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Scottish independence: Salmond seeks to woo Europeans

An independent Scotland would be a more constructive member of the European Union (EU) than a reluctant Britain, Scottish first minister Alex Salmond said in a campaign to persuade Europeans to keep Scotland within the Union.

He believed EU members would welcome an "enthusiastic" Scotland into the bloc should it vote to end the 307-year-old union with England in a referendum on September 18, he said.

Remaining part of the EU is fundamental to the nationalists' vision of an economically viable independent Scotland. However, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso has said Scotland would have to reapply to the EU as a new state.

Salmond took his campaign to Bruges in Belgium today, seeking to persuade Europeans that keeping Scotland within the EU fold was very much in their own interest.

He pointed out that while Scotland wanted to stay part of the EU, British Prime Minister David Cameron has promised to renegotiate ties with the EU and hold a referendum on Britain's membership if his Conservatives win a general election next year.

"The difference in Westminster, is that there is lots and lots of people who see the abolition of Europe, drifting off into the mid Atlantic, as a viable option," Salmond said in an interview.

In a speech, he said Scotland's energy reserves and fishing grounds would make it a crucial EU member. Salmond, who heads the ruling Scottish National Party, said that should Scots choose to break away from the United Kingdom, he expected it would be possible to negotiate EU membership before a formal declaration of independence in March 2016.

But he said Scotland would not join the euro currency zone. "You cannot be forced compulsorily to be in the euro," Salmond said. "It's a voluntary thing. Because England is our biggest market, we should stick with sterling."

The British government and the three main UK political parties have insisted that an independent Scotland could not retain the pound or use the Bank of England as its central bank.