Plaid Cymru, SNP, and the Cracking Union

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Thematic Working Group Briefs – 2026

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In a United Kingdom where the far-right ReformUK dangerously takes the stage, Scottish and Welsh citizens decided to step forward, unveiling a cracking union.

In Wales, on the 7th of May, the Plaid Cymru party, led by Rhun Ap Iorweth, won the Welsh Senedd, putting a historical end to 100 years of Labour rule in Wales (The Guardian, 2026). In his speech, Iorweth made his intentions clear, stating that "No UK Prime minister in the present or future can cast Wales aside, or turn a blind eye to our needs and our aspirations as a nation" (BBC News, 2026), underlining Wales' possible path toward independence. This result is the product of years of mistreatment and carelessness from Westminster.

In Scotland, the Scottish National Party "SNP", led by John Swinney, won again, securing another five years in office. In his speech, Swinney promised Scots to become the first Prime Minister of Scotland and to "make Scotland the nation we know it can be." During his campaign, Swinney focused on the patriotic meaning of these elections, strengthening his party's support for Scottish independence, a support that has grown since Brexit (Holyrood magazine, 2026). The SNP won 58 seats, hence short of an absolute majority, but alongside the Scottish Greens, held a pro-independence majority, highlighting further pressure on Westminster (Sim, Picken, 2026). The Scottish Greens welcomed the results, signalling upcoming progressive policies and pro-independence campaigns (Sim, Picken, 2026). Despite the SNP victory, many decided to turn their heads away from the party. A former SNP voter in Dundee claimed that the party betrayed its voters' expectations, as the crime rate in his city increased without any solution or help from Swinney's party (EPIS Interview with Oliver R, Dundee, 2026). Already in 2023, Dundee had the highest rate of violent crime in Scotland (The Courier, 2023). Despite the decrease in support for independence, just 44% pro-independence against a solid 56% contrary to it (Statista, 2026), the SNP re-affirmed its aim for independence.

But what do these results actually mean for the UK?

In 2014, when Scottish citizens voted against independence, one of the main reasons was the danger of leaving the EU, says Richard, an International Relations student from Glasgow. In 2016, 62% of Scots voted to remain in the EU, while 52% of Welsh citizens voted to leave (bbc, 2016).

The youth was extremely impacted by Brexit, and described it as the main factor that led them to vote for parties like SNP, LibDem, and Plaid Cymru, said Shona from Scotland. Without the EU, many young people lost the opportunity to study and work abroad without visas and sponsorships.

The impacts of Brexit on Scotland and Wales, turned upside down local economies and education in different ways.

Impact of Brexit on Scotland

A first negative impact is definitely an increased cost of living. Scotland saw an increase of 25% in food prices between December 2019 and March 2023, the increase due to Brexit (Scottish Government 2023). Moreover, withdrawing from the EU Internal Energy Market, meant a less efficient model of energy training for Scotland and the UK as a whole (Scottish Government, 2023). Moreover, leaving the EU had a significant impact on Scottish trade. Before Brexit, Scottish producers sold 20.000 tonnes of seed potatoes to the EU, a trade that has now collapsed without the EU. In addition, without EU funding there have been less commitments to support Scotland's rural economy. Moreover, 44% of Scottish owned businesses named Brexit as the main cause of their trade difficulties (Scottish Government, 2023). Finally,

Scotland's sea food industry, in 2023, saw a 50% increase in the cost of packaging items sent to the EU, (Scottish Government, 2023). Additionally, the loss of Freedom of Movement hit Scotland's tourism. 45% of tourism businesses in the Highlands and Islands reported staff shortages after Brexit. In July 2022 there were 40.000 vacancies in the hospitality sector in Scotland, but since the sector is excluded from the seasonal worker scheme, those vacancies enhanced the difficulties for many businesses (Scottish Government, 2023). Last but not least, Brexit decreased the important contribution of the EU to education and research in Scotland. The Erasmus+ programme contributed to educational projects across Scotland, but with the new UK replacement the projects decreased greatly, from 190 in 2020, to just 30 between 2022 and 2023 (Scottish Government, 2023). Before 2020 EU students and researchers helped improve Scotland's research in areas like climate policy, energy, medicine, and history, but with Brexit, many EU citizens found it almost impossible to study/research in Scotland and the UK (The University of Edinburgh, 2025).

In order to counter the damage, the Scottish government kept working with EU institutions, to ensure a continued cooperation between the EU and Scotland, (The Scottish Government, 2023). The group Friends of Scotland in Brussels, facilitates engagement with the EU Parliament, Commission, and private stakeholders, to ensure and promote Scotland's interests with the EU, (Scottish Government, 2023). An example of continued cooperation can be seen through the Trade and Cooperation agreement between the EU and UK (The Scottish Government, 2023).

Analysing the Scottish results: Brexit a catalyst, but the SNP disappointed voters

In Scotland, Brexit had a major impact on voters' choice during last month's elections. The Cambridge University Press, underlined how Brexit exposed Scotland's constitutional fragility within the UK (Cambridge University Press, 2026). Moreover, the SNP framed another independence referendum as a mean to rejoin the EU (Withers, 2026). Despite the victory, the results showed that voters felt disappointed by the SNP (The Guardian, 2026). Before the elections, a SNP supporter admitted to "losing faith" in Swinney's party after the party's failure to improve health hazards in some buildings (The Guardian, 2026). Other citizens, on the other hand, decided to stay at home, as they had lost faith in Scottish politics as whole (The Guardian, 2026).

Despite the lack of faith, and lost votes, on the 26th of May 2026, the Scottish Parliament endorsed the SNP call for a referendum on independence (BBC, 2026).

Impact of Brexit on Wales

In Wales as well, trade was negatively touched by Brexit. Trade between the EU and Wales decreased by 20%, disrupting one of the most important trading cooperation for Wales (Senned Research, 2025). The Farmers' Union Wales, FUW, highlighted a 50% decline in meat exports after Brexit, alongside a worrying increase of illegal meat imports (Senedd Research, 2025). Another recurring issue, that interests not only Wales but the UK in its entirety, has been an exaggerated bureaucracy. 90% of companies experienced timing and quantity issues (Senedd Research, 2025). Moreover, the Cabinet Secretary announced that the Welsh economy has been greatly impacted, as it was more reliant on exporting to the EU (Senedd Research, 2025). In 2024, Welsh exports to the EU amounted to 58.1% (Senedd Research, 2025). Leaving the EU, left Wales with serious environmental issues. The new UK TCA enhances the environmental governance gap in Wales, as it doesn't have any focus on environment and climate cooperation (Senedd Research, 2025). The EU environmental policies and cooperation,were beneficial for Wales, as trade could have a negative impact on air pollution (Senedd Research, 2025). Just like Scotland, Welsh education suffered the loss of major EU programmes and opportunities. Wales' involvement in the Erasmus+ programme and major cooperation with EU institutions, allowed EU citizens to work and cooperate with Welsh professionals, but with Brexit PhD students like Peter, feel that there has been a major loss of opportunities.

The victory of Plaid Cymru: A choice for Wales

Despite Plaid Cymru's pro European stances, Brexit was not the main issue for Welsh voters. Plaid's leader, Ap Iorwerth, focused his campaign on finally putting Wales first, with the intention of ending 27 years of Labour rule in the country (Nation Cymru, 2026). The Welsh leader accused Labour of giving up on Wales, harbouring divisions rather than strong leadership, adding that Wales needs a leadership that brings its people together (Plaid Cymru, 2026). Amongst the main reasons for their votes, Welsh citizens voted Plaid Cymru in the hope of fairer support for struggling families and childcare (Plaid Cymru, 2026). But the biggest factors, influencing the outcome of the elections, was to stop the far-right party Reform from winning and immigration (itv, 2026). A poll from Yougov.com , showed that 49% of Welsh voters would have refused to see Reform as part of their government (YouGov, 2026). The poll underlined that 49-52% of voters placed healthcare and cost of living as their top priorities. Regarding independence, even if many voters would expect Plaid Cymru to prioritise independence, only 22% of Welsh citizens would vote yes (YouGov, 2026).

What is the meaning of these results for the UK?

Despite the major SNP loss in Scotland, the UK witnessed an unprecedented constitutional crisis after last month's elections. With the victories of the SNP and Plaid Cymru, the three devolved nations, being Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, are all led by pro-independence parties (The Guardian, 2026). Around the three nations, there have been talks about a "celtic alliance", anticipating further turmoil for the UK (CIPD, 2026). Northern Ireland's first minister, Michelle O'Neill, anticipated increased cooperation with Swinney and Iorwerth (Starkey, 2026).

According to the interviewed Scottish and Welsh, they hope that the SNP and Plaid Cymru, will put major emphasis on NHS policies, and more funding for education, farming, and local businesses.

As mentioned before, the rise of the Reform party will enhance disruption within the UK, alongside further policies on immigration (CIPD, 2026).

Conclusions

Finally, the 7th of May elections, apart from changing regional politics, managed to expose the UK's fragilities. The Union has now entered its most precarious era, with three pro independence and pro EU governments. The results reveal a contrast between Scotland and Wales.

Despite the SNP's disappointment over unmet health and security policies, on the 26th of May the parliament endorsed its call for a second independence referendum. The proposition passed with 72 in favour and 55 against (BBC, 2026). This time independence is extremely tied to Scotland's will to rejoin an union that it never meant to leave, the EU.

In Wales, Plaid Cymru's victory made history, ending 27 years of Labour rule, with Iorwerth stating "No UK Prime Minister in the present or future can cast Wales aside" (BBC, 2026). While independence is not Plaid's main point, it is clear that he will do everything to ensure Welsh citizens' well-being.

In the meantime, Starmer will have to deal with increased criminality throughout the UK, and the more recent racist outbreaks in the entirety of the United Kingdom,

It looks like the union is cracking.

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