

Separatist fears make indyref 2 the

Despite warm words for Sturgeon's Brussels mission the chances of keeping close ties from within the UK are slim

By TOM PETERSON
Political Editor

"I am so sorry that the Spanish are this way," said Ramon Tremosa, an economist and Catalan MEP as he contemplated First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's efforts to sustain Scotland's relationship with the European Union. As a believer in Catalan independence, he has friends in the SNP and has been observing the turbulent events which have unfolded since the Brexit vote with great interest. Given his political leanings it is the implications for Scotland which have captured his attention, and in particular the behaviour of Spain, the country he blames for standing in the way of Catalonia making its own way in the world.

"Spain has been a country with hundreds of years of military dictatorships and absolute monarchs, so there is no respect for national minorities' rights," was Tremosa's reaction to the body blow dealt to Sturgeon by the Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy last week. The MEP was responding to Rajoy's insistence that he overall UK vote to leave meant that Scotland should no withdrawal from the EU, despite the 62 per cent support for Remain recorded at the border.

Jajoy's remarks plus those of French President Francois Hollande, who agreed that stand could not negotiate its own agreement with EU, underlined the leauge ahead for Sturgeon, spite this setback, geon was resolutely at when she began her for EU membership with lomatic trip to Brussels week.

One of those allied to Sturgeon's cause is the Irish Taoiseach, Enda Kenny. Kenny supported Sturgeon in last week's meeting of heads of government in Brussels. He repeated her message that Scotland should not be "drugged" out of the EU against its will.

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The options also include looking at ways of achieving EU membership while the United Kingdom remains intact.

"I fully support the will of the Scottish people to remain in the EU," said Tremosa, who believes that Sturgeon's Brussels visit had made Rajoy "very nervous".

Rajoy's nerves have been frayed by the long-standing notion that any special treatment dished out to Scotland would be enormously encouraging to the Catalan independence movement, emboldening the separatists in their campaign to break up an existing sovereign EU member state.

For that reason, Spain will automatically veto any attempt by Scotland to come up with its own EU arrangement from inside the UK.

Alejo Vidal-Quadras, a Spanish politician and former vice president of the European Parliament, appeared unequivocal.

"What Spain will never accept is if now Scotland tries to get a separate status for Scotland [in the EU] inside the United Kingdom. Spain cannot accept anything that would represent a precedent that could be used by the Catalan separatists."

Vidal-Quadras told Scotland on Sunday. Politicians from other EU nations coping with secessionist movements like France, Italy and Belgium will take a similar line.

But as EU rules require all member governments to approve the accession of a new member, Spanish objections on their own would be enough to veto Sturgeon's ambitions and overturn the wishes of other countries who have a more easy-going attitude towards the First Minister.

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Commission spokesman Margaritis Schinas in which he said the commission "respected" the Scottish majority in favour of staying in the EU. Officially later suggested that a deal for Scotland would be theashed out but only if it had the agreement of the Westminster government.

There are also those, like Tremosa, who believe the "reverse Greenland" model could offer a solution. "There is the precedent of Greenland with Denmark and the Faroe Islands. Of these only Denmark is an EU member. But Danish MEP Anders Vistisen is sceptical. "In the reverse procedure Greenland wanted to leave the EU," he said. "It has a very small population. There are just 50,000 people living up there. Scotland has five million people so it is a completely different story."

His view was echoed at Holyrood last week by Professor Sir David Edward, the former judge at the European Court of Justice who has just become a member of Sturgeon's newly-appointed Standing Council of European advisers.

Appearing in front of the Scottish Parliament Europe committee, Edward said: "It is fine talking about Greenland, but Scotland is not remotely like Greenland—it is connected by its navel to England. One has to start from that rather simple fact."

Another option, which has been aired in MSPs at Holyrood voting against Brexit thereby vetoing the rest of the UK's withdrawal from the EU. The legal practicalities of this are disputed. Some contend that the terms of the Scotland Act mean that Brexit requires the consent of the Scottish Parliament and the UK's

other devolved assemblies. But Alex Salmond has conceded Holyrood would not be able to block the rest of the UK from leaving. For Vidal-Quadras this would be the ideal outcome. "If the Scottish National Party could stop it [Brexit] by the position of the Scottish Parliament, something internal according to the constitution of the United Kingdom. That would be wonderful."

But if Sturgeon was to go down that route and attempt to defy the democratic wishes of the rest of the UK the backlash from England and Wales would be furious. According to Vistisen, there is "a lot of goodwill" from the European institutions towards Sturgeon's desire to remain in the EU. But Spain, France, Italy and Belgium are the obstacles that have to be overcome. The "only chance" Vistisen can see of Scotland



European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker greets Nicola Sturgeon in Brussels last week. Below: Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. Main Photograph: Gaert Van den Wijngaert



'Rajoy's nerves have been frayed by the notion that special treatment would encourage Catalan independence'

best bet for EU future



Like Vistisen, Tremosa also believes that Sturgeon's best chance is to have another shot at independence. "As a Catalan, I would be delighted if there is a second referendum. Tremosa said. "If Scotland became independent and rejoined the EU it would be fantastic." Tellingly, even Vidal-Quadras conceded Scottish independence could offer a route to the EU. Vidal-Quadras said: "If Scotland could separate from the United Kingdom by an agreement that is constitutionally valid between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom, then, of course, it is a different matter. It is a different battle."

The battle, though, would be a hard fought one. There is the question of whether Sturgeon could achieve a Yes vote although Scottish disapproval at Brexit is expected to fuel demands for independence. Sturgeon has said she will only go for indyref 2 if she thinks she can win it. The big question is whether she can build the increase in support required to move from the 45 per cent recorded in 2014 to a comfortable majority in a tight time frame. She knows that a second defeat will kill the independence dream. Sturgeon's ideal scenario

would be for Scotland to achieve a Yes vote within the two years it would take the UK to negotiate its way out of the EU under Article 50, the mechanism within the Lisbon Treaty that triggers Brexit. Dame Mariot Leslie is former Permanent Representative to Nato who campaigned for Yes in 2014 and is now a member of Sturgeon's standing council advising the First Minister on the EU.

'The next campaign will be a more sober and difficult and tormented one'

Although she believes Scotland has bought a "one way ticket" to independence and it is now "highly likely" there will be another independence vote, Leslie concedes a Yes result cannot yet be guaranteed. Changed with looking at all the options available to Scotland, she described it as a "very complex task" to see if there is a solution for Scotland short of breaking up the United Kingdom. Therefore the independence route is very much on the table as the best way to

overcome Spanish objections. But the plummeting oil price, the unresolved question about an independent Scotland's currency and the deteriorating economic outlook make it challenging to build a convincing argument for breaking up another political union.

"I think one would want to see a sustained majority for Scottish independence with people having a clarity of view about why they felt that, in order for the project to be sustainable," Leslie said.

"An independent Scotland would have a lot of challenges and if the country hadn't understood that and wasn't pulling together, that would not be a good basis for an independent country. I think there will be a lot more arguments coming on to the table in the current situation as we see what happens in the UK and elsewhere in Europe. And those arguments are themselves complex and are grown up."

"I think and expect—because I do think Scotland is on a one-way ticket to independence—the next campaign will be a more sober and difficult and tormented one than the festival of democracy that we had in 2014."

We are, as Nicola Sturgeon keeps reminding us, entering uncharted territory.

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