Published on *Adam Smith Institute* (http://www.adamsmith.org)

A referendum on Scotland is just what we need [1]

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Now that the Scottish National Party (SNP) is in control of Scotland's Parliament, can we expect a referendum soon on whether Scotland should become independent and leave the United Kingdom? Well, no, we can't ? but it might be good if we could.

The problem for SNP leader Alex Salmond is that actually, the Scots have a pretty good deal going for them right now. Under a decades-old settlement, Scotland is over-represented in the UK Parliament in Westminster. The Scottish Parliament at Holyrood decides its own policy in important areas like education and healthcare ? though Scotland's MPs in Westminster can and do vote on how these same services are run in England and Wales. Financially too, the new Scotland Bill promises to give Holyrood over taxation and the management of Scotland's public finances. The number of people in Scotland who owe their living to the public sector is much higher than the UK average ? and most of the tax that pays for that public sector is generated in England. Other covert subsidies mean that Scotland can scrap its university tuition fees and guarantee everyone free social care without worrying too much about the cost. And, of course, if Scotland's debts continue to mount up, England will have to bail the country out ? this is a union, after all, and though Scotland is the much smaller country, it is still "too big to fail".

With all that going for Scotland within the Union, we should not expect Alex Salmond to rush into holding a referendum on independence. Why should any right-minded Scot vote for independence? Scotland presently has the best of both worlds ? a fair measure of self-control, with English finance.

The former UK Secretary of State for Scotland, Michael Forsyth, says that it is time to call Salmond's bluff [3] and let the Scottish people decide. The UK Prime Minister David Cameron seems to reckon that the decision about if and when to hold a referendum on independence is one for Holyrood and the Scots. But the fact is that it is of crucial interest for the rest of the UK, particularly England, whose taxpayers are picking up the bill for Scotland's socialist lifestyle. With the allegedly pro-independence SNP in power at Holyrood, it would be entirely reasonable for Westminster now to insist on a referendum. A Yes vote would force Scotland to face up to the facts and live within its means. A No vote would mean that Westminster could be far more assertive in limiting the extravagance which Scotland enjoys at England's expense. Either way, Scotland would have to become less introspective and more friendly to the private sector. And that would actually benefit the whole of the United Kingdom.

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