

# Brexit is turning Scotland more Canadian

**JULIA RAMPEN**

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*Julia Rampen is a Scottish-Canadian journalist based in London.*

“Now is the time for the Canadian government to extend an invitation,” wrote [Ken McGoogan in The Globe and Mail last year](#), shortly after Britain chose to leave the European Union against the wishes of Scottish voters. “Would the Scots consider becoming a province of Canada?” Mr. McGoogan’s lighthearted suggestion was widely reported in the British media, before being submerged days later by news of a snap election. Yet as the Brexit talks veer towards a constitutional crisis, the idea of a more Canadian Scotland is increasingly in favour.

The connection between Scotland and Canada is deep, as anyone who has ever visited the deserted stone pier of Calgary Bay in the Hebrides knows. But modern comparisons began in 2014 with the Scottish independence referendum. Then, defenders of the Union recited the cautionary tale of Quebec — a series of referendums, [they warned](#), would send Scotland’s biggest firms skedaddling to London.

The Scottish nationalists lost the 2014 referendum. But the pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) increased its dominance in politics, at the expense of the centre-left, anti-independence Labour Party. The Brexit vote the following year threw Labour into further disarray.

Searching for a way forward, the Scottish Labour leader at the time, Kezia Dugdale, [invoked the idea of federalism](#). Devolved government in the United Kingdom has an eccentric past. Although Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all have legislative bodies, England has none at all. Powers also differ: Scotland gained income-tax-raising powers after the 2014 referendum, with no such offer for Wales. The Northern Ireland Assembly, meanwhile, is designed to share power between staunch republicans and unionists (it currently has no devolved government at all, after talks collapsed).

Ms. Dugdale’s idea of federalism struck at the heart of a problem familiar to Canadians — the unwritten constitution. If the devolved parliaments are quirky, so too is the union itself. “We’re bought and sold for English gold,” lamented the Scots poet Robert Burns, of the decision by Scottish parliamentarians in 1707 to strike a deal with England. Wales was an English conquest — the fact it is still a nation today is thanks to the generations who passed on their distinct language and culture. Northern Ireland is the product of centuries of colonialism, settlement and conflict, and was officially only created in 1921, when the island was partitioned. “After more than 300 years, it is time for a new Act of Union,” Ms. Dugdale declared.

Meanwhile, Scottish liberals of all stripes were interested in another part of the Canadian system — devolved immigration policy. In England, there are 407 people per square kilometre, [according to national records](#). In Scotland, there are just 68. While “immigrant” has become an insult in much of the British press, Scottish newspapers are peppered with stories of much-needed Gaelic teachers from abroad [blocked by inflexible Westminster visa rules](#).

The Scottish government, vehemently opposed to Brexit and frustrated in its dreams of independence, has led the charge. “Canada operates a points-based migration system with a strong regional element to account for the differences in population and economic structure of Canada’s provinces,” [a recent Holyrood report noted approvingly](#).

The Scottish government’s interest in Canada’s immigration policy goes deeper than simply devolved powers, though. The SNP leadership insists the nationalism it espouses is the civic, inclusive kind (anti-English sentiment remains common in Scotland, however, and low-ranking SNP councillors have been known in the past to [make dog-whistle references to “quislings”](#)). Scotland has embraced a U.K.-wide program to resettle Syrian refugees. Its refugee-integration strategy celebrating “new Scots” borrows directly from the concept of “new Canadians” — and contrasts sharply in rhetoric with the British Prime Minister’s assertion that “a citizen of the world” is “a citizen of nowhere.”

In November, the Scottish government went one step further and [hosted the Arctic Circle Forum in Edinburgh](#) (the week of chaos that ensued when the blizzards really did arrive this March suggests Scotland has some way to go in reinventing itself as an Arctic nation). Like Ontario, Scotland is experimenting with the progressive policy du jour — universal basic income.

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There is one time Canada is anathema to the Scottish government, however, and that is when it is followed by the word “plus.” This is a reference to the Canada-EU trade deal, seen as a poor alternative to access to the EU’s single market, which Britain is expected to leave after Brexit. In January, [Scotland’s leader Nicola Sturgeon declared](#) that no option, not even a “Canada plus plus plus,” was as good as the status quo.

For now, though, the Scottish government’s focus is on what it already has. The devolved nations are locked in a battle with the British government over where powers returning from Brussels should be located. The Scottish Parliament is expected to defy Westminster and vote to use its emergency powers to take direct control over fishing, agriculture and other repatriated powers. The dispute is likely to end up in court.

And at this stage, perhaps the judges and constitutional technicalities are the Scottish Parliament’s best hope. Scots have long known that a bigger neighbour, however unsavoury, is likely to get its way in the political boxing ring. In that way, at least, Scotland is just like Canada.