

Alex Salmond insists independent Scotland would remain in EU

Scottish first minister says it would be absurd for secessionist Scotland to re-apply to join European Union

Ian Traynor in Brussels

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Scotland's first minister Alex Salmond prepares to make his speech at the College of Europe in Bruges. Photograph: Francois Lenoir/Reuters

Alex Salmond has put himself on a collision course with Westminster and the European Union by insisting that an independent Scotland would automatically remain in the EU while still enjoying the UK's key opt-outs from the EU regime.

In a set-piece speech on Scotland's place in Europe, delivered in Bruges to echo Margaret Thatcher's bravura 1988 performance, the Scottish first minister dismissed as absurd statements in Brussels and London that a secessionist Scotland would need to re-apply to join the EU.

Contrasting English Euroscepticism with Scottish Europhilia, Salmond argued that the bigger threat to Scotland's future in the EU stemmed not from the September independence referendum, but from David Cameron's pledge to allow a UK vote in 2017 on whether to remain an EU member.

"Because of the rising influence of a virulent strain – not just of Euroscepticism, but of Europhobia – at Westminster, it now poses a real threat to Scotland's place in Europe," he said. "Today Britain sits at the margins of European influence, and if Scotland remains governed from London we face the prospect of an in/out referendum on whether to be part of the European Union at all. It is conceivable that unless we choose to change our circumstances this September we could be dragged out of the European Union against our will."

There is a settled legal view among policymakers in Brussels that an independent Scotland will not automatically be an EU member, but will have to apply to join and face the prospect of lengthy and tough negotiations. That view has been eagerly seized upon by unionists and the no campaign.

In a letter to Salmond on Monday, William Hague, the foreign secretary, wrote: "Scotland's negotiations to join the EU are likely to be complex and long and the outcome would certainly prove less advantageous than the status quo ... your desire for Scotland to become an independent state which is a member of the EU within 18 months of a yes vote has been presented to voters in Scotland as a certainty. The truth is that this is far from certain."

Salmond's visit to Bruges and Brussels was aimed at refuting this notion. He asserted that a separate Scottish state would remain an EU member.

"The Scottish government recognises that continued membership of the EU will require negotiations on the specific terms. That is only right and proper. But these negotiations will be completed within the 18-month period between a yes vote in September and achieving independence in March 2016," Salmond said. "Scotland will ask for continued membership on the basis of 'continuity of effect'".

He said it was absurd to deny the correctness of his argument.

"Five and a quarter million people ceasing to be EU citizens against their will ... is more than absurd. There is simply no legal basis in the EU treaties for any such proposition. And it is against the founding principles of the European Union."

Salmond also insisted that the new Scotland would retain the sterling currency and remain, like the rest of Britain, outside the EU's Schengen travel zone. If he is right, Scotland would be afforded special treatment that has been denied all new member states joining over the last decade.

The assertion was challenged by Hague. "How will you convince all 28 member states to unanimously agree to grant special opt-outs to Scotland (on the euro, or membership of the Schengen area) which all recent member states have had to adopt themselves?"

The first minister and foreign secretary also clashed over how best to represent Scottish interests in Europe.

"Scotland benefits from the UK's strong voice in Europe and the UK has a proven track record in delivering for Scottish interests in the EU," Hague said.

Salmond, by contrast, argued that Scotland's interests in Europe had been persistently damaged by conservative governments with no mandate in Scotland.

"For more than half of my life, Scotland has been governed by parties from Westminster which could not command a majority in Scotland. That's a profound democratic deficit. It affects all areas of Scottish life," he said.

"Not being at the top table in Europe has harmed Scotland's interests for four decades. Within the UK, we are occasionally consulted. With independence, we would contribute as equals."

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