

Scotland and Independence

by Michael Curtis



Robert the Bruce

Roamin' in the Gloamin' on the bonnie banks of Clyde when the sun has gone to rest, that's the time we love the best.

Janus, the Roman god of beginnings and transitions, has two faces, looking in opposite directions, one to the past and the other to the future. The Scottish actor Sean Connery, named in a poll in 2011 as "Scotland's greatest national living treasure," achieved fame and fortune as the cinematic incarnation of James Bond, the quintessential British secret agent. He took what Dr. Samuel Johnson called the high road that leads to England. However, as a Scot with a declared lifelong love of Scotland, he is a fervent advocate of independence for the country. Though he is personally domiciled in the Bahama, Connery believes as do an increasing number of people that those who live in Scotland are best placed to make decisions that affect Scotland.

The argument for Scottish independence has historic overtones. On April 6, 1320 the Declaration of Arbroath was proclaimed. Written in Latin, it was really not a declaration but a private letter, perhaps the most famous letter in Scottish history, by 39 Scottish barons addressed to Pope John XXII who had excommunicated Robert the Bruce, King of Scots who had murdered a rival to the throne in a church. The context was that England under King Edward II had attempted to conquer Scotland in 1296, an invasion which continued in spite of the victory of William Wallace at Stirling Bridge in 1297.

The barons were asking the Pope who had clashed with Bruce to recognize Scottish independence, and for him to recognize Bruce as the lawful king of Scots. Bruce, who had seized the throne in 1306, in June 1314 won the Battle of Bannockburn over the army of King Edward II in what can be regarded as the first war for Scottish independence.

The Declaration stated that, "For so long as a hundred of us remain alive, we will never in any degree be subject to the dominion of the English...Not for glory, nor riches, nor honors, that we are fighting, but for freedom, for that alone which no honest man gives up but with life itself." The Declaration led to the Pope rescinding the excommunication of Bruce, but it did not lead to any decision that the independence of Scotland was the prerogative of the Scottish people. The Declaration of Arbroath was not translated into English until the late 17th century. It is unlikely that it influenced the U.S. Declaration of Independence, as some commentators have suggested, but it was awarded in 2016 the UNESCO Memory of the World status for its international importance. Its rhetoric still flourishes.

In 1328, England recognized the kingdom of Scotland as an independent state and Bruce as the rightful ruler of the Scots. This continued to exist as such until 1707. A personal union took place in 1603 when James VI of Scotland, by

inheritance, became James I of England and Ireland. By the Act of Union 1707 the United Kingdom was created, the individual parliaments of England and Scotland were abolished and united by the parliament of Great Britain, with seats for Scotland, based in Westminster, London. Common citizenship, customs union and monetary union were established, but by compromise the Church of Scotland, and Scottish law and courts, and education were preserved as separate systems. The Westminster parliament has sovereignty over the UK as a whole, and Scotland has partial self-determination, less than full self-determination which provides for full decision making with control over defense and foreign policy.

Scots were prominent in British cultural and economic life as merchants and traders in commerce and shipping, particularly in the East India Company, where by the 1770s, they formed almost half of the writers of the company, and were employed in civil, military and maritime services . The wealth acquired created a social and economic infrastructure, and reduced the impetus for Scottish separation and nationalism. Particularly prominent was the most powerful Scot in the 18th century, Henry Dundas, Lord Melville, government minister and leading member of the Board of Control over East India.

He has become familiar today as a result of the BLM protests. Dundas is a contentious figure because he was instrumental in delaying the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Believing that a bill of 1792 to abolish slavery immediately could not be passed, he inserted the word "gradual" in the legislation. The statue of Dundas in St. Andrew Square in Edinburgh was vandalized on June 7, 2020, and a new plaque is being installed, exposing his link to slavery.

The issue of Scottish identity and national self-determination, a mixture of historical, emotional, political and financial factors. has now reemerged as a pressing political issue as recent political polls have shown.

In 1997 the Labour government agreed to proposals for a Scottish parliament and devolution and a referendum in the same year. As a result, an elected Scottish parliament, Holyrood, of 129 members came into existence in 1999 with legislative authority over most domestic policy, all non-reserved matters relating to Scotland, and with limited power on business rates and income taxes. One of its members, of the party controlling a majority, is appointed First Minister. At present, that is Nicola Sturgeon, leader of the Scottish National Party, SNP since November 2014, the first woman to hold these positions. She replaced Alex Salmond who had held these positions for over seven years, and who was acquitted by the High Court in March 2020 of 13 alleged sexual assault charges while he was First Minister.

In a first referendum on independence in 2014 the result was negative; 44.7% voted for independence and 55.3% against it in a turnout of 85%. But public opinion polls and voting in elections now show the opposite result, roughly 54% to 45%.

The SNP, the supporter of independence within the EU, has been increasing in popularity. In 2011 it won power in the Scottish parliament, Holyrood, as the majority party. In 2015, SNP won 56 of the 59 Scottish seats up for election. In 2016, SNP again became the largest single party, but with a few less than a majority, in Holyrood, winning 59 of the 73 constituencies up for election, resulting in SNP having 63 of the 129 seats, while the Conservatives declined to 31, and Labour to 24. The SNP is favored to win a majority in the devolved parliament at Holyrood in May 2021.

Scotland has 59 seats in Westminster. The SNP become the third largest party in Westminster in 2019 winning 48 seats, and was second in 11 others. In the referendum on Brexit on June 23, 2016, Scotland, contrary to the UK as a whole, voted 62% to remain, and 38% to leave the EU. All of the 32 council areas in the country voted to remain. The argument is that the people of Scotland do not want to turn their back on Europe,

but rather want to play a larger role in the EU.

Indications in recent public opinion polls show support for independence is increasing. Most show that between 50 % and 55% favor leaving the UK. and about 45% preferring to remain. There is no one overriding factor, but various issues are mentioned. First, independence means people of Scotland would make more of its decisions which they are best placed to make.

The UK is governed by the Conservative party, but the Tories have not won a Scotland wide election for over 70 years. The SNP has been critical of the Conservative handling of current problems, Covid-19, lockdown, quarantine. Nicola Sturgeon, unlike Prime Minister Boris Johnson, is personally popular, and appears on television every day. Johnson has rejected a suggestion that Sturgeon, might attend cabinet meetings in London.

More practically, one argument is that Trident nuclear missiles would be removed, and the money saved could be devoted to education, health care, and housing. Though the argument "It's Scotland's oil" is not as pungent as it once was, it still provokes the responses that only an independent Scotland can fully obtain the financial benefits of the North Sea resources.

In the ongoing issue two factors are controversial. One is the exact nature of the desired break with the UK, and the precise meaning of self-determination. Many in the SNP want to keep the monarchy and Scotland to become a Commonwealth country like Canada or Australia. Others suggest a federal system.

More extremist nationalists want an independent republic with full powers. Would this require a new currency?

The second debatable issue is whether Scotland can prosper on its own, financially and in managerial terms. North Sea oil and gas extraction in the North Sea is falling, as are prices. Can an independent country cope with the persisting Covid-19 epidemic? Can it manage without the usual subsidies provided

of between 10 billion and 12 billion pounds annually to fund public services? Or would the country need to raise taxes in order to sustain levels of public spending?

Scotland benefits from UK's presence in NATO , the G8, and as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and is unlikely to have any considerable influence in the EU on its own. On the contrary, it is more stable as part of a larger state.

Realistically, because of Covid-19, Scottish GDP has declined substantially, and if independent, would likely have a weaker growth rate than UK as a whole. Statistics already show the economy is declining in recovery in dominant services industries, construction, agriculture and in business activity generally except in the manufacturing section. The country is less able to sustain a significant national debt or to borrow.

Already, 65,000 Scottish firms are getting \$2.6 billion loans to survive the lockdown.

Yet Nicola Sturgeon wants a second vote on independence. The vital question is whether this is the best way to preserve the Scottish heritage and creative excellence and to play a bigger role in Europe and the rest of the world, or whether it would be divisive. One can ask, should auld acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind?