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A Divided Scotland Confronts Independence Vote 'Yes' or 'No'?

By Christoph Scheuermann

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Traveling through Scotland, you might think the result of September's independence referendum is a foregone conclusion. "Yes" signs are everywhere. But surveys tell a different story and many who are wary of the hype.

Liam Stevenson was never the type to become particularly passionate about politics. A tank truck driver in Scotland, he spent most of his free time with his wife Helen and daughter Melissa in their small house in Cumbernauld, northeast of Glasgow. Every now and then, he would join his friends for a few pints.

But a couple of months ago, he experienced a transformation not unlike that of Franz Kafka's character Gregor Samsa, who became a new creature overnight. Stevenson became a political activist.

He guides his Volkswagen Golf past working class housing cowering in the shadows of gigantic residential towers. Cumbernauld was created after the war and has since become a Scottish dystopia. It is a place that remains stuck somewhere between the 1950s and 1980s. In the cold jargon of the welfare bureaucracy, the housing projects are known as "schemes" and look just as soulless as the word sounds. Stevenson spent his childhood here. He waves at a man on the way by. "That's Paul. He stabbed his son in the face. No idea why."

Stevenson wants people to see the city through his eyes so they can understand his confidence. After all, the day that could change everything is rapidly approaching. On Sept. 18, more than 4 million Scots are to vote on whether they want to become independent from the United Kingdom.

Like many of his compatriots, Stevenson dreams of independence. He hopes that it will ring in a new era of prosperity, driven by oil and natural gas. An independent Scotland would be freer, richer and more equitable, Stevenson says. Cumbernauld, too, would flourish.

The process currently underway on the British archipelago is a unique one. Free of violence, amid an atmosphere of amicability, a referendum is to be held that could result in the end of a 307-year-old union with the United Kingdom. The Scottish move toward independence is also reflective of the ongoing erosion of the European nation-state. After years of crisis, many people no longer identify with their countries, preferring instead to be part of smaller, more manageable regions. Separatists across Europe are pushing for independence, including the Catalonians in Spain, the Flemish in Belgium and the South Tyroleans in Italy. But only in Scotland is a nationally recognized referendum in the works.

The Undecided

The plan to hold the vote was born in 2011 after the Scottish National Party (SNP) emerged victorious in parliamentary elections there. In March 2013, the date of the referendum was set for this September. This year, various factions and groups belonging to the "yes" campaign have been fighting hard for Scottish secession. Foremost among them is Alex Salmond, SNP party boss and Scottish leader as first minister of Scotland. But the three largest parties in Great Britain, the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats, are largely opposed to Scottish independence and are working against secession under the motto "Better Together."

Currently, surveys indicate that a majority of Scots will likely vote to remain part of the UK, with between 45 percent and 55 percent in favor of staying. No survey has yet projected a victory for the "yes" camp. But many voters remain undecided, making it difficult for pollsters to make reliable prognostications. Campaigners, meanwhile, have zeroed in on those who have not yet made up their mind.

Liam Stevenson is talking into his mobile phone as he walks into his kitchen. He has organized a panel discussion on the independence referendum for this evening, to be held in a small Cumbernauld theater. He wanted to have representatives from both camps there, but the unionists declined to send anybody. Now, a PR consultant, a health worker and a member of the Scottish Socialist Party are going to speak in support of independence. Stevenson is euphoric. He has never before spoken in front of so many people and has also never organized a political event. "It gives me a huge boost," he says.

Helen scoops mince and tatties (mashed potatoes, ground beef and mashed carrots) onto his plate. The couple is eating on the sofa in front of their flat-screen television, but Stevenson is too agitated to have any appetite. "The English have gotten drunk on our riches for decades: oil, natural gas, whiskey," he says. Scotland, he continues, must finally regain control of its own

resources without allowing the government in London to skim off the profits and only send a part of them back. As he speaks, his meal becomes cold.

Stevenson isn't a politician, nor is he an intellectual. If you spend an afternoon with him, you find out about his uncle's affairs and learn that Stevenson sometimes cries when he goes to the movies. He wears his heart on his sleeve -- and that too, he says, is something that separates him from the taciturn English to the south. Helen gets a quick kiss and then her husband sets off for the theater, where all 270 seats are filled. After the podium discussion, he later says, two women who had previously been undecided came up to him. They said they now planned to vote for independence.

The debate over independence isn't one just for politicians. It has also become a vital one for people like Stevenson as well -- and for people like the author in Glasgow, the fashion designer in Dundee and the engineer from Aberdeen. Not all Scots that one meets want to split off from the United Kingdom. But there are many of them, and they are eager to talk about why.

Compelling Arguments?

Janice Galloway says she was long unsure as to whether she should vote "yes" or "no" on Sept. 18. She is an author and is sitting in a Glasgow tearoom. At the end of the 1980s, she was among the young writers, painters and other artists who began to more closely examine Scotland. Her own debut novel was about an anorexic, alcoholic teacher on the west coast. Galloway belongs to a generation that doesn't just see Scotland as being home to beautiful landscapes, romantically weathered castles and whiskey distilleries.

She says that she waited for compelling arguments from those opposed to independence, but not many were forthcoming. At the beginning of August, more than 200 prominent British wrote an open letter urging the Scots not to leave the kingdom. But aside from "let's stay together," there wasn't much to the missive. "It looked more like a dinner invitation than a defense of the kingdom," Galloway says. She found herself disappointed by the lack of enthusiasm among unionists.

Galloway spent her childhood and youth in Ayrshire on Scotland's west coast. One of her first jobs was as a singing waitress, entertaining tourists in a banquet hall. Her first paycheck went toward buying a telephone for her mother, who lived in Yorkshire at the time. When her mother spoke on the phone, she always used a fake Yorkshire accent out of shame for her Scottish roots.

In the south of the island, the Scots were seen as well-behaved minions, an image that was embodied in the figure of John Brown, a servant of Queen Victoria's. The queen loved Scotland, Balmoral Castle and, it is said, her servant, Brown. People still believe today that they might have had an affair. Brown represents the archetype of the loyal, obedient Scot, true to the queen and the throne to the death. At the same time, he stands for a period when nobody questioned the union of Scotland with the United Kingdom, largely the result of economic prosperity which benefitted the north as well. Between 1885 and 1939, one-third of British governors-general abroad were Scots. The bond remained strong deep into the 20th century. "When I was a girl, there was a strong British identity," Galloway says.

The estrangement began in the 1960s and 70s when the coal, steel and shipping industries in Great Britain began contracting. Just as Scotland had profited handsomely before, it now suffered even more. "Britishness may have had less appeal than before," writes historian Tom Devine in his work "The Scottish Nation." As the economy declined, the Conservatives lost support among the working class and Labour became the strongest political power.

Nowhere was Margaret Thatcher more hated than in Scotland. When she came to power in 1979, there were 15 coal mines in Scotland; by the time she stepped down in 1990, only two were left. Many Scots blamed Thatcher for the economic troubles and her anti-labor union policies deepened the chasm between the north and the south. Janice Galloway is one of those authors whose books helped the Scots develop a sense of self-confidence in the face of the collapse. Others include Irvine Welsh, Alasdair Gray and Iain Banks in addition to painters Ken Currie and Jenny Saville as well as the composer James MacMillan. A counterculture developed. "We were wild," Galloway says.

Waking Up from Hibernation

Welsh's novel "Trainspotting," published 21 years ago, likely had a greater influence on young Scots than any other book. The sallow skies, the social housing, even the junkie-lifestyle in Edinburgh suddenly seemed sexy. Welsh and other artists showed a way to differentiate themselves from Thatcher and the southern British culture.

This self-confidence remains today, even if bitterness increasingly mixes in with the pride. Liam Stevenson, the truck driver, grumbles an entire afternoon about the English who have "dragged us into illegal war after illegal war." Little has brought the Scots together more in recent years than their demarcation from the south, particularly when the Conservatives have the upper hand in Westminster. Of the 59 Scottish members of the House of Commons, only one is a Tory. A favorite joke has it that there are more pandas north of the English-Scottish border than there are Conservative parliamentarians. There are two pandas and they live in the Edinburgh zoo.

With just weeks to go before the referendum, Scotland seems like a land waking up from a winter slumber to celebrate the Caledonian version of the Arab Spring. Blue "Yes" stickers are plastered on lampposts while "Yes" signs are displayed in windows. If it weren't for the opinion polls, one would think that the result of the referendum was a foregone conclusion.

"We've been talking about nothing else for months," says Hayley Scanlan. She works as a fashion designer in Dundee, a port city on the east coast between Edinburgh and Aberdeen. Scanlan says she is in favor of independence because Scotland needs its own voice.

Her studio is in an old jute spinning mill in the center of town which provides workspace to jewelry designers, start-ups and artists. Bits of material and leather cover the floor while at the drawing table, an assistant cuts out the patterns for the next spring collection. The room is just big enough for the two women, three sewing machines and a couple of clothes racks. When large orders come in, Scanlan's mother and aunt help with the sewing.

Scanlan says that she isn't interested in politics and has never voted, but she is planning on casting her ballot in the referendum. "It is an exciting time for Scotland," she says, adding that she is happy that she has found success in her homeland. Like many of her friends in the fashion industry, she initially wanted to move to London. But she didn't have enough money so she stayed in Dundee, where rents are much more affordable.

Scanlan belongs to the growing number of young entrepreneurs in her city that don't want to expose themselves to the stress that comes with living in the British capital. Customers reach her by way of her online shop and she occasionally works with department stores as well. She only travels to the south for Fashion Week.

Oil and Gas

Although she is Scottish, Scanlan's designs don't use plaids or tweeds. She prefers leather, wool and lighter fabrics. "We don't focus on the past, we focus on the present," she says. That is true both of her fashion and of her politics.

For her, pride in her homeland is combined with frustration with the south. In contrast with London, she says, she can be herself in Dundee and she also believes that an independent Scotland would be more prosperous. She herself has seen that energy and tenacity can lead to success. She expects the same of Scotland.

The most important argument for the "yes" camp are the oil and natural gas reserves off the Scottish coast. First Minister Alex Salmond says they would be enough to boost the country's prosperity and his party promises that income for the state would climb to over 7 billion pounds (\$11.6 billion) per year by 2018. Others, though, estimate that treasure will be worth only half that. Salmond's calculations are nothing but a gigantic bet on the oil reserves in the North Sea, the London-based *Economist* has written. One reason is the fact that, once the fields have been pumped dry, an independent Scotland would probably be liable for the estimated 40 billion pounds it will cost to clean up the dozens of kilometers of pipelines and cables in the North Sea.

Iain Downie says the Scottish government is intentionally covering up such costs because they put a damper on the euphoria surrounding independence. Downie is just coming from rugby practice and is still glowing from the exertion as he sits down in an Aberdeen bar and orders himself a beer. He works for BP as a drilling engineer, ensuring that the oil continues to flow. He plans to vote "no" in the referendum. He wants to see Scotland remain a part of the United Kingdom.

Downie has been working at his current job with BP for the last two years and is responsible for tapping into new oil fields. He knows just how unreliable reserve estimates can be. He spent most of his first year on a swaying drilling ship west of the Shetland Islands in the Atlantic Ocean. It was winter and they were trying to find a new field 1,200 meters below the surface. It was Downie's job to calculate how thick and long the pipe had to be. In the end, the project was abandoned. "You have to be sick to like this job," he says.

His father is a retired policeman and his mother a nurse. In contrast to most Scots, the Downies respected Margaret Thatcher because she promised to bring Great Britain back to life after decades of paralysis. Iain Downie grew up in a quiet suburb of Edinburgh and his parents managed to avoid most of the pain associated with the dying mines and shipyards. The kingdom gave the family a sense of security and belonging.

Optimists and Pessimists

Downie studied in Edinburgh, has lived in South Africa and has worked in Oman and Norway. In two or three years, he plans to move to Azerbaijan or to the Persian Gulf, chasing the oil. Having a British passport opens doors around the world, he says. An independent Scotland would be insecure, Downie believes.

He orders another beer and explains that the search for oil has become more difficult in recent years as the reserves have shrunk and become more difficult to access than they used to be. As he talks, the idea of Scottish independence seems reduced to the crazy idea of gambling addicts. For him, as an engineer who values certainty, there are too many variables, too many unknowns. "What happens with the pensions?" he asks. "Can we keep the British pound? How do we trade goods and merchandise if we don't even have a stock exchange in Scotland?"

He also thinks it is right for the British military to intervene in conflicts when it becomes necessary. In his view, Great Britain is the only European country that thinks globally and keeps all of its options open when it comes to international crises. "I am proud of the fact that we have an impact on the world," he says.

In the end, the doubts that plague Downie could also be enough to move other Scots to vote against independence. The referendum is also a measure of a country's willingness to take risks. It is a fight between the optimists and the pessimists.