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The EU Referendum: Unpredictable in Scotland and the UK

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Article text:

*In Scotland, despite differences in views and parties, the 1975 EC referendum shares some similarities with the EU referendum today, writes **James Mitchell**. He suggests that the referendum will be an unpredictable contest with the prospect that Scotland may either vote differently than the rest of the UK or swing the overall UK vote, both of which could raise constitutional questions on the future of the UK union.*

Forty years ago, there was much speculation that Scotland would vote to leave the European Economic Community in the Common Market Referendum, while the rest of the UK would vote to remain. It was thought that this would fuel demands for independence at a time when the Scottish National Party was riding high in the polls.

A poll in January 1975 suggested that only 29 per cent of Scots favoured continued membership, while 45 per cent were against. The Scottish National Party held a special conference and almost unanimously agreed to campaign for a 'NO' vote.

Many SNP members did so reluctantly. Five of the party's then eleven MPs were sympathetic to EC membership, but the opportunity to take advantage of apparent public opposition to the EC and of a divergence in attitudes with the rest of the UK was too great. In the event, 58 per cent of Scots voted to remain in the UK compared with 68 per cent for the UK as a whole, but crucially Scotland had voted to remain.

By contrast, polls today suggest the possibility of Scotland voting to remain in the EU while the rest of the UK votes to leave. The SNP has been quick to identify this as evidence of divergent attitudes and an opportunity to make the case for a second independence referendum.

But if history teaches us anything, it is that no assumptions should be made about the outcome of the EU referendum in Scotland or the UK as a whole. At the moment, evidence suggests that there is a reasonable chance that Scotland will vote to remain and the rest of the UK will vote to leave. But something like a repeat of the sort of 1975 is at least as likely. The UK may vote to remain but Scotland could vote more enthusiastically in favour.

The strength of the SNP is likely to play a significant part in the outcome. While we can anticipate some SNP members arguing for EU exit, it is difficult to identify any major figure making this case. However, though the SNP may be united on EU membership, it is unlikely to devote anything approaching the commitment or resource to this debate as was devoted to the independence referendum.

It is unclear who will lead the SNP case for EU membership. The First Minister may formally be leader, but she will no more be able to devote herself to the referendum campaign than her predecessor was able to devote himself to the independence campaign until relatively late in 2014.

The obvious leader of the SNP 'Remain' campaign would be Alex Salmond. Mr Salmond has become another ex-leader without a clear role. He would be the main figure to head a cross/non-party Scottish campaign but hatred – and that is not too strong a word – for Mr Salmond probably exceeds support for the EU amongst the SNP's opponents.

The likelihood will be that the Scottish line-up in the EU referendum will be deeply imbalanced. It is even less clear who would lead the campaign for withdrawal in Scotland. UKIP's sole Scottish MEP, David Coburn, has strong support for that role but only amongst those who support continued membership. The situation is similar to that faced by opponents of devolution in 1997. As a leading opponent of devolution back then put it after the routing of the Scottish Tories in the 1997 general election, 'All the generals had been killed'.

There is, of course, a scenario that has been paid insufficient attention. It may not happen, but it cannot be dismissed given the state of the polls. In this scenario, Scotland votes overwhelmingly to remain and in so doing tilts the UK as a whole in favour while England narrowly votes for withdrawal.

This would be the West Lothian Question writ large. As has been noted over many years, Scotland might end up being forced out of the UK union by the rest of the United Kingdom rather than through a decision made by Scots. Just as he discovered following the Scottish referendum, David Cameron may find that his European troubles are far from over and might yet take an unexpected turn.

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