

An Independent Scotland?

On September 18, 2014, Scots will vote on the question “Should Scotland be an independent country?” This referendum is a huge historic moment for Scotland. The results will determine Scotland’s future, either to continue as part of the UK or to become an independent sovereign state.



Recent polls show that Scottish sentiment in favor of independence is increasing, so a Yes vote in September is a real possibility. Voters will be almost anyone over 16 who currently lives in Scotland. Results could bring the biggest political change for Scotland in 300 years.

Scotland is now part of the United Kingdom along with England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. That means Scotland elects delegates to the UK Parliament in London, and its people are subjects of the British monarch. However, Scotland was an independent country from its foundation, perhaps in 843, until the Union of the Crowns in 1603. Then James VI of Scotland became also James I of England and Ireland. The two countries were further united in 1707 with The Treaty of Union or The Union of the Parliaments.

Scotland has always maintained its own systems of education and courts, which differ substantially from England’s practices. In 1999 Scotland was granted its own parliament, which has taken on additional responsibilities, such as social services, in Scotland.

The move for independence, with the slogan of “Yes, Scotland,” is led by Alex Salmond, First Minister of Scotland and leader of the Scottish National Party. Reasons proposed for independence include: 1) the principle of self-determination for people who live in an area; 2) control over defense and foreign policy, which, for instance, would allow Scotland to decide whether to allow nuclear weapons in its waters; 3) Scottish access to North Sea oil, which is expected to increase funding for the Scottish government; and 4) distinctive Scottish habits of mind, culture, and history which include pride in Scotland and sometimes fierce distrust of England.

The movement against independence is called “Better Together.” Reasons for keeping the Union include: 1) The stability of maintaining systems already in place; 2) the uncertainty of forging relationships with other countries and entities such as NATO and the European Union; 3) Scottish economic fragility including the eventual decline of North Sea oil and the danger of losing UK jobs and pensions within Scotland; 4) long term personal relationships between Scots and English peoples and shared popular culture including language, families, cross-border access, industrial and military connections, and major Scottish contributions to the British Empire and the Industrial Revolution.

Among many unresolved questions are defense arrangements; whether an independent Scotland would use the pound sterling; relations with the rest of UK; whether Orkney, Shetland and the Western Islands would be part of an independent Scotland; and whether Scotland would become part of the British Commonwealth.

Some people characterize this vote as a choice between the heart and the head, a Yes vote for independence being from a proud, patriotic Scottish heart, and a No vote being from a practical Scottish mind sensing better economic security in union.

See more information and current discussion of these questions online.

Thanks to Don Laird for calling attention to a *New York Times* article on Alex Salmond.