

Scotland's Nordic propensity

By Lesley Riddoch

Scottish voters look set to vote on independence from the rest of the UK in a referendum in 2014. If Nationalist First Minister Alex Salmond has his way, a third option of "devo max" will be added to outright independence and the status quo allowing Scots to opt for full control of tax and economic policy while refraining from cutting all ties from the UK. It's not yet clear if that third option will be put, or even allowed, as an alarmed UK government threatens to take over the whole referendum process. But since the SNP's landslide victory in May 2011, the question is being taken seriously north of the border – how would an independent Scotland manage itself? What would be different about a uniquely Scottish taxation and welfare system?



Lesley Riddoch is a Scottish political columnist, broadcaster and author. She is a regular contributor to the columns of the Guardian and the Scotsman and was shortlisted for the Orwell Prize for Political Writing in 2006. Riddoch is presently doing a PhD comparing the cabin traditions of Norway and Scotland as part of the newly formed North Atlantic Research Group. She is also a founding member of the thinktank Nordic Horizons - see www.nordichorizons.org.

The intriguing aspect for Scandinavian observers of this debate is that there is such an obvious Nordic dimension to it. Could the Nordic Model serve as a new social and economic template – whether Scotland votes to become Europe's newest independent state or remains Britain's most highly devolved national region?

Thanks to her geographical, political and historical position within Northern Europe, Scotland has always had a dual identity. Since the Treaty of Union in 1707 Scotland's formal position within the UK has defined it as remote, small, relatively infertile, leftward-leaning, northern and Celtic.

But arguably, Scotland could also be viewed as the most accessible, second largest, most socially conservative, fertile, southern part of the Nordic region. In reality, the land of Picts and Celts once ruled by Norwegian Vikings is a bit of both. Veteran English politician Peter Shore once observed that Scots-born Labour Party leader John Smith would struggle to win votes in the south-east because, "he was too Nordic to understand southern greed."

Throughout 17 years of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government – and the Major administration which followed – Scots voted Labour, against national trends. The Iron Lady's belief in competition, de-regulation and sale of public utilities went down like a lead balloon in Scotland and resulted in the removal of every Conservative MP at the 1997 General Election.

But even though Tony Blair and New

Labour won, Scots were determined not to be outmanoeuvred by conservative English voters ever again. The extra-parliamentary Constitutional Convention that prompted the 1999 Devolution referendum was positively Nordic in its breadth, earnest intent and inclusiveness – boycotted only by the Scottish Nationalist Party who would, within a decade, become the main political beneficiary of devolution.

But devolution has been a disappointment for many – "not being English" is not a good enough *raison d'être* for a new policy or an expensive new parliament.

Alex Salmond has been the first to grasp the thistle. He intends to craft a distinctive economic base by avoiding nuclear energy and generating (the equivalent of) all domestic electricity from renewable sources only by 2020. He wants to create a Renewables Fund for future investment. He believes Scotland's unsurpassed wind, wave and tidal resources can be harnessed to supply the home market whilst oil and gas reserves can become valuable exports. The parallels with Norway could hardly be stronger.

During a 2009 speech in Edinburgh about the political consequences of climate change and the new north-east passage around Russia, Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre appeared to reciprocate; *"When I talk of the High North I include Scotland. There is a North Sea community based on past links and present interests and Scotland is in it. The High North is not about individual states but about a developing part of northern Europe. Ecosystems, migration flows, technological communities all make more sense when you are dealing with wind, wave and sun – they don't observe national boundaries. It's only with oil and gas that boundaries matter."*

And yet, boundaries do matter. In 2007, Alex Salmond made a speech memorable for his mention of the "Arc of Prosperity". Iceland, Ireland and Norway – he said – were three examples of small, dynamic, northern nations whose prosperity Scots could hope to share if they controlled all the policy levers that come with independence.

Within a year Iceland and Ireland had gone belly-up, the Arc of Prosperity was dubbed the Arc of Insolvency by critics and Scotland's banks were saved from Icelandic-style meltdown only by the intervention of Big Brother Britain. Scotland's self-confidence was badly shaken. Months later, Alex Salmond's hopes of "endorsement" by the resurgent Norwegians were also shattered when Jonas Gahr Støre reportedly urged the Scottish First Minister not to use comparisons with Norway to justify the cause of Scottish independence.

Diplomatic relations have since been resumed with more realistic expectations on all sides. And for Scottish policymakers comparisons

abound. Could Scots adopt Norwegian-style outdoors kindergartens to combat poor health outcomes and indoor, sedentary, inactive lifestyles? How could Scotland adopt Swedish-style insulation, recycling and district-heating to cut heating bills and transform housing standards? Would Scotland benefit from rubbing shoulders with like-sized nations in the Nordic Council?

Already the first policy directly lifted from a Nordic neighbour is rumbling its way through Holyrood. I was a member of the Scottish Government's Prison's Commission which adopted many aspects of the Finnish community payback model after an inspiring fact-finding trip to Helsinki.

And inspiration is a two-way street. Swedish educationalists are watching keenly as Scotland launches the Curriculum for Excellence where the separate disciplines of history, geography and science are largely replaced with study of single, compelling issues – like the Cold War or Air – across all subject divides.

In policy – and maybe in politics – Scotland clearly has as much to learn from its left-leaning, five-million-strong Nordic cousins as from our right-leaning, fifty million strong English neighbour. Two years ago, after making a BBC documentary on Norway's Outdoor Kindergartens, I set up a think tank called **Nordic Horizons** with fellow Nordophile Dan Wynn. We've held 7 well attended meetings in the Scottish Parliament for policy-makers and the public on subjects as varied as municipal government, women's quotas, oil, gas and the High North, kindergarten and the applicability of the Nordic Model(s) to Scotland. Slightly more Labour than SNP MSPs have attended, including former Scottish Labour leader Wendy Alexander and Labour Party Whip John Park. We've had financial backing from the Norwegian and Swedish Embassies to bring relevant speakers to kick start each meeting – the bulk of which is a highly interactive "round table" discussion. A special lunchtime meeting for interested civil servants was also successful.

The Nordic nations record the highest levels of trust in the world. Trust between people. Trust between people and politicians. They have the highest levels of child happiness. They also have fit, healthy, forward-thinking and relatively gripe-free people. People are the biggest asset of any nation. And the resilient outlook of Nordic people fascinates many Scots.

Turn the map of northern Europe on its side, and you can see a new geography for Scotland. Routes that allowed Viking invasion a thousand years ago now lead to a new, challenging Nordic future – if Scots have the courage and humility to ask.