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The demand for Scottish independence

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Why is in news? Recently British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was quick to reject a call from the new First Minister of Scotland and leader of the governing Scottish National Party (SNP), Humza Yousaf, to hold a second referendum for Scotland's independence from the U.K.

History of formation of Scotland

The independent Kingdom of Scotland was formed in the 9th century and went on to fight wars to remain independent from the Kingdom of England.

In 1603, the two kingdoms entered a personal union and were then ruled by the same monarchs.

In 1707, due to economic and political vulnerabilities prevailing on both sides, the British and Scottish Parliaments passed the Acts of Union, entering into a political union under the name of Great Britain.

While Scotland could retain some of its decision making powers it did not get equal representation in the united Parliament, and longstanding cultural and political differences remained.

Demands for self-governance

Demands for self-governance soon began to sprout, eventually leading to two referendums in 1979 and 1997, resulting in the formation of a new devolved Parliament of Scotland in 1999

This Parliament was given the mandate to form legislation on devolved issues such as health, transport, education, and so on, while the power to legislate on defence, foreign policy, trade, immigration, and currency was reserved.

The last referendum for independence took place in 2014, where 55% of Scots voted to stay in the three-centuries-old union while 45% voted to walk out.

A large proportion of Scots see independence from the U.K. as question of self-determination and identity. Scotland accounts for 8% of Britain's population and economy and one-third of its landmass.

The demand for independence

The SNP government says that people who live in Scotland should have the right to decide if they want to be an independent country.

To relinquish doubts over the future of Scotland after independence, the SNP has been coming out with White Papers on its vision for "building a new Scotland".

It currently gets a bloc grant from the British government for a large part of its annual expenditure which it plans to substitute with oil revenues from the North Sea once its gets independence. It says that instead of using the North Sea oil revenues to invest in future generations, the U.K. is using them to fund its current expenses, which undermines the interests of Scots. It also plans to re-join the EU, to expand its trade in the bloc, and to receive other associated benefits.

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The SNP also plans to keep using the British pound Sterling as its currency after independence.

It also argues that Scotland is different from the U.K. in that its electoral system is already fairer and more proportionally represented than the U.K. It says it stands for different things — more open immigration policies, a faster push for green transition, free university education and geriatric care, taxation on higher earners, and inclusion of the LGBTQ community.

It also believes that the U.K. could make other decisions like Brexit in the future that would undermine Scottish interests.

The U.K.'s stand

The British government believes that the SNP has failed to give a clearer picture on how issues of pensions and healthcare would work in an independent Scotland.

It has also warned Scotland that if it rejoins the EU, it would lead to the creation of a hard border between Scotland and Britain. Before the 2014 referendum, the Economic Affairs Committee of Westminster had highlighted that the retaining of the sterling as Scottish currency would be problematic as the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England, which forms policy for the U.K., could not entertain the interests of a separate country.

It also said that Scotland would find it difficult to assume its share of U.K.'s public debt, which runs into billions. Besides, the decommissioning of North Sea Oil would also have economic and trade implications for Britain.

Aside from impacts on the Defence and trade strategy, former British civil servant Philip Rycroft pointed out to the London-based think tank Chatham House that perhaps the “biggest impact” of Scotland leaving the centuries-old Union in the current geopolitical environment, would be on “perceptions of Englishness among the English themselves, who make up 85% of the U.K.'s population, and the projection of Englishness as a national identity” to the world.

The Way ahead

After Mr. Johnson's rejection of her demand for British consent, Ms. Sturgeon had planned to hold in 2023, a “consultative plebiscite” — a non-binding referendum in Scotland without a green light from Westminster.

In November 2022, however, the U.K.'s top court ruled that such a referendum could not take place. Refusing to give up her party's push for independence, Ms. Sturgeon declared a new strategy — that her party will make the next British general election or the Scottish Parliamentary election as a “de facto referendum” for independence, where SNP would stand on the sole issue of independence.