

Nationalist Contradictions in Europe

by Theodore Dalrymple

All the current nationalist parties of small nations in Europe—the Scots, the Welsh, the Basque, the Catalans, the Flemish—strongly support membership in the European Union, which is dedicated to, and even predicated upon, the extinction of national sovereignty. One would have thought that these parties wanted, at a minimum, national sovereignty. The contradiction is so glaring that it requires an explanation.

The human mind is not a perfect calculating machine, and no doubt all of us sometimes contradict ourselves. Perfect consistency tends to be disconcerting—but so does glaring inconsistency. It's possible that the nationalist parties' leaders don't perceive the contradiction, being so blinded by ideology that they are simply unaware of it. But another possible explanation exists: by leading their nominally independent countries, they forever will be able to feed at the great trough of Brussels and distribute its largesse in true clientelistic fashion. The nationalist leaders certainly lead their people, but by the nose.

The Scots, once the canniest and most provident of people, now believe that improvidence is the greatest of political virtues, and that it is their inalienable right to run huge budgetary deficits for the sake of "social justice"—that is, for services paid for by someone else. Their detestation of George Osborne, the Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer, is quite out of proportion to his unsuccessful efforts to balance the budget; the Scots think that if they leave the United Kingdom and join Europe, they will be allowed to run any deficits they like.

It is possible that, for a time, the Scots will indeed receive subventions from Europe, if only to show disaffected populations how beneficial it is to remain in the Union. (Without a murmur, the Greeks got more money just before the referendum, because yet another Greek crisis might have affected the British vote adversely.) But this period of largesse will not last. Before long, the Scots will be constrained to live within their means—or, at least, approximately within their means—the need to escape this very imperative having been precisely the attraction of Europe in the first place.

Oddly enough, I have not seen the contradiction between current nationalism and support for remaining in the European Union referred to in the press, though I don't read every paper in every language. This is surely one of the first times in history, however, that the expression, "Out of the frying pan into the fire," has become not a warning, but the desired destination of substantial proportions of whole populations.