Will Scots Heed Ancient Call for ‘Freedom’?

Exclusive: The Sept. 18 referendum on Scottish independence pits the ancient lure of freedom from English dominance against practical economic issues of the future. Continued union seemed to be winning but a late surge for separation has made the outcome a toss-up, as Don North reports.

By Don North

Anyone who has seen the movie “Braveheart” with Mel Gibson playing the Scottish hero William Wallace can understand the historic animosities between Scotland and its powerful neighbor to the south, England. Set mostly in the late Thirteenth Century, the movie tells the story of an early fight for Scottish freedom, albeit with many Hollywood fictional flourishes.

But the substance was true. Wallace led a Scottish uprising against England’s tyrannical Edward I and despite some stunning victories including the Battle of Stirling Wallace’s army was ultimately defeated. After his capture and treason trial in 1305, Wallace was dragged naked through the streets of London and then tortured to death on the execution grounds of Smithfield. In the movie version, his last word was: “Freedom!”

Wallace’s severed body parts were sent north to be displayed as a warning to other Scottish rebels. But as the movie notes this grisly message had a different impact, helping to inspire more resistance led by Robert the Bruce, the other great warrior for Scottish freedom who defeated Edward II at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314.

The union of the two countries in 1707, after centuries of hostilities and bloodshed, was regarded by many Scots as a shotgun marriage that more than 300 years later has not diluted the differences in outlook and attitude between the ill-matched partners.

Beyond their stubborn desire for freedom and their deep-seated pride, the Scots are not known to forgive ancient quarrels easily and their history of hatred toward the English is part of the back story in the referendum for Scottish independence on Sept. 18.

In some ways, the vote will hinge on whether the Scots side with their ancient heritage of resisting English domination or accept that their economic future is brighter as part of the United Kingdom.

There’s also the issue of anti-Scottish bigotry in English literature and
society. For instance, Dr. Samuel Johnson In 1773 wrote a much quoted maxim, “The noblest prospect that a Scotchman ever sees is the high road that leads him to England.” An unease towards the English, a suspicion that they are social superiors, has for centuries troubled the Scottish psyche.

But the advocates for the continued union have made their own historical appeals, recalling great military victories when kilted Scots were the shock troops of British regiments dispatched around the globe to forge the British Empire and fighting the momentous battles of World Wars One and Two. Scots and Brits fought side by side at The Marne, El Alamein and Normandy.

**Neck-and-Neck Race**

Which way the tugs of history longstanding hatreds or more recent comradeship pull the Scottish voters looks to be a toss-up as the referendum nears. Recent polls rate the election between Aye or Nay as neck-and-neck with the momentum shifting toward independence in the last few weeks to the surprise of many political pundits.

Yet, arguing against independence is the economic reality that Scotland, a beautiful land with an often harsh climate, could face hardships if it separates from wealthier England. Over the centuries, an estimated 20 million Scots have scattered throughout the world, four times as many as live in Scotland today.

There is fear of renewed difficulties once the North Sea oil fields run dry. There are questions, too, about whether Scotland would need its own currency. If Scotland joined the euro, it could run the risk of becoming a northern version of Spain or Greece, according to some economists including New York Times columnist Paul Krugman.

And there is the possibility of further division, given the long history of Scottish clan warfare. Recently, the outspoken British historian Simon Schama cried, “A splendid mess of a union should not be torn asunder.” He went on to predict “ethnic turmoil” if Scots vote yes and denounced what he called “tribal identity” of Scottish nationalism which he said represented the same forces “in dreadful places, causing ethnic and tribal wars and immense massacres.”

But Angus Roxborough, columnist for the New Statesman, a British political magazine, took Schama to task. “What is happening in Scotland bears as much resemblance to Shama’s ‘dreadful places’ as haggis does to Yorkshire pudding. It may not be to everyone’s taste but a ferocious beast it most certainly is not.”

The warnings of disaster also do not appear to be frightening the people of Scotland where the latest polls show a surge of support for independence, essentially making the race a dead heat barely a week before the plebiscite.
If the “yes” vote wins, the three-century-old union of Britain and Scotland would be dissolved, according to the agreement reached before the plebiscite was scheduled. The U.K. government has stated that if a simple majority of the votes cast are in favor of independence, then Scotland would become an independent country after a process of negotiations.

If the majority is against independence, Scotland would continue within the United Kingdom although London has agreed to devolve more powers to the Scottish parliament.

In the final debate between campaign leaders, Alex Salmond, Scotland’s first minister, scored what most viewers considered a decisive win over Alistair Darling, leader of the pro-U.K. “Better Together” campaign.

“This is our time, this is our moment, let us do it now,” urged Salmond in a fiery performance that was much more convincing than other debates with Darling.

Salmond jumped in early on the issue of what currency an independent Scotland would use, an issue that seemed to rattle him during earlier debates. This time, Salmond said he would seek a mandate for Scotland to continue using the pound sterling, despite the fact that Britain’s three main political party leaders had ruled it out.

Darling, however, countered that the issue was not what currency Scotland used, but rather “the problem is using somebody else’s currency you don’t have a central bank.”

**Prosperity or Trouble?**

Both politicians addressed what has become a key question in the independence referendum: Would an independent Scotland be more prosperous? Salmond argued that with the help of North Sea oil revenue, Scotland would be a richer country, while Darling insisted Scotland was economically more stable within the framework of the United Kingdom, that oil was a resource notoriously volatile.

U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron also jumped into the debate with a foray to Glasgow for a speech to industrialists. He said the U.K. was “one of the oldest and most successful single markets in the world” and that Scotland does twice as much trade with the rest of the U.K. as the rest of the world put together.

Early in the referendum campaign Cameron suggested Scotland would be offered more freedom from the Westminster parliament if it votes no to separation. Cameron also has stressed mutual national security interests. His announcement that the U.K. faces the greatest terrorist threat in the country’s history was not lost on referendum voters.
Cameron pledged new emergency measures to combat terrorists, especially the threat of a possible 500 Britons believed to be fighting with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. With a yes vote Scotland would lose the services of U.K. intelligence organizations like MI5 and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS).

There are also questions about the future of the nuclear submarine base at Faslane in the Firth of Clyde near Glasgow. Although the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) objects to having nuclear weapons on Scottish territory, British military leaders have said relocating the Trident missiles would be “very difficult” and estimated it would take about ten years and a cost of around three billion pounds sterling.

U.K. politicians have also predicted the loss of 8,000 jobs in Scotland’s shipbuilding yards if a yes vote wins.

Meanwhile, the yes campaign has argued that control of welfare policy would be a major benefit of independence and would give the opportunity for more radical reform that better reflects the views of Scottish people.

Although Prime Minister Cameron has stated “a unified tax and benefit system is at the heart of a unified country,” Liberal members of Parliament in London suggest that devolution of Scotland’s welfare budget should be up for debate if Scotland remains in the U.K.

Ben Page, a British political researcher, says much of the Scottish push for independence is based on issues of identity. “It matters more to them to be Scottish than being English,” he said.

A Reborn Scotland

Committed activists flaunting their Scottish identity and utopian visions of a reborn Scotland are certainly being heard on the streets of Edinburgh and Glasgow in orderly demonstrations as the vote date nears. However, many political analysts are surprised that surveys show that 16- and 17-year-olds have been among the most hesitant to ditch the United Kingdom.

The Scottish Parliament, led by Scottish nationalists, opted last year to lower the voting age for the referendum, reasoning that teens will have to live with the consequences longer than others. Indications are that youths under 18 are embracing their new powers with enthusiasm with 80 percent of the 120,000 new youth voters eligible already registered.

The youthful Scottish voters are of a generation raised on the Harry Potter books of author J.K Rowling, an Edinburgh resident who recently dropped one million pounds into the “Better Together” campaign’s coffers and compared some
Yes advocates to her fictional “Death Eaters” for focusing on “the purity of your lineage.”

But Sir Sean Connery, the James Bond star known for his Scottish brogue, has long been a major supporter of the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) and is convinced he will see an independent Scotland in his lifetime, though some critics note that he now lives in Bermuda.

“The Yes campaign is centred on a positive vision for Scotland,” Connery said. “It is rooted in inclusiveness, equality and that core democratic value that the people of Scotland are the best guardians of their own future.”

But celebrity supporters of “Let’s Stay Together” far outnumber those supporting the Yes vote, including Mick Jagger, David Bowie, Susan Boyle, Judi Dench, Patrick Stewart and recently Sir Paul McCartney.

The former Beatle at a rally for union supporters in Liverpool signed his name to an open letter to Scottish voters: “We want you to know how much we value our bonds of citizenship with you, and to express our hope that you will vote to renew them. What unites us is much greater than what divides us.”

Touring Scotland as I have for two weeks to gauge the sentiment here for the independence referendum, I found attitudes surprisingly low key, with few rallies or demonstrations open to a casual tourist. Trying to strike up a conversation in the pub or restaurants about the referendum did not bring an enthusiastic response either pro or con.

My uncle in Glasgow, who was a strong Scottish nationalist, died recently and his family is now steadily for the status quo of unity. The Scots whom I encountered seemed much more concerned about ISIS terrorists and the possibility of local Muslims joining them or the recent conflict in Gaza than the referendum. Even the issue of using animals for medical research seemed to interest activists whom I encountered more than the independence vote.

But one question about the referendum that often got a robust response but little consensus was on the question of how the national hero and poet of Scotland Robert Burns would vote if he were alive. Two centuries after his death, the image of Robbie Burns is everywhere, on tins of shortbread and on bottles of whiskey. He has been a familiar and safe image of Scottish identity.

Commenting on how Burns would vote on Sept. 18, a columnist for the Guardian, Chris Bambery, drew a storm of response letters when he wrote: “Burns was an opponent of monarchy and slavery, and a champion of the rights of man and democracy. Put simply he was a radical. I find it hard to envisage him putting his cross in favour of the status quo. His every instinct would be with the
common people and, the further down the social ladder you go in today’s Scotland, the greater the support for independence.”

The responses included a reference to Burns’s memorable verse: “We were bought and sold for English gold. Such a parcel of rogues in a nation.” That suggested Burns might vote aye.

But another commenter argued that “In the privacy of the voting booth, worried about the value of his house and his job security, he would probably have voted no.” Another noted that Burns was writing in the late Eighteenth Century when many Scottish working people were emigrating to avoid poverty, but that Burns was no radical.

However contentious the independence debate has been, both Yes and No supporters agree that the debate has set in motion a movement that will not stop after Sept. 18 whichever way the vote goes. The Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) can fairly claim to have lit a fire under politics in Scotland.

Analysts agree that Scotland will never be the same whatever the final tally. If there is a no vote, it will be the start of negotiations to bestow more power to the Scottish parliament in matters of taxes, health and welfare. If there is a yes vote, Scotland will chart a course into the future guided by memories of the past and those centuries-old cries for freedom.

One hundred years ago, Scottish author Wilfred Cambell in The Scotsman wrote, “men may rave of the heather, the hills, the pibroch and the Brig of Ayr, but all the time the real Scotland and the true Scottish people are a mystery to themselves and to others.”

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