

## With the Scottish vote, Brussels can heave a great big sigh of relief

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**F**irst, a declaration of interest, as an ordinary citizen of the United Kingdom, who has English, Irish, Scottish and mongrel British DNA in his veins, and was brought up at university on some of the great Scots like David Hume and Adam Smith, while enjoying Sean Connery as James Bond; for the likes of me, the idea of Scottish secession was something plain alien to mind and soul.

To the European Union, the prospect of Scottish secession from the UK loomed up as a key component of the nightmare scenario of everything falling apart, inside and outside. The nightmares are already firmly in place outside, from Putin's war to destroy Ukraine to ISIS beheading hostages in the Levant. And now the Scottish secession could lead on to UK secession from the EU and to grave escalation of political conflict in Spain over Catalonia, and so on to a Europe of Marine Le Pen, Nigel Farage and a broad spread of extreme-right populists. The propagandists of the Kremlin would have greatly enjoyed the *Schadenfreude* of this final crumbling of the British empire, alongside the renaissance of Putin's Russian empire, completing the revenge for the Crimean war. In brief, the end of civilised Europe.

But this morning we learn that the majority stuck to the UK with a bigger margin than anyone had dared expect – 55.4 to 44.6.

Brussels' next thoughts are about what this does to the UK in the EU. The key comparison is about the contest between emotions and calculations. For the Scottish bagpipes, read the British bulldog spirit. For the future of the Scottish pound and its budget calculations, read the costs and benefits of multiple EU policies. The prevailing view is that populist emotions will outvote objective calculations of the accountant and economist. The Scottish vote gives heart to those in the EU who will want to plod on with getting EU policies right, or at least their major problems sorted out. More precisely for Britain in the EU, the ongoing balance of competences review is showing, volume by volume, that most EU policies are doing what they should do, and the case for repatriation or secession does not hold water. Will the messages from this material enter into the common sense of the British people by referendum time in 2017? Maybe. Hope springs eternal, and hope was given a fillip today.

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But even at the level of emotions, the Scottish experience should help. The English got the shock of their lives just a few days ago when a poll suggested a Yes majority. Maybe the English public will conclude that they don't want to peer into the unknown again.

There is also some puzzlement at the simplistic and inept management of the referendum, so surprising coming from the mother of democracies. By comparison, Belgium's handling of its own separatist tendencies in Flanders is much sounder. Let there be a continuing process of constitutional adjustment to the powers of the centre versus the regions. Refine the system in a spirit of compromise, rather than force it into a binary choice of yes or no, in or out. Or if you have to have a referendum, avoid bias in the question, offering alternative 1 versus alternative 2, rather than risking that the Yes will sound so positive versus the very negative No. Or have triple options – independence versus enhanced autonomy versus status quo – and then two rounds if necessary to find the majority. Or follow the practice of many democracies that require a 'constitutional majority' of around two-thirds for major constitutional changes. There was also the problem of the 700,000 Scots in England not able to vote, whereas all the Polish plumbers in Glasgow could do so. Rather than preparing for a careful mechanism of popular choice, Prime Minister Cameron threw caution to the wind, deciding on the most simplistic and hazardous method.

At the most practical level of politics, if Cameron has lost Scotland, this would have finished off his premiership. A coup to replace him would be organised in the Conservative party, whose overwhelming Eurosceptic or Europhobe majority would then elect a successor who would demand drastic repatriation of powers from Brussels, or further opt-outs on a grand scale. The process of renegotiating terms with the EU would be impossible, and the referendum would produce a big majority for secession. By comparison, Cameron has become very reasonable, since his apparent agenda for reform of the EU and the UK's place in it seems quite negotiable.

And so, the nightmare scenario did not unfold and Brussels can return to its business, with its own renewed leadership even feeling perhaps now a bit encouraged to go about their burdensome agenda with more confidence.