

Scottish National Party leader Nicola Sturgeon ignored in Europe

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With one exception, Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's effort to extract support for Scottish membership of the European Union (EU) in the aftermath of the June 23 Brexit vote was rejected by other member states.

The vote, which in Scotland was 62 to 38 percent to remain in the EU, led Sturgeon to proclaim that a new independence referendum was "on the table" and that she was "determined, utterly determined, to protect Scotland's relationship with and place in the European Union."

Underlying Sturgeon's conviction is the Scottish National Party's (SNP) longstanding perspective of "independence in Europe" as being vital for Scottish-based business interests. Having failed to win the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, the SNP campaigned in the June 23 referendum for the UK to remain in the EU. With a static, or even falling population, increased immigration from Europe is also considered essential for the Scottish economy—which accounts for the difference in tone between the campaigns in England and Wales and that in Scotland on EU immigration.

In the aftermath of the Leave vote, Sturgeon set off for Brussels hoping to explore a number of hastily conceived proposals offering either some form of retained EU membership while Scotland remained in the UK, or an easy transition for a future independent Scotland into the EU. In short order a list of European leaders wrestling with the mayhem wrought by the British vote made clear they were determined to ignore her.

Martin Schulz, president of the European Parliament, agreed to meet Sturgeon and blandly noted he had "listened and learned." European Commission President Jean Claude Juncker considered Scotland had

"won the right to be heard in Brussels," but made clear he would not "interfere in the British process." Donald Tusk, former Polish prime minister and president of the European Council, refused to meet her at all.

National leaders were even sharper. French President Francois Hollande snapped that "negotiations will be conducted with the United Kingdom, not with a part of the United Kingdom." The Danish minister for foreign affairs, Kristian Jensen, said the government "will not intervene in the internal UK discussions." The Czech government said it was "premature to address the question of an independent Scotland and its relation to the EU." Xavier Bettel, prime minister of Luxembourg, stated, "We have more need than ever for a united union rather than a disUnited Kingdom."

Sharpest of all was Spanish premier Mariano Rajoy. "I want to be very clear. Scotland does not have the competence to negotiate with the European Union," he said. "Spain opposes any negotiation by anyone other than the government of the United Kingdom. I am extremely against it, the treaties are extremely against it and I believe everyone is extremely against it. If the United Kingdom leaves ... Scotland leaves."

Underlying the near unanimity in opposing any independent negotiations with the Scottish government is the view in the leading European capitals that to give any encouragement to Edinburgh to seek its own relations with the EU would further destabilise the already parlous state of relations between the EU and the UK. It would alienate a crisis-ridden and barely functioning British government and could rapidly accelerate the disintegration of the UK itself.

Equally vital, for Spain, Italy and Belgium in particular, is the example that any direct talks with Scotland would set for other regional and separatist formations.

While the Brexit crisis centres on British relations with the EU, the unanticipated debacle is also a general crisis of capitalist rule in Europe—threatening to destabilise both relations between, and regional relations within, all the EU’s component countries.

Reinforcing this point, Alejo Vidal-Quadras, a member of Rajoy’s right-wing People’s Party, told *Scotland on Sunday*, “Spain cannot accept anything that would represent a precedent that could be used by the Catalan separatists.”

Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy warned, “If we allow that [independent Scotland to stay in the EU] to happen, how long will Belgium last between Flemish and Walloons? When the centripetal forces are in action, you cannot master them.”

The exception to the rule of snubbing Sturgeon was Ireland, where the Brexit vote is being portrayed as a national emergency. Northern Ireland voted by 56 to 44 percent to remain in the EU, but as with Scotland, was outvoted by the large Leave vote in England and Wales.

Irish *Taoiseach* Enda Kenny insisted Scotland should not be “dragged out of the European Union having voted to stay.”

Opposition Fianna Fail leader Michael Martin said, “Scotland is strong enough to advocate for itself, but Ireland should be its friend and demand fair play should it seek to remain in the EU.”

Martin added that the next few years will be “a defining moment in our history and in the history of Europe... The stakes could not be higher. We must prepare for new threats and possible opportunities.”

Six years after an EU-led “troika” imposed brutal austerity on Irish workers, all the major political parties in the Irish Republic backed the Remain campaign. In Northern Ireland, all parties bar the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) sought to remain in the EU.

Both the Irish and Northern Irish economies are heavily dependent on exports to Britain and the EU, and EU subsidies. In addition, despite the 1921 partition of Ireland by Britain, the economies are increasingly interlinked, with some £3 billion of goods traded annually across a currently near invisible border. Since the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998 brought Sinn Fein into the Northern Ireland government, the erosion of the border has been smoothed by a host of EU regional subsidies.

Among the most pressing concerns is that Brexit will

leave the Irish Republic isolated on the outer Atlantic edge of the EU, while the border with Northern Ireland will become an EU border.

This raises the possibility of again enforcing the 300 border crossing points between North and South, which during the 20th century “Troubles” were among the most brutal expressions of partition—in the process hindering not only trade with Europe but with Britain, which remains Ireland’s most important market.

Seeking to avoid a “hard border” at all costs, Kenny agreed to propose a new cross-border forum to deal with the issues posed by Brexit. This was taken up by Northern Ireland Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein and opposed by the first minister, the DUP’s Arlene Foster.

Brexit could also drastically undercut Ireland’s long-term strategy of attracting investment through low taxes. Ireland has long had the lowest corporation tax in Europe, while Northern Ireland’s political leadership has been bartering away welfare spending so as to gain the right to lower taxes in competition with the South.

The *Irish Independent* summed up the panic: “The advantages of a plunging pound and the full freedom to establish a huge tax haven [in the UK] on Europe’s front porch will not have gone unnoticed internationally. Brexit was a game-changer, and Ireland has more skin in the game than anyone. At a stroke, the UK gained complete autonomy over interest rates, currency and tax rates. The devil take the hindmost.”



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