of independence in history, which was signed on 6 April 1320, 701 years ago.

Scotland was now a sovereign kingdom, but the succeeding centuries were marked by struggles for power fought between the various clans. At the same time, links with England remained close as the Scottish and English royal families were connected through marriages. With the death of the childless Queen Elizabeth I in 1603, her Scottish relative, James I acceded to the throne of England and thus united the crowns of both Scotland and England. While they shared the same king, both kingdoms remained sovereign, but efforts were under way to unite them. Yet those only succeeded in 1707. Until then, the Scottish Parliament had resisted any attempts to give up sovereignty (and statehood). It was only when financial pressures<sup>4</sup> mounted and economic incentives of having access to the flourishing English colonial empire grew, that Scottish parliamentary consent for the union could be won. This development was heavily contested within Scotland, however, and resistance was particularly strong in the Highlands. Two (French-backed) attempts by descendants of the previously ruling Stuart dynasty to reclaim Scotland's throne failed, and finally so with Bonnie Prince Charlie's 1746 defeat at the Battle of Culloden, the last large-scale battle fought on British soil.

In the century that followed, Scotland prospered economically, with the Industrial Revolution and as part of the British Empire. Intellectually, Scotland was also on the rise. The Scottish Enlightenment, its universities (especially Glasgow, St Andrews, Aberdeen and Edinburgh), scientists, thinkers, and engineers (such as Lord Kelvin, Adam Smith, and James Watt) just as much as its poets (e.g. Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson and Arthur Conan Doyle) testified to the country's cultural prowess. At the same time though, social and economic tensions within Scotland grew, as the Highlands and rural areas could not partake in the increasing prosperity of the cities. The 'Highland Clearances' (the eviction of tenants from their ancestral lands), famines and poverty struck the countryside and led to waves of mass emigration and a rural exodus. This continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into a new era – the Romantic revival - which saw a newfound interest in (and glorification of) local cultures, both in Scotland and across Europe. As a consequence, the tartan and the kilt became popular symbols. British Queen Victoria contributed to the 'Scotland hype' by purchasing her holiday residence, Balmoral Castle in the 1840s. It remains the favoured place of vacationing for the royal family until today.

However, the next century was marked by increasing (overseas) competition leading to the downfall of whole sectors of Scottish industry, a trend that lasted until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, attempts were made in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to



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secure more autonomy for Scotland. The Labour Party had been toying with the notion of 'home rule' – or devolution – since the 1920s but it remained a low priority. It was only against the backdrop of growing electoral successes for the SNP, that the Labour government under James Callaghan held a referendum on devolution in 1979. While a majority of Scots voted in favour of devolution, a stipulation in the legislative framework for the referendum required that at least 40% of the electorate (and not just of those who showed up to vote) had to vote for yes. That threshold was not passed, and consequently devolution did not emerge. During the succeeding Tory governments, Scottish devolution was not an agenda item. In fact, Margaret Thatcher's social and economic reforms did their share to alienate even more Scots from her government and the UK more generally. Her poll tax,<sup>5</sup> and her neoliberal policies devastated the heavy industry and mining sector and led to high unemployment in Scotland. As voting patterns are concerned, the last time the Conservatives had won an election in Scotland was in 1959 and from then on, the Scottish votes for the Tories were in constant decline. This trend accelerated during the Thatcher and John Major years and the Tories fell from 31% in 1979, to 17.5% in 1997. Against this backdrop, and when Labour won the UK elections in 1997, Tony Blair reintroduced plans for a referendum. It was held the same year and led to a majority in favour of devolution and to the establishment of a Scottish Parliament and Government in 1999. While powers around independence and matters of national importance remained with the British Parliament, on more local issues (for instance university tuition fees) Scots finally had more of a say. For the first few years, the Scottish government was formed by the Labour Party, but the growing number of votes cast for the SNP put them in power in 2007 and they have led the country ever since, albeit often as a minority government. The success for the SNP, with a clear goal of independence in their election platforms, resulted in ever louder calls for a referendum on Scottish independence. Consequently, after the SNP's victory in the 2011 Scottish elections, then British Tory Prime Minister David Cameron agreed to plans for a referendum to be held. The nature of the devolution settlement for Scotland required for such a bill to be passed by the British Parliament and the Scottish government alone could not set up a referendum. When the referendum took place in September 2014, the Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond described it as a 'once in generation' event. Yet, a majority of Scots (55.3%) wanted to stay in the United Kingdom and the referendum failed with a voter turnout of almost 85%. Major concerns for people to vote against independence centred around whether an independent Scotland could continue to be a member of the EU; constitutional, economic and legacy questions as well as the uncertainties about the currency an independent Scotland would use.

### **Much Ado About A Lot – The Current Situation**

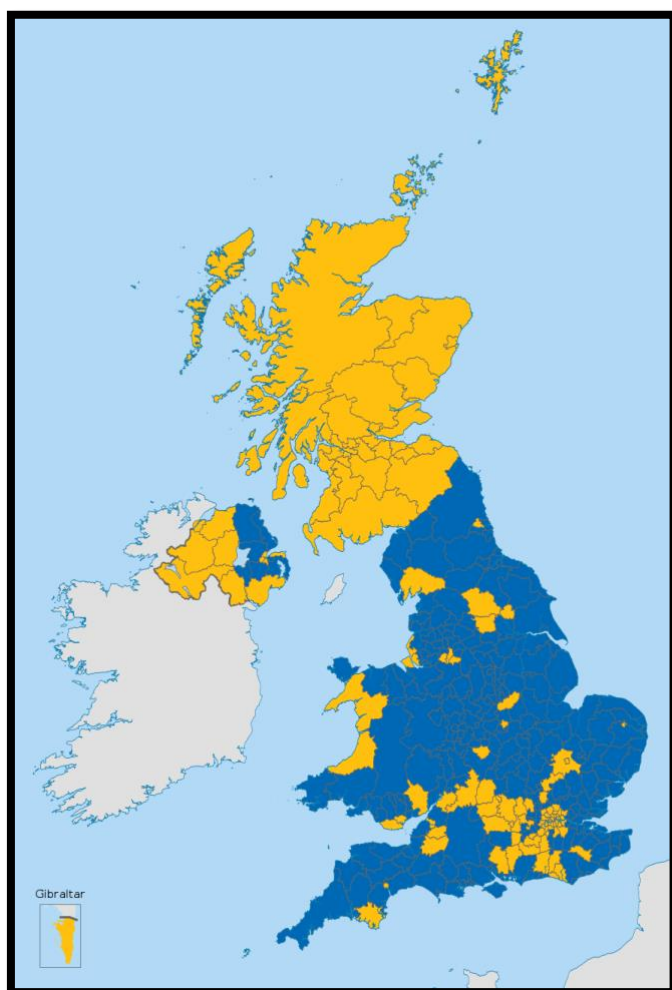
As all major parties had agreed to respect the outcome of the referendum, the matter seemed settled in September 2014. Scotland would remain a part of the United Kingdom but receive further powers on matters such as social security. Yet, another referendum two years later would catapult the question of Scottish independence from the political backburners right onto the centre of the stage again. In the UK's Brexit referendum of 2016, approximately 52% of those voting opted in favour of severing ties with the European Union. But, as the map below demonstrates, the referendum also revealed huge discrepancies within the not-so-United Kingdom: while more than 53% of voters in England were in favour of leaving the EU, almost 56% of those in Northern Ireland, and 62% of voters in Scotland favoured remaining in the EU.





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Map of the United Kingdom showing the voting areas for the European Union membership referendum, 2016. ■ Leave ■ Remain

Source: Wikipedia/Mirrome22,

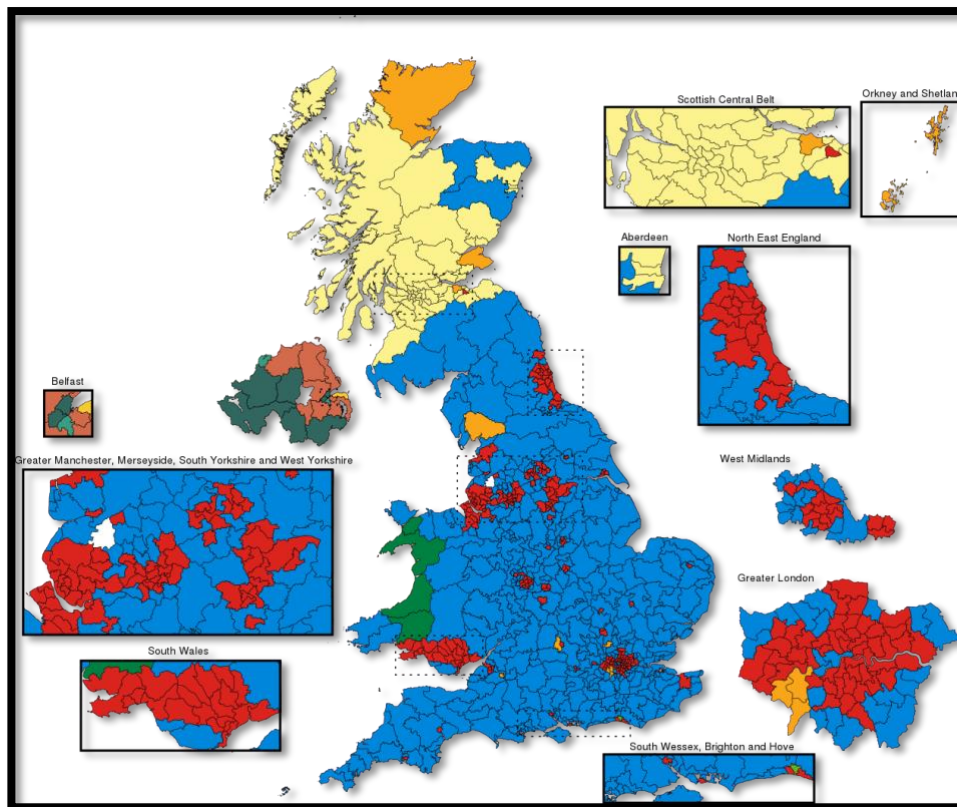
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:United\\_Kingdom\\_EU\\_referendum\\_2016\\_area\\_results\\_2-tone.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:United_Kingdom_EU_referendum_2016_area_results_2-tone.svg)



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These nations of the UK were therefore set on a path that would take them out of the EU even though no majorities for such a course existed there. This moved the question of Scottish independence (and with lesser prevalence, also that of a possible reunification of Ireland) back onto the political agenda. Pro-independent Scottish politicians stated that as EU membership had been such an important reason for many Scots to vote against independence two years before, it was unacceptable that the UK would now force Scotland out of the EU anyway. Consequently, it was claimed, that the situation for Scotland had changed fundamentally, which would justify another independence referendum (or Indyref2, for short) to be held. The notion that there was a growing political divide between Scotland and the UK, and that people in Scotland were progressively affected by policies and parties they did not vote for gained further traction in the 2019 UK elections. A look at the map of voting results shows a significant difference between England and Scotland:



Map for results of the 2019 general election in the United Kingdom. Ultimately based upon data from the Boundary Commission. Colours are as below.

[Conservative Party](#) | [Labour Party](#) | [Scottish National Party](#) | [Liberal Democrats](#) | [Democratic Unionist Party](#) | [Sinn Féin](#) | [Social Democratic and Labour Party](#) | [Plaid Cymru](#) | [Green Party \(E & W\)](#) | [Alliance Party of Northern Ireland](#) | [Speaker of the House of Commons](#)

Source: Wikipedia/ Brythones under Creative Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2019UKElectionMap.svg>



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While many parts of England were secured by the Conservatives, 48 out of Scotland's 59 seats were won by the SNP. This added further momentum to the argument that Scotland was affected by decisions of a government it overwhelmingly did not vote for, and thus fuelled further calls for Indyref2.

The Covid-19 crisis was another instrumental development. Health is a devolved matter, meaning that it was mostly for the Scottish government to manage. Hence, many of the decisions on Covid-19 for Scotland were made not in London, but in Edinburgh. While the actual policies might not have differed all that much between nations, the approach towards the crisis and communication throughout it was significantly different. Initially, Boris Johnson downplayed the threat and was extremely reluctant to take any measures that would limit people's interactions or impose a lockdown on England. Nicola Sturgeon, however, was more cautious and through daily briefings to the public conveyed a more competent and approachable impression vis-à-vis her English counterpart. It also allowed the Scottish Government to show competence in crisis management and prove that they could act like any other normal government. The crisis and the different political competences also relegated Johnson to the role of de facto 'Prime Minister of England' only. The one power that he held though – and which is an incredibly important one – was that of the purse, the possibility to borrow and spend money. So even though Scotland could design most of its Covid-19 policies in Edinburgh, for the financial means necessary to support them (such as the furlough scheme), they depended on London. Nevertheless, Nicola Sturgeon was largely perceived to be more competent in handling the crisis and the opinion polls predict her and her party to benefit from this and to win a majority in the 2021 Scottish elections. Polls across the board also measured sustained support for Scottish independence with most of them indicating a majority for such a policy. However, the nationalistic but speedy British vaccination programme together with political infighting between Sturgeon and her predecessor Alex Salmond over sexual harassment allegations against him seems to have stopped the upward movements in the polls for the SNP and independence. It remains to be seen, though, if this is a consolidating trend or just reflects short term reactions. Recently, Salmond also founded his own party – Alba – and it is unclear whether this will affect the number of seats the SNP will win. At the time of this writing the SNP is still predicted to return a majority in the elections.

Despite the momentum the SNP and Indyref2 have gained, so far, Boris Johnson stands firm on his decision not to 'allow' it to take place. But this wording, which he inherited from his predecessor Theresa May (who decided it was up to her to determine when a referendum would be held when she claimed that: ['Now is not the time.'](#)), adds further fuel to the fire. It portrays the situation as an almost colonial setting: where the country seeking self-determination had to ask the motherland (the UK) to kindly grant it. Needless to say, continuing to withhold this permission could further escalate the crisis. At the same time, pro-independence sentiments are more [dominant amongst younger Scots](#). Thus, as time passes, the number of people in support of independence is likely to rise further. This creates a dilemma that is not helped by the fact that the UK lacks a written constitution, which could provide clear rules for such a situation. The majority view at the moment seems to be that for a referendum to be legally watertight it has to have the support of the UK Parliament, and while the Scottish Parliament could possibly hold a consultative referendum, it would not be legally binding.

Faced with growing impatience in the independence movement, the SNP has recently laid out a [roadmap](#) towards a referendum. Sturgeon also revealed what her [Plan B](#) would be in case that Johnson would not concede to Indyref2. Apparently, and assuming that pro-independence parties won a majority in the May elections, the Scottish Parliament would legislate for a referendum and the UK government would have to challenge it in the courts. This is a risky gamble for both sides. For the SNP, if the courts decided that the referendum was not legal it would bring it back to square one. This, however, might stir up more support as it could be seen as another colonial imposition (after all, it will likely end up in front of the UK Supreme Court). At the same time though, it might also lead to a split in the independence movement – between those in favour of more immediate action and advocates of a more cautious approach – and fragmentation might hurt the cause just as much as a possible shift towards radicalisation. For the time being, however, there is no indication that a majority of Scots would be prepared to support a





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Catalonia-style escalation. Then again, the British government would also be in a dilemma. Its position is morally difficult to maintain (standing against 'self-determination' always is) and legally challenging a referendum approved by a Scottish Parliament would add further problems. After all, if a majority of Scots voted for parties with a clear pro-independence platform, one could claim that the Scottish Parliament arguably does have the legitimacy, which derives from the elections. Maintaining an 'undemocratic', 'English' veto on the Scottish referendum does leave a rather unpleasant aftertaste for a democracy and former colonial power. So far, however, the Tories (and Labour for that matter) remain firmly committed [to not permit Indyref2](#).

### The Issues and Obstacles

While this paper is predominantly concerned with the more short-term issue of a referendum (and can be followed up by a paper on independence proper once a referendum has actually been agreed on) we shall nevertheless look at some of the main issues involved. As detailed above, legality is a major point of contention. Does the Scottish Government have the right to hold a legally binding referendum that could take Scotland out of the UK? Probably not. Should it have such a right to exercise self-determination? Probably yes. Ultimately, this is a matter of political convictions. The other argument often advanced is that Scotland is inherently different from England. As this paper has shown, Scotland does have a distinct history of statehood, and has had its own close ties with Europe for centuries. Nevertheless, it has been a part of the UK for 300 years and as such has developed strong bonds with the other nations. Yet, political willingness assumed, there is no immediate reason why those bonds cannot be maintained when Scotland is an independent state. The Republic of Ireland, for instance, was once a part of the United Kingdom, too, yet still maintains close ties with the UK even after its own independence. Besides, as Scotland has entered the Union voluntarily in the early 1700s it seems somewhat odd to now deny it the right to terminate the treaty. Adapted to a different context: imagine a spouse being denied the right to file for divorce. So there are good reasons to allow the Scots to hold a referendum and decide themselves where and how they see their future.

But the pro-independence camp does face some problems too. Given the importance of the economic, financial and currency question in the last referendum, one might wonder whether more comprehensive plans than currently exist are needed to address these concerns and to swing voters towards independence. While some notions of how this should be organised [exist](#) (such as Scotland maintaining the Pound Sterling for a while) none of them seem to be without problems. Having a more detailed blueprint for how independence could look might convince the public that this is a less risky project than the other camp makes it seem. For instance, a draft constitution could be produced that could address issues such as the future political system of an independent Scotland, as well as its macroeconomic design. Why not set up a central bank-in-waiting? As a matter of fact, there are Scottish banknotes circulating already so why not benefit from this? Likewise, and to show preparedness, the Scottish Government could accelerate its policy to proactively set up offices abroad that could quickly be turned into diplomatic missions, and allow for a more seamless transition (in addition to allowing the Scots to develop ties with other states already). The future relationship with the EU provokes debate as well. While the pro-independence camp seems to be rather in unison on wanting closer ties with the EU, the exact nature of those ties remains somewhat blurry. Will it be an associated or full membership? What about the requirement to adopt the Euro in the latter case? Moreover, roughly 40% of the Scots still voted for Brexit in 2016. Against the backdrop of Brexit affecting Scottish fish exports and agriculture in [disastrous ways](#), the number of Brexit supporters might have gone down. However, there are still some Eurosceptics in the country. Not all of them might be hostile to Scottish independence, so how might these votes be secured? These are somewhat random examples of questions yet to be comprehensively answered. Pursuing a strategy of clarity and detail on these issues might show a higher level of competence and preparedness for independence and hence sway more people to this side. Currently, the approach seems to be 'independence first, all else later' and whether that will be persuasive enough has yet to be determined. The problem here is of course that the pro-independence movement as such is a very broad church. It includes people with very different (social, economic, and other) political views and the current dispute within the



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SNP on [trans rights](#), for instance, shows that. Having too clearly-defined plans for an independent Scotland might risk splitting up the movement. The recent foundation of the Alba party seems to confirm this hypothesis. In fact, that might offer a glimpse at the future of the movement: different pro-independence parties but with various political leanings. This might convince more people to vote for parties endorsing independence. But that might also mean that the pro-independence vote is split and the actual number of seats in Parliament for pro-independence parties might reduce. A diversification of the pro-independence movement also risks making any agreement on how to get to an independent Scotland more difficult to achieve. So, the challenge is to have plans specific enough to win new people to the pro-independence side but to also leave them loose enough to not alienate those already in the movement. This is a very delicate balancing act and whether it will work remains to be seen.

### Possible Ways Forward

Ultimately, May 2021 will be a crucial moment and future developments around independence will largely depend on the outcome of the Scottish elections. If the Tories see significant losses, the SNP forms the next government, and pro-indyref parties win the majority of seats in the next parliament, it might signal to London that the 'Scottish question' will not go away. In this case, the SNP's plan might pay off and pressures will increase on the UK parties to allow for Indyref2 to go ahead (and this seems to be what Nicola Sturgeon [expects to happen](#)). Much will hinge on Boris Johnson personally. If Scotland were to leave the Union, it might actually bode well for the Tories. At least for the moment, Scotland seems to be politically lost to the Conservative Party with [polls](#) suggesting Scottish disapproval ratings for Boris Johnson of 75%. Moreover, with most of the Scottish Westminster seats occupied by the SNP, there might be some appeal to just getting rid of the seats altogether as this would allow the Tory majority in Parliament to grow. However, Johnson also declared himself 'Minister of the Union' and presiding over the dissolution of the United Kingdom is likely something he would not want to be remembered for. Yet, Johnson has proven time and again that he might not be as much a man of principle as one of opportunities. If the Tories' English electorate is uninterested in the issue of Scottish independence and it is perceived not to pose a problem to his power, then he might decide that Indyref2 is the lesser of two evils and better than perpetual quarrelling over it. His rejection of the independence referendum (and therefore the right of the people to decide their own fate) does also not align with his staunch support for Brexit (and the stated goal to 'take back control' to the people). Ultimately, there is also no guarantee that the pro-independence camp would actually win a referendum. The UK government might make its approval conditional on including more options than just 'yes' and 'no' on the ballot, or for Scots living outside of Scotland to be able to vote as well. Both manoeuvres could pose serious threats to a 'yes' majority. Personally, for Johnson, there might be less to lose by just 'allowing' Indyref2 to go ahead. Consequently, both sides of the argument are in positions that do not seem tenable on the long run. The SNP needs ultimate UK approval of whatever form (by government or court) to have a legally sound referendum that would not jeopardise the new Scotland's international recognition.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, many of the questions around independence will be much easier to resolve in a somewhat amicable atmosphere with Britain, than in one that would be marked by hostility. However, Johnson too is skating on very thin moral ice with his position. Standing in the way of self-determination does not look well (especially internationally) and he seems to care about his image. Furthermore, a glance at Irish history shows that dragging out such crises can do more harm than good; and could still ultimately lead to independence. Although there are no signs of it yet, protracting the crisis might even lead to violence, which is what happened in (the Republic of) Ireland in the 1920s.

Nevertheless, at least at the moment, it is hard to see how the political stalemate around Indyref2 can be broken. At the very least, it will take a convincing pro-independence victory (and popular turnout) at the May elections, and possibly much more than that, to give momentum to the situation and to cut the Gordian Knot that the past three hundred years of Scottish-English relations have tied. What is equally true, however, is that the 'Scottish Question' will not disappear. London's resistance to it will likely maintain and increase opposition to the UK in Scotland, especially in light of the demographic trends. Mid- to long-term it appears





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more prudent for the UK – its Parliament and government - to engage constructively with the desire for another Indyref and independence. This will allow them to have some influence on the process and to secure a constructive rapport between Scotland and the rest of the UK, whatever form this future relationship will take. For the pro-independence movement, too, hard questions will have to be asked – and answered: what exactly will an independent Scotland look like? What lessons can be learnt (or what mistakes must not be repeated) from other separations (in Ireland, Czechoslovakia, the Balkans, or elsewhere)? How to integrate those into the process who did not want independence. And how to ensure that the transition works out smoothly?

Whatever happens, the tone and stance taken now by both sides will affect the Scottish-UK relationship for years to come. Scotland and the rest of the UK share a border, myriads of links, and a common history. The more constructively all sides engage in the discussions and process over the next months, the more prosperous and successful the future relationship will be. However, the spectre of independence is very much present, and it will not disappear again. Grievances exist and they will need addressing. At the same time, Scots and English will remain neighbours, whatever happens. Therefore, all those involved might be well counselled to take advice from one of the most well-known and iconic Scottish songs:

*'For auld lang syne, my dear,  
for auld lang syne,  
we'll take a cup of kindness yet,  
for auld lang syne.'*

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<sup>1</sup> Certainly, those bills involving the EU according to Art. 23 of the German Grundgesetz.

<sup>2</sup> On a sidenote on Brexit: arguably even the smallest EU member state has had more of an impact on the EU's Brexit policy than Scotland had on the UK's. Through the processes in place at the EU, every state could influence the EU's general position whereas the UK government did not grant the UK nations any say on the position and negotiations at all.

<sup>3</sup> Which many Scots might regret in light of Brexit.

<sup>4</sup> A significant part of the Scottish aristocracy had lost a lot of money in a fruitless colonial enterprise, the Darien scheme; many of the lords faced bankruptcy as a result.

<sup>5</sup> A local tax charged as a single flat-rate per capita tax, rather than one based on the property value. It was therefore often criticized for disadvantaging less well-off people.

<sup>6</sup> Which, of course, comes with a certain irony as the UK government itself does not seem to be overly concerned with its international reputation. Just recently, the Johnson's government announced its intention to break international law in a ['in a very specific and limited way.'](#)