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Scots Independents Lose Vote but Win the Fight

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The Scottish independents may have lost the vote in this week's historic referendum on secession, but they have won a decisive fight – with the winning argument that the United Kingdom is a broken-down entity in drastic need of democratic overhaul.

And it is not just within Britain that the essence of this argument is resonating. The Scots' push for independence, or at the very least for acquiring more democratic powers, is serving to fuel separatist sentiments across Europe, in Spain's Catalonia region, Belgium, Italy and elsewhere.

Indeed, it could be said, the issues raised by the Scots of democratic accountability, more equitable economic policies, and more independence in international relations as opposed to subservience for example to NATO group think, all such issues resonate not just with "separatists" but to many ordinary citizens right across the EU.

The Spanish government in Madrid even threatened to veto an application to the European Union from an independent Scotland. That's a measure of how concerned Madrid was taking the Scottish "contagion" spreading to its own borders.

So, for now, the Spanish central government, like the London government, may be feeling relieved over the Scottish referendum and its apparent vote for the status quo. But they would be foolish to rest on their laurels. They should know that at a deeper level the popular ground is shifting beneath them.

The issue of Scottish independence, and the underlying debate about democracy functioning for people instead of elite power, is not going to go away merely with this week's referendum result. Once an idea catches on, it becomes irreversible.

Far from celebrating its apparent victory, the British status quo is on the retreat after the result. The constitutional flaws and democratic deficit of the existing United Kingdom have been demonstrably exposed; and a clamour for radical change is now in the air even among those voters who apparently supported the Union.

Across the UK, regional media greeted the Scottish vote not with crowing over a pro-Union victory but rather with further questions on how greater devolution is needed and must be delivered throughout Britain. That call for devolution will undermine the traditional London seat of British government, which is seen as one of the most centralised and undemocratic in Europe. Brussels better take note.

The high turnout of the Scottish electorate this week is less about a positive endorsement of the existing UK, and more about a groundswell for substantive political change.

The largely English establishment that has resided cozily up to now in London is seen as dead wood that needs to be torn up and jettisoned. This is because the Scottish referendum has set off a dynamic for greater decentralisation of powers from London, not just to Scotland, but to all the other regions that make up the United Kingdom.

The centuries-old UK may have been spared for now from imminent dissolution – at least on paper – but sweeping changes are nevertheless on the way, thanks to Scotland's pro-independence movement.

In its vibrant campaigning – and despite a hostile London-based media bias – the Scots

separatists have blown open long-overdue public debate about Britain's highly centralised and undemocratic power structure. This debate resonates not just with Scots, but also with the peripheral English regions, the Welsh and Northern Irish. The Westminster establishment – whether Conservative, Labor or Liberal Democrat – is seen as discredited, redundant and incapable of addressing the needs of the wider public on fundamental issues of representation, economy, public services and foreign policies.

When final votes came through early Friday morning, there was palpable relief in the pro-unionist British media. The BBC was almost ecstatic in its breaking news alerts: “Scotland has voted to stay in the United Kingdom after voters decisively rejected independence,” it reported with fanfare.

British Prime Minister David Cameron, who led the No campaign against secession, could hardly contain himself: “Like millions of others, I am delighted,” he gulped.

Cameron was facing the sack from his own Conservative Party benches if Scotland had voted for independence. And over the past weeks, the British media have shown shameless bias in promoting the No campaign while doing everything to undermine the Yes vote. The Scots independence movement was accused of leading Scotland into economic disaster, and of using bullyboy intimidation tactics towards would-be voters. Scottish Nationalist leader Alex Salmond was labelled “a liar” and described as “unscrupulous”. One article in the staunchly Conservative Daily Telegraph even referred to Salmond as being “less popular than Ebola”.

Ironically, it was the pro-unionist establishment that was deploying the dirty politics of smear and intimidation in order to rig the referendum result. Moreover, into the poison was mixed a blatant attempt to bribe the electorate. Cameron and his Westminster cohorts clinched the vote by a last-gasp offer days before the referendum of “more powers and public funds” to Scotland if it stayed within the UK.

But that ploy turns out to be a double-edged sword. By promising more democracy, the Westminster establishment is self-indicting its own traditional abuse of power, which came at the expense of Scotland and the other regions. Promises of more powers to Scotland, unleashes a genie from the bottle for other parts of the UK, which will also push for likewise increased governance at the regional level.

In the end, 55 per cent of Scotland's electorate voted No to the question of separation from the UK. The pro-independence movement won 45 per cent. The turnout was a remarkably high 84.5 per cent of nearly 4.2 million voters.

The margin of victory for the pro-unionists came as a surprise after polls leading up to the referendum were showing a neck-and-neck race, with a late surge in the Yes vote for independence. The Yes vote was campaigning to sever the 307-year-old political union between England and Scotland. That axis serves as the bedrock for the United Kingdom, comprising Wales and Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, the pro-independence Scots have shaken the constitutional foundation of Great

Britain to its foundation. “There will be no business-as-usual,” declared Salmond as the result came through. The nationalist leader accepted defeat with magnanimity, but he called on the London government to deliver on its belated promises of devolving more political powers to Scotland.

Salmond defiantly told supporters: “The unionist parties made vows late in the campaign to devolve more powers to Scotland. Scotland will expect these [vows] to be honoured in rapid course. Not just the 1.6 million Scots who voted for independence will demand that timetable is followed but all Scots who participated in this referendum will demand that timetable is followed.”

The final-hour offer, or should we say bribe, of greater devolved powers to Scotland from the Westminster establishment effectively changed the central question of the referendum. Instead of a choice between independence and the British union as it exists, the voters were now being asked to choose between independence and a Britain with ramped up devolution – or “devo max” as it was described in hyped rhetoric.

Given the British media and No campaign’s relentless exaggeration of risks and dangers from Scotland going independent, the belated devolution promises obviously appealed to a crucial number of uncertain voters as a safer option.

That’s why Salmond has fair reasoning on his side when he says “all Scots who participated in the referendum” are demanding major political change in the existing status quo of the United Kingdom. He added that the political debate has now shifted inexorably to a whole new terrain.

The London government knows this too. Celebrations of victory have been tempered by a nervous recognition that deep-going changes are needed if the United Kingdom is to survive into the future. It will be a tricky balancing act. Speaking from Downing Street, Cameron said: “Just as Scotland will have more power over their affairs, it follows England, Wales and Northern Ireland must have a bigger say over theirs. We will ensure that those commitments are honoured in full,” the prime minister added.

Those powers refer to regional governments being able to determine economic policies on taxation and public spending. In Scotland’s case it may even result in the removal of British nuclear-armed submarines from its sea territory, as the pro-independence people have long demanded. That will have major repercussions for Britain’s role within NATO.

This dynamic of devolution across Britain signals a radical break-out from the straitjacket of austerity and neoliberal largesse for the rich that has been the doctrine of successive London governments, whether Conservative, Labor or the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition.

It’s not that the Westminster establishment is offering up these concessions out of beneficent volition. The establishment knows that the Scottish referendum has exposed its London-centric autocracy in the eyes of all the electorate across Britain. It is being forced to make long-overdue concessions towards greater democratic representation – or face a real separatist threat. No doubt

the autocrats in Brussels and other EU states are also reading the memo.

The United Kingdom may still be intact for a few years to come. But it's shaping up to be a very different place thanks to the Scots. Less kingdom and more a federation of regions, with an imperious London cut down to size.