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## A YES VOTE WILL TRUNCATE THE UNITED KINGDOM

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**A**re the United Kingdom and Europe sleepwalking into a crisis whose consequences will be far reaching and unpredictable? If Scotland decides to go its own way on September 18th, it would amount to “an utter catastrophe for this country because a fundamental part of our identity will have been killed.” The sense of foreboding expressed by the popular mayor of London, Boris Johnson, is shared by a majority of British people – whether they live in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. It is ironic and, in the view of many, a denial of democracy that the electorate consists of EU nationals resident in Scotland, Commonwealth citizens who have a residence permit but not the 750,000 Scots who live in the British Isles outside Scotland. The future of this nation is being decided with no reference to the vast majority of the inhabitants of the United Kingdom.

A Yes vote is supported by many ordinary Scots who are convinced life will be better when freed from the shackles of London. They dream of a fairer society, one where wealth is distributed more evenly than is the case in the UK today. Other supporters are far more suspect. Rupert Murdoch, whose power to corrupt is well documented, has spent his whole career as media mogul attacking and insulting anything remotely British – not least the monarchy. Nor have eventual flows of Russian and Chinese money in a small country which would have no defence forces to speak of been taken into consideration. Deprived of the Trident nuclear deterrent and with no armed forces to speak of, an independent Scotland might find international politics a far dirtier and tougher proposition than it had gambled for.

The story of how this referendum came about, how the first minister of Scotland Alex Salmond wrong-footed an incompetent prime minister of the United Kingdom at every step is extraordinary. David Cameron is most likely to fall on the proverbial sword if the Yes vote wins. He would be dubbed “the Prime Minister who lost Scotland” and most likely lose control of the Tory party. Whether or not one shares the mayor of London’s view that “we are on the verge of thrashing our global name and brand in an act of self-mutilation that will leave our international rivals stunned, gleeful and discreetly scornful”, what is not in question is that a United Kingdom thrown into turmoil will be in no position to play a construc-

tive role in international affairs, let alone in the foreign policy making (or what is left of it) of the EU for some time. As an ally of the US, its role would be much diminished.

Others in the United Kingdom view the possible break up of the three hundred year union – one of the oldest and most successful of its kind in history, as a sad prospect but in some sense inevitable because the historical pillars on which the United Kingdom was founded – the British Empire, the Royal Navy, Protestant ideology and the monarchy have either vanished or eroded. It would be a practical ordeal that would suck up years of work both in London and Edinburgh. Much of the debate has been about economic issues that are far from conclusive either way. Would an independent Scotland emulate the economic dynamism of some (but not all) other small European states? Or would it be mired in a combination of crony capitalism and municipal socialism that would damage initiative and depress growth? The recent history of Scotland admits both possibilities.

Those inclined to optimism will argue that much of the negative comment on sterling sharing and euro-membership is designed to discourage the pro-independence voters. Reality might be more accommodating but also very much more messy. Reactions elsewhere in Europe and the US are quite unpredictable on any number of issues. Many people have opted to be comforted by the conviction that the two country's interests, history and emotions are so intertwined that a policy of muddle though, that quintessentially British invention, together with a sense of humour and the BBC are likely to carry the day. As bloody confrontations spreads through the Middle East, as Ukraine fails to stabilise, as China and its neighbours glare at each other across the sea and gridlock prevails in Washington, "muddling through" may turn out to be a dangerous option.

The domestic political fall out of a Yes victory could well provoke outrage against the politicians who have so mismanaged the campaign as to dissipate the 60-40 lead of two months ago. Whoever replaced David Cameron would not have enough credibility to represent the rest of the United Kingdom in the post-referendum negotiations with the Scots. New elections would be called. The second scapegoat would be the Labour leader Ed Miliband. Scotland, after all, is a Labour stronghold and most of the key figures in the No campaign have been Labour grandees. They have been put on the back foot by the Scottish National Party's efforts to highlight the risk of Westminster rule by claiming that "privatisation" of the National Health Service in England threatens the survival of the Scottish NHS. They have been unable to match the Yes campaign's evolution into a broad movement of grassroots groups that reaches far beyond traditional SNP members and foregoes the romantic sentiment and ethnic mythmaking that once infused Scottish nationalism.

Those who incline towards, as they see it, the inevitable drift of history dismiss the romantic case for Britishness. In *Vanished Kingdoms: The History of Half-Forgotten Europe* which ranges from the Visigothic Kingdom of Tolosa, in what historians used to call "the Dark Ages" to places such a sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, one of Britain's most distinguished historians, Norman Davies, argues that "even the most powerful states reach their term at one point ... all political institutions will end sooner or later. The question is when and how. It's our vanity that makes us think that what forms part of our world today must be stable and secure". The unionist campaign may be dry and visionless but it is one of the political vanities of the political class to overrate the importance of campaigns.

Seen from London's political class and much of the media, a vote for the independence of Scotland risks pushing the United Kingdom further to the margins where militant English anti-Europeanism would like it to be. Scotland declaring independence might set the stage for a major push by the euro sceptics for re-

negotiation of the EU relationship or even exit. A Yes vote would discredit the British political class. The main beneficiary could be the party whose *raison d'être* is opposition to the political class: Ukip, a party that appeals to a sense of Englishness rather than Britishness. The hitherto slumbering force of English nationalism could make life difficult for an independent Scotland as Alex Salmond hopes for a currency union in the tight post-independence negotiations which he envisages. But that depends, crucially, on English goodwill, a commodity which might be in distinctly short supply if Scotland votes yes.

Vernon Bogdanor, Professor of Government at King's College in London, and one of his country's most lucid political analysts, believes an English nationalist government in London would be determined to drive a hard bargain with Scotland in such negotiations. He quotes the Chinese saying to the effect "that the man with the tight timetable also needs the deepest pocket." That is the pessimistic scenario but others cannot be ruled out. The very fact that family ties between families across the UK run so deep, that trying to break up the funding of the arts, the BBC, the armed forces, pensions etc would be such an excruciatingly complicated and long drawn out process suggests that more accommodating behaviour will prevail. It is worth reminding ourselves that GDP per head in Scotland is closer to that of London than of any other region in the UK.

Two features of the United Kingdom have been overlooked in the run up to the vote that might have allowed events to unfold differently. London's fast growing wealth, perceived arrogance and cynical hedonist worldly views exasperate more and more people in many parts of England and Wales as much as in Scotland. Many jobs lost during the massive deindustrialisation of the 70s and 80s have never been replaced. Edinburgh and London share two characteristics: they are by far the richest and most pro-European cities in the UK where many regions are poor and run down. This is yet another, bitter, irony of the current situation.

Scotland's sense of injustice is a blight on its future. The politics of historical resentment do not encourage an optimistic view of the future. There is little to be gained by complaining that the rate of oil production in the past was not determined by Scottish needs, rather by those of England, with the result that North Sea oil production peaked years before it otherwise would have done. One might as easily argue that Scotland got more than its fair share of the wealth and plunder accrued during the British Empire in whose expansion, and often oppressive policies towards indigenous people, the Scots played a leading role.

The debate which has preceded this vote speaks in favour of democracy – it has had its good and bad moments and provoked an exchange of ideas about the future shape of politics and economics not seen in most of mainland Europe and the British Isles in decades. It would be far fetched however to argue that the standard of debate in the run up to the vote has been remotely comparable to what Adam Smith, the author of the *Wealth of Nations*, and his friends might have indulged in two and a half centuries ago. Politics in a democracy seldom rise to the level of dinners in Edinburgh's New Town and Parisian salons in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Has the debate on Scotland - and the United Kingdom's future been worthy of what is at stake? Probably not.