

Scotland: A Short Generation?

by GWYNNE DYER

Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland, declared in 2014 that the referendum on Scotland's independence that her Scottish National Party (SNP) demanded and lost later that year would be 'once in a generation.' It has turned out to be a very short generation.

As soon as the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union in 2016, in a referendum in which the English voted 'Leave' but the Scots voted 'Remain', she claimed that circumstances had changed enough to justify another independence referendum in Scotland. This time, Sturgeon hoped, Scots would vote to leave the UK, and then rejoin the EU.

The right response from London would have been to say, 'Okay. Best two out of three, then?', but Sturgeon would never have agreed to that. Independence is a one-way gate. No independence movement has ever promised that if people vote yes, and then later change their minds, they can have another referendum and go back to the previous arrangement.

Besides, the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, is only in office because he won the Brexit referendum in 2016. He fought tooth and nail to prevent a second referendum on leaving the EU (which opinion polls from mid-2017 onwards consistently suggested would have gone against Brexit). He wouldn't agree to such a thing for Scotland now.

Nicola Sturgeon described the SNP's modest success in last week's local elections (which included parliamentary elections in the quasi-federal 'devolved' countries of Scotland and Wales) as an 'historic and extraordinary' event that justified her demand for a second referendum, but in fact it only won one more seat than last time.

The SNP still falls short of a majority. It will once again form a coalition or at least a voting alliance with the pro-independence Green Party in the Scottish parliament to form a government. It is not exactly holding the whip hand either at home or in the broader UK.

Johnson, of course, has loudly declared his opposition to a second independence referendum, and he has the law on his side. Schedule 5, Part 1 of the Scotland Act says that the constitution is a 'reserved matter,' which means that only the entire UK parliament in Westminster can decide to change the way the country is run.

Ninety-one percent of the Westminster parliament's members are not Scottish, and well over half of them are actually members of Johnson's Conservative Party, so Sturgeon cannot expect any help from there. She talks of taking the issue to court, but the law is clear and there is little hope that the courts would side with her either.

The biggest obstacle to her hopes, however, is the Scottish voters themselves. Recent opinion polls and last week's vote all tell the same story: they are divided 50-50 on independence. That's a modest improvement on the 55-45 split against independence in the 2014 referendum, but hardly enough to justify demanding another one now.

Moreover, impending events are likely to make Scottish voters more doubtful about independence. The new 'border' between the United Kingdom and the European Union, which has been drawn down the middle of the Irish Sea to avoid a land border between Northern Ireland (part of the UK) and the Republic of Ireland (member of the EU), is making even Scottish nationalists think twice.

The circumstances are different: there hasn't been a war on the Scottish-English border since 1547. But rejoining the EU is part of the package offered by the SNP, and the Irish border troubles serve to remind the Scots that there would be a 'hard' border between Scotland and England in that case.

There's no getting round that awkward and probably quite costly fact. Boris Johnson's government chose the hardest Brexit

imaginable, so Scotland as an EU member would face customs duties, immigration controls and all sorts of other nuisances at the English border. It would also lose the \$2,700 per capita subsidy for Scottish residents currently paid by the UK government.

An independent Scotland would be a perfectly viable country, about the size and population of Denmark. There's just no burning sense of outrage that makes independence necessary for Scotland. It sounds nice, but most people calculate how much upheaval and cost would be involved in leaving.

Nicola Sturgeon knows that, so although she talks about a referendum, she promises to do nothing about it until the coronavirus pandemic is over. The smart money says that she'll find another reason to postpone it after that, because a second referendum defeat would be the death of the idea for a generation. A real generation, that is.

Like what happened in Canada after the second independence referendum failed in Quebec in 1995.