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While Tories usher Scotland towards UK exit, Miliband's SNP refusal looks a huge mistake

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Labour leader ruled out any SNP deals on Question Time. Stefan Rousseau/PA

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Historical turning points do not occur often, at least not in the settled West. But we are about to witness one in Scotland. In the 1922 general election, Scotland turned red. It is now about to turn yellow.

Two contests are occurring now, and Scotland is at the heart of both. In Scotland itself there seems little to prevent the Scottish National Party (SNP) seizing the bulk of Labour's seats and rendering them the indisputable dominant party north of the border. The nationalists' victory will not be a mandate for independence – Nicola Sturgeon has been careful to reassure voters about this. But it will both give a huge boost to nationalists morale while embedding the party in all the key intuitions that comprise the Scottish public domain.

In England the SNP factor – or spectre – is no less important. A minority Labour government sustained by SNP votes, the Tories claim most loudly and vehemently, would be illegitimate. It would (apparently) be profligate with the UK's finances, filling Scottish pockets with English money, and bring chaos to the governance of the UK.

The significance of this heated rhetoric is that, in seeking to delegitimise SNP participation in the House of Commons, the Tories are sawing off the Scottish limb from the UK body politic. They are unobtrusively setting the English against the Scots, stoking English nationalism to set against its Scottish equivalent. No house divided can remain united, to paraphrase the Bible.

The impact of this is bound to tighten allegiance in Scotland to the SNP and foster resentment towards the UK. It will enhance the appeal of the nationalist message that the Scots need a powerful voice, which only they can provide, to protect the nation from Westminster. All this may bring a second referendum a little nearer.

Saving all my love for EU

The outcome of the SNP sweeping the board will depend very much on the complexion of the next UK government. The best result for pro-independence forces (although the party denies this publicly) is another Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, pledged to hold a referendum on the EU. It would then be very much to Nicola Sturgeon's advantage if the British people voted to withdraw from the EU because she could then claim, with a good deal of moral force, that this was not the scenario presented to the Scots in 2014.

There is the crumb of comfort that at present, UK opinion has tilted against voting to leave Europe. But if the Eurosceptics can turn this around, and assuming that the SNP government is re-elected next year in the Scottish election, this would put Sturgeon in a strong position to demand a second referendum. The choice would be between "Scotland in Europe" and an insular "rest of the UK". In short, the combination of an SNP triumph in Scotland and a Con-Dem victory overall could be the dismemberment of the UK.

Mili-blunder?

If the total of the Labour/SNP/Plaid Cymru/SDLP vote forms more than half the membership of the House of Commons, matters will be up in the air. It is understandable that Ed Miliband rejected a coalition or a formal pact with the SNP because Tory attacks south of the border seemed to have gained traction. But he has gone beyond this and may well have unwisely reduced his room for manoeuvre. For however embittered relations between the two parties have become, and however vociferous and unpleasant the SNP's vitriol in its grassroots campaigning, no stable Labour government looks capable of emerging without some understanding.

What the SNP would ask in return is the key question. Many in Labour's ranks are sympathetic to the SNP's stances on austerity and Trident. New constitutional arrangements would be very difficult to hammer out, though they would be so difficult to follow that most voters would soon lose interest. So the matter might not be that hard to manage. But if the SNP presses for financial concessions, this could be politically embarrassing for Labour as well as much resented in its northern strongholds.

Long story short, we are in uncharted territory. If the SNP's principal aim is to manoeuvre in such a way as to further discredit and undermine support for the union, UK relations with Labour will rapidly become fraught. If its prime goal is to show that it can protect the interests of Scots (and austerity sufferers elsewhere) while consolidating its reputation as an effective and responsible quasi-government party, a different scenario opens.

Labour David Cameron SNP Ed Miliband Nicola Sturgeon
UK General Election 2015 Conservative

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A big SNP win looks inevitable. Danny Lawson/PA