



Why is Barack Obama Lecturing Scotland About Its Independence Vote?

By Doug Bandow

9/17/2014

Polls show a close vote over Scottish independence. It is a momentous decision, but why is President Barack Obama bothering the Scots with his opinion?

Until recently virtually everyone outside of Scotland believed that the Scots would deliver a solid no vote. After all, their economy is weak and they are dependent on subsidies from London.

And what would be gained from going alone? Holyrood already enjoys extensive self-rule, instituted in 1999, and is governed by the Scottish National Party, which won a majority in 2011.

But many in the UK's north feel disenfranchised. Scotland is overwhelmingly for Labor—it sent only one Tory MP to Westminster in the last election—and feels little connection to Conservative governments. More fundamentally, many Scots reject the more vibrant market system which characterizes the UK as well as U.S.

The tightening race has created panic in Westminster. The Cameron government has countered by promising to return more authority to the Scottish assembly.

In 2012 the Cameron government refused to allow a second ballot question asking whether voters would accept further devolution. Now the three largest national parties are promising to pass along additional powers to the Scottish assembly—though they can't agree on how much and which powers.

Britain's government long has been overly centralized, but the rush to toss national authority overboard raises the question: what is Westminster hoping to preserve? If the Scots are so unhappy with the present system, why not accept the result with grace?

Even a narrow win in which almost half of voters say they wanted to leave might prove Pyrrhic. It would leave a barely united United Kingdom, one likely to face continuing Scottish dissatisfaction and future secession votes.

The decision is up to the Scots. Yet a comical cavalcade of outsiders has been telling the Scottish what to do.

For instance, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott said “it’s hard to see how the world would be helped by an independent Scotland.” Russian President Vladimir Putin observed: “one should not forget that being part of a single strong state has some advantages.” Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang endorsed a “strong, prosperous and united United Kingdom.”

India’s Foreign Minister, Sushma Swaraj, answered a question about the upcoming vote: “God forbid!” Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper urged the Scots to follow the example of Quebec, which rejected proposals to secede. Even Pope Francis observed “all division worried him,” though he acknowledged that it would be right in some circumstances.

In June President Barack Obama declared: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” meaning the UK, which he said appeared to have “worked pretty well.” He worried about the impact on the U.S.: “the United Kingdom has been an extraordinary partner for us.” Moreover, “we obviously have a deep interest in making sure that one of the closest allies that we will ever have remains strong, robust, united and an effective partner.”

President Obama didn’t stop there. He also told the United Kingdom that it should remain in the European Union. Opined the president: “With respect to the EU, we share a strategic vision with Great Britain on a whole range of international issues and so it’s always encouraging for us to know that Great Britain has a seat at the table in the larger European project.”

Rep. Brad Sherman (D-Ca.) argued: “It’s clear from this side of the Atlantic that a United Kingdom, including Scotland, would be the strongest possible American ally.” He was joined by 26 colleagues in introducing a resolution declaring “that a united, secure, and prosperous United Kingdom is important for U.S. national security priorities in Europe and around the world.”

While Westminster, which apparently requested the president to intervene, might find these arguments convincing, not so the Scottish public. Indeed, there’s one very good reason for Scots to vote yes on independence: to tell the rest of the world “up yours!” Scotland’s First Minister, Alex Salmond, who is running the yes campaign, observed that “Being told what to do tends to instigate a position in Scotland where we will say we will choose our own way forward.”

The American experience inspires some. One Scottish independence activist told NBC News: “Americans went through their own struggle for independence 200 years ago and it turned out pretty well for them. They were the pioneers of this process! You would expect America to look out for what’s in its own best interests and there’s no reason why Scotland shouldn’t be exactly the same.”

Indeed. Whatever the Scots choose on September 18, Americans should wish them well.

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