The View from Europe
By David Jessop

The implications of a Scottish yes vote

Forget the movie Brave Heart and the passion and nationalism associated with the long-standing desire by many Scots for independence from the British Parliament in Westminster. On September 18 something real and significant will take place in Scotland that could change the nature of the United Kingdom and alter Britain’s place in the world.

That is the date on which there will be a referendum on Scottish independence which, if the Scottish National Party (SNP) and others who are promoting the yes vote were to prevail, could raise some interesting and even difficult questions for the Caribbean.

For example, if the Scots were to vote yes to independence it would also undoubtedly diminish London’s role and influence in Europe, weaken the UK’s relationship with Washington, and may by extension in both cases, slowly come to affect the positive approach to the Caribbean that the UK encourages on both sides of the Atlantic.

While a yes vote would undoubtedly require the Caribbean to assess how it should relate to an independent Scotland and a smaller United Kingdom, it may also offer new opportunity, given the many Caribbean-relevant small nation aspects of Scotland’s economic approach.

Only now are some of the wider implications of a changed Scotland starting to become apparent. In the last week, the international dimension has risen to greater prominence. Speaking in London, the President of the European Commission (EC), José Manuel Barroso, suggested that any new EU state coming out of a current member state will have to apply to accede to the European Union and its entry will have to be approved by all.

His remarks, which appear to be politically driven as the EC and the EU’s interest is in a strong and unadulterated United Kingdom presence in Europe, point to the international uncertainty that a yes vote would bring. He referred to issues such as the UK’s national debt, the strength of the pound, and a wide range of cross-border economic, security and political issues that would require negotiation and resolution, not just between London and Edinburgh, but internationally as well.

Media reports suggest that Washington is also starting to wake up to the implications of a yes vote. From its viewpoint an independent Scotland would weaken the UK’s sometimes pivotal international role in relation to security and other issues, on which from time to time the US seeks Britain’s resource and moral support.

In response, the SNP suggests that all of these matters can be resolved and that once the Scots have voted for change, London and Brussels will come to the negotiating table and find pragmatic solutions.

That said, a vote for Scottish independence will likely have constitutional, legal, political, economic, judicial, parliamentary, and development implications for the region.

For example, it will alter the future nature of UK politics and policy. If Scotland were to vote for independence it will change the balance of political power in the United Kingdom. According to John Curtice, one of Scotland’s leading pollsters, a yes vote may deprive Britain’s Labour Party of more
than forty members of parliament at Westminster, requiring Labour to have to engineer challenging future levels of voting swing if it were to ever take power again.

The suggestion is that a vote for independence in Scotland could well cement long-term power for the Conservatives, or leave the Liberal Democrats, the UK’s third main party, in the position of being a permanent partner in any government. It is also suggested that there could be a constitutional crisis if the Scots vote yes this September and then in the UK’s May 2015 general election Labour were to have an outright win with a majority based on having won Scottish seats.

Other uncertainties include how civil service planning for change might work; what will be required in respect of thousands of overseas treaties and arrangements, or who pays for the associated costs. There may also be a hiatus in government; experts suggest that it will take about two years to negotiate Scotland’s exit from the UK.

That said, for the Caribbean, from a positive perspective, Scotland could represent an interesting future partner. It has a population of around five million and although much wealthier than almost all Caribbean nations it has interesting similarities to the region in that it relies heavily on tourism, financial services and exports of alcohol (whisky) as well as on oil and gas, offshore services and life sciences.

It has an outward looking policy that supports Scottish business seeking to trade abroad, promotes foreign investment and defends its interests in Brussels. As a part of its approach it has established integrated programmes that sell Scotland internationally as a destination for tourism. It is also promoting creative industries in areas such as the design and manufacture of computer games and is encouraging population growth and migration to achieve the skills it needs.

In the area of tourism it recognises that it has to compete and needs to support its industry’s marketing efforts not least because it recognises that the impression each visitor gains has an influence on wider views about investment and trade.

It also recognises that the Scottish Diaspora across the world can play a significant part in supporting and promoting its interests and has a ‘Global Scots’ programme in order to harness this latent force for development.

It has identified nations that it sees as it comparators to aspire to. These are the Scandinavian nations of Norway, Finland, and Denmark as well as pre-recession Iceland and Ireland. It has also created an embryonic overseas development programme.

Less positively, a yes vote for Scottish independence raises all sorts of issues no one has yet addressed in a Caribbean context, from its murky past in relation to slavery to how independence will diminish the role of ‘Caribbean marginal seats’ and potential Caribbean political influence in England.

That said, the Scottish National Party has created a close to sovereign identity for Scotland in the world that has resonance with Caribbean thinking; one that suggests an interesting model for nations in a region that seem unclear about where they are seeking to position themselves and their economic interests.

As the year proceeds there will be much more to be written about what will happen should the Scottish people vote yes.