‘Our infinite Scotland small?’ Choosing worlds to join: Scotland emerges onto the international scene.

‘Scotland small ? Our multiform, our infinite Scotland small? In asking the question so fiercely, Hugh MacDiarmid rather conveyed the answer he was out to reject. When young Marlon Brando was asked about immortality, he replied:’ I caint think, I caint believe, that we are just here for one gnashing ,stomping moment and that’s all’ . But his very words somehow tell you that he knew that the gnashing, stomping moment really was all. And Scotland – 5 million people, stony, acid-soiled, in unkind latitudes - Scotland really is small.

During last year’s referendum campaign, a group of us went about the land asking people what sort of Scotland they wanted. They wrote their answers down in coloured felts on a huge roll of backing paper we bought at Homebase in Wick; eventually a quarter-mile scroll of ideas and hopes. They and we also talked about what Scotland should do in the world, when and if it became independent or even before. I proposed that Scotland should become the world leader for disaster aid, combining our existing resources in heavy engineering (lifting gear), emergency and post-emergency medicine, temporary housing planning, social and physical aftercare and so forth, into one incomparable rescue team, the best on earth. .People struggling out of earthquake debris or tsunami mud would look up and tell each other: ‘It’s going to be okay. The Scots are coming’ .

Well, this went down well until, one day somewhere in Fife, a woman came up to me and said: ‘Why do you want Scotland to be the best in the world at anything? What kind of thinking is that? They have fooled us so often with that big-headed stuff in the past. What we want is just for Scotland to become a normal wee country like others, no worse and no better’.

In recent years, the word ’normal’ has become the most threatening term in politics. Where you meet young people in crowds saying they want to be normal, you know that soon cars will be in flames and water-cannon will be sousing the boulevard trees. In both Ukrainian revolutions, the people camping on the Kiev Maidan in the frost said: ‘We just want to have a normal country. Where the law is respected, and opposition journalists don’t end up beheaded in a ditch.’ The Turkish boys and girls on Taksim Square last year, or the enormous crowds of that shrivelled Arab Spring, said they wanted to live in a normal nation.

Many Scots, contemplating dire health and housing data or a government which almost nobody voted for, don’t just think that this is bad or even scandalous. They think that Scotland’s situation is abnormal.

The implication is that people all over the world are beginning to look outwards to an imagined ‘norm’, to an external set of standards in governance and material security against which they judge their own nation or polity. This seems to me new. In the past, concerned subjects and citizens looked beyond their frontiers for models – to revolutionary France, to England’s limited monarchy, or even to the Soviet Union. But the idea of an out-there normality, not an ambitious definition of human rights but a basic, universal Plimsoll Line which all decent societies are supposed already to respect, is one of the curious consequences of globalisation.

Scotland, it would seem, is preparing to join the world on its own terms. This means becoming more like other places, rather than more different. For some forty years, the most common justification of nationalism has been that ‘we simply want to run our own affairs as other small countries do’. Most Scots, up to now, would add: ‘…within the United Kingdom, if that’s possible’. Over the last year, that has started to look less possible.

Nationalism, in Scotland, it’s often said, is positioned far at the ‘civic’ end – as opposed to the ‘ethnic’ end – of the spectrum. It has developed as a strong wish to join the world rather to stop it and get off. There is nothing corresponding to De Valera’s determination in the 1920s to withdraw, consolidate Irishness and ‘de-anglicise’ the national culture. Neither, so far, has there been evidence of insularity, or of anxiety that a self-governing Scotland’s increased exposure to the outside world would dilute or contaminate national identity. Quite the contrary: there is a vague but widespread assumption that greater Scottish participation in world affairs can only reinforce that identity. So the apparent paradox that this particular nationalism is eager to join a European Union in the process of political integration dissolves under Inspection.

As it emerges, Scottish nationalism with a small ‘n’ has some fortunate advantages over comparable movements elsewhere. Self-confidence in Scottish identity is strikingly solid. This is largely because the identity is not perceived as ethnic. It is not gathered around a language or genetics, neither is it challenged by a dissenting minority: Scotland has no Ulster.

Scots appear comfortable with the accurate idea that they are a mongrel nation. In a polity formed out of territories inhabited by Gaels, Anglians, Picts, Norse settlers and non-Gaelic Celtic populations in Strathclyde and the Lothians, each with their own language, a Kingdom of Scotland was recognised several centuries before anybody tried to assume a ‘Scottish people’.

Up to about the 11th century, outsiders found it worthwhile to settle in Scotland – the last being the Norse and the Anglo-Normans. After that, the flow reversed. Until quite recently, Scots regarded their country as essentially poorer than its neighbours, a place which young people were well advised to leave in order to get a life somewhere else. There was a constant outflow of men, above all, throughout the early modern period. Traders settled in Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands and the Atlantic coast of France. A very large but now almost forgotten chain of Scottish colonies developed in Poland, on the Vistula and its tributaries, while mercenary soldiers from northern and eastern Scotland served in almost every European army , from Joan of Arc’s ‘Garde Ecossaise’ and Gustavus Adolphus’s Scottish regiments in the 30 Years’ War to the Caledonian officers in Russian service. Many thousands of Protestant families from the west of Scotland moved into Ulster. as the province was ethnically cleansed of its Gaelic Catholic population.

All this movement drained Scotland of active male population, and established a Scottish identity as emigrants and wanderers. But beyond saving those who left from poverty and hunger, it did little for Scotland; the early colonists tended to invest their profits and savings on the spot rather than send wealth back to the homeland.

After the Union of 1707, opening England’s empire to Scottish trade and settlement, the outflow turned away from Europe to North America and the West Indies, and later – during the Highland Clearances – towards Australia and New Zealand. Familiarity with the Baltic region faded. The upheavals of nation-inventing revolution in 19th century Europe found no echo in Scotland. Even the experience of two World Wars, which sent Scottish men and women in the armed forces all over the world, if anything deepened this isolation and its compensating sense of ‘Britishness’.

How, then, did this discourse change direction once more in the later 20th century? Obvious factors were the dissolution of the British Empire and the decay – eventually collapse – of great industries which had made west-central Scotland the so-called ‘workshop of the world’ in the late Victorian and Edwardian decades. ‘Britishness’ – the proud sense of partnership in empire, in war and in the centralised welfare state - began to lose traction, and to be replaced by a spreading realisation that Scotland could no longer rely on a distant government in London to solve its grim problems of economic decline and social deprivation.

Scotland started to look for its own solutions. Europe swam back into focus. and in the late 1960s a delegation from the Scottish Council for Development and Industry made a study visit to Norway. This was a few years before the discovery of North Sea oil, but the visitors were fascinated by the way a small, rugged country with about the same population as Scotland dealt successfully with problems of transport and maintaining population in remote areas. What was the secret? Shockingly, the answer seemed to be national independence, giving Norway the indispensable freedom to plan and shape its own future. Not surprisingly, several of the young businessmen on the delegation subsequently joined the Scottish National Party, and one of them later became an MP

In the early 1970s, the discovery of oil and gas in the North Sea gave sudden impetus to an SNP surge in popularity (‘it’s Scotland’s oil!’). But this and excitement about the Norwegian ‘model’ didn’t yet move the Scottish public towards the European Community. In the 1975 referendum on EC membership, the Scots voted to leave, in contrast to the UK majority: the SNP campaigned with sections of both Labour and Conservative parties for a British exit. The motives then were suspicion of ‘Europe’ as essentially a right-wing, anti-socialist bloc, and – one must guess – some sectarian prejudice against the Roman Catholic element in continental Christian Democracy.

This prejudice also kept the SNP at a distance from the independence movement in Quebec, and from Irish republicanism. Instead, the 1970s brought a long and ultimately fruitless effort by the SNP to mobilise the vast Scottish diaspora, above all in North America, to the independence cause. But although happy to revisit the old motherland to enjoy haunted castles, tartans and clan reunions, the overseas Scots - in contrast to the vigorously political Irish, Basque, Baltic or Ukrainian Diasporas – have refused to be involved in the problems of actually-existing Scotland.

In the 1980s, in the backwash of Labour’s failed first attempt to install an elected Scottish assembly, the outlook of nationalism began to change – not least, in its approach to the outside world. In 1979, Winnie Ewing had become the first SNP member of the European Parliament, the famous ‘Madame Ecosse’. In 1988, the charismatic Jim Sillars, who led a breakaway Scottish Labour Party and then joined the SNP, launched the slogan of ‘independence in Europe’, which the party accepted. Meanwhile the visit of Pope John Paul II to Scotland in 1982, in which he spoke of Scotland as a distinct historic nation and urged Scotland’s 15 per cent of Catholics to use their right to help decide their country’s future, accelerated the migration of the SNP from a rather traditionalist and Presbyterian enclave towards a more inclusive, outward-looking social democracy. It was in Scotland that the works of Antonio Gramsci were translated into English for the first time, making a deep impact on the younger left generation and steering the Labour Party away from a narrow class-struggle doctrine towards an understanding that cultural and constitutional plans could belong to a socialist programme. French and Italian socialist thinking lay behind Tom Nairn’s hugely influential book ‘The Break-Up of Britain’, which first appeared in 1977.

In the 1980s, although plans for legislative devolution stagnated, steady social and political divergence between Scotland and the rest of the UK began to appear. At the same time, Scots were becoming much more aware of the European Community’s importance: the well-placarded European financing for new bridges and roads, the subsidies flowing into marginal farming, the work of the social funds, could not be overlooked. (An awareness not paralleled down south, where the impact of EC support programmes has always been far less visible).

Disagreements soon surfaced between Scottish fishing interests and Brussels – they still flare up – but their main effect was to underline an obvious political point. Without direct representation at the top tables of the Community, Scotland would always be at a potential disadvantage while the UK delegation set its own priorities for Britain as a whole. It was easy for big-country statesmen to make speeches about the irrelevance of nation-states in a globalised world. The fact was, and is, that the European Union is firmly organised on the nation-state principle, and that only sovereign independence, old-style, gets a national delegation to the table where the decisions are taken. (A recent but flagrant example of this rule occurred in November over the EU summit meeting on deep-sea fish quotas. In the UK, this is almost exclusively the concern of Scottish boats. But in spite of previous informal agreements about representation, Whitehall refused to allow Richard Lochhead, Scotland’s fisheries minister, to lead the delegation which was instead assigned to an Etonian Tory hereditary peer, Lord Rupert Ponsonby de Maulay. Lochhead had to brief him quickly him about fishery problems).

This point about the importance of independence in Europe has long been grasped in Scotland. On Tuesday, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon went to Brussels for the first time, and in an article published on the eve of her visit, she

wrote that ‘ Scotland is an ancient European nation and I … passionately believe our future is as part of the modern European family of nations … my government sees our future as one of continued European Union membership’. At the same time, she proclaims that the EU needs change and reform from the Scottish point of view. The Union’s desperate attachment to budget-balancing and neo-liberal social policy doesn’t fit the SNP’s ethos or intentions in government.

Beyond politics, Scottish culture also began to turn towards Europe and the outside world in the last decades of the 20th century. The Edinburgh International Festival dared to look beyond Western Europe and to invite earth-shaking theatre and music from Poland and Georgia. The untameable impresario Ricky Demarco brought the German painter Joseph Beuys and the Polish avant-garde theatre company of Tadeusz Kantor to Britain by way of Scotland, with lasting impact. Lynda Myles, in the 1970s, transformed the staid Edinburgh Film Festival, which had been reliant on the sober Grierson documentary tradition; she turned it into an astounding fairground of European and American film theory and experiment. so that when intellectuals in Krakow or Budapest said ‘Edymburg’, they meant not a city but the latest aesthetic of film. Determination to break free of the ‘London art world’ and its market sent two painters, Sandy Moffat and John Bellany, to both East and West Germany, a journey which – through Moffat’s teaching at Glasgow School of Art - was to inject a rich , intoxicating dose of German figurative Expressionism into the Scottish bloodstream. The immediate outcome was the dazzling work of the ‘New Glasgow Boys’ in the 1980s, but the bold, angry confidence which this import gave to Scottish visual art is still alive..

In poetry, this habit – almost a duty – of importing from other cultures and languages through translation has occupied Scottish poets since Gavin Douglas translated the Aeneid into Scots in 1513. Hugh MacDiarmid, who died in 1977, laid about himself with a dictionary in many languages (German, Russian, French and Gaelic). The late Edwin Morgan (1920 -2010), translated the work of Attila Joszef from Hungarian as well as verse from Russian, Italian and Old English. Living poets do the same, consciously letting outside light into Scottish imaginations.

All that summarises the remote and more recent past of Scotland’s re-emergence into the non-British world, its states, cultures and alliances. . Now I would like to talk about the relationship of Scotland, or more accurately of national politics in Scotland, to that world over the last couple of years. They have, as you know, been exhilarating years. It isn’t often that you see a people suddenly overtaking and outrunning its politicians, who pant along after the electorate wondering where the hell it is going and why. The SNP, I may say, is as baffled as anybody else.

Relations with the European Union had begun to change well before the 2014 independence referendum. After 2004, when Europe’s first wave of post-Communist states entered the EU, Scotland’s chief minister Jack McConnell (Labour) broke with British anxieties about foreign swamping and openly encouraged Polish immigrants to come to Scotland. Some 70,000 did so, much to the benefit of an ageing society notably lacking in small-entrepreneur energy and, on balance, they have met much more welcome than resentment. The contrast between this relaxed attitude and the nervous surrender of poliical parties south of the Border to irrational anti-immigrant populism is another significant divergence between the two countries. Confrontation over the free movement of peoples could have heavy consequences when the referendum on British membership of the EU arrives.

The campaign over the independence referendum, held on September 18th last year, frequently invoked Scotland’s future place in the world. The SNP and the broader Yes campaign appealed to widespread Scottish opinion by denouncing the presence of the Trident nuclear deterrent in Scotland (SNP policy is non-nuclear NATO membership). . The ‘Better Together’ No camp argued that NATO would never accept an independent Scotland as a member if it opted out of Trident To this, the Yessers retorted that the great majority of NATO member-states were content to shelter under the American nuclear umbrella without holding such armaments themselves.

‘Better Together’ suggested that independent Scotland would be a pariah state, excluded not only by NATO but by the European Union. This threat was based on the assumption that an independent Scotland would have to re-apply for membership of the European Union, and that other EU states - Spain, in particular, but perhaps Belgium too – might well veto the application. Those states might fear that admitting Scotland would encourage their own national minorities in Catalonia or Flanders to press home their calls for total independence. Manuel Barroso, the outgoing President of the European Commission, did the British government a favour by warning that Scotland’s application process would be prolonged, very difficult and might not succeed.

In this, ‘Better Together’ were only partly right. Alex Salmond, SNP leader and Scotland’s first minister, had certainly been rash to insist that Scotland need not make any fresh application because - as a limb of the UK - it was already inside the European Union. It grew plain that Scotland would indeed have to re-apply. But the scare stories were ill-founded too. In spite of discreet British prompting, the Spanish government did not oblige by promising to blackball Scotland, and there was little sign of hostility to the Yes campaign in the Commission bureaucracy. ‘Project Fear’ , the grimly negative propaganda of the No camp, told Scottish farmers that all payments under the Common Agricultural Policy would be frozen on the news of a Yes vote in the referendum. Officials in Brussels confirmed that this was entirely untrue: all financial support programmes would continue on a provisional basis while EU membership was being negotiated.

European residents in Scotland were encouraged to vote in the independence referendum (although the Conservative government has banned them from the coming referendum on EU membership). Several spontaneous ‘ethnic’ Yes campaigns appeared, the best organised being raised in the Polish immigrant community. One of their ‘Tak’ leaflets, calling for a Yes vote, speaks of ‘our blossoming Polish minority which reflects the long history of friendship and immigration in both directions between Poland and Scotland, a history which found its beginnings many centuries ago …’ It points out (not quite accurately) that ‘in contrast to the London Parliament, the Scottish Parliament supports membership of the EU and the flow of immigrants into Scotland …’ Here again, my own personal experience rather contradicts the suggestion in Westminster circles that other Europeans are alarmed and disgusted by the independence project. Casual friends in Italy, France, Ukraine or Poland, not to mention the Caucasus, tended to react with ‘Go for it! What kept you?’ London reactions are inevitably dampening. But I predict that, out there, a considerable crowd of small countries is waiting to cheer Scotland on as it stumbles the last mile to the United Nations.

It’s often assumed in Scotland, perhaps too easily, that an independent Scotland would find its place in a company of smaller states, within and outwith the EU, who would combine to make their influence prevail . So would Ireland and Estonia, Scotland and Slovakia and Cyprus, really get together to put Lilliput bonds on great Germany ? On paper, such alliances could certainly dominate the reform of EU structures - if the smaller states could ever agree on what reforms they wanted. But so far, in fact, it has been individual states, large or small, rather than sub-groupings which have made an impact in the EU. An independent Scotland, committed to renewable energy and yet sitting on Europe’s largest fossil fuel resource, would certainly be listened to on climate change and (deprived of Lord Rupert) on fisheries . But France and Germany , interpreting moods in North America and Russia, will go on dominating strategy. Subordinate linkages like the Vysegrad Four in central Europe do nice cultural work among themselves but lack wider influence.

For half a century, Scottish politicians have referred to the ‘Scandinavian model’. Nationalists who know Norway would like Scotland to copy the Norwegian oil fund, the biggest sovereign wealth fund on earth. And there has been a more general sense that Scotland should envy Scandinavia’s combination of social democracy with a certain distancing from military and economic blocs. But this is no longer an accurate account of those nations and their policies. And Scotland is ‘unScandish ‘ in at least two important ways: its dislike of really steep progressive taxation rates, and Scotland’s forbidding social and environmental problems inherited from the rise and decay of 19th-century industrialisation.

On the eve of the great crash of 2007-8, Alex Salmond was still talking confidently about the ‘Arc of Prosperity’, the economic boom in other small north-European countries: Ireland, Latvia and Iceland, for example.. As disaster followed, he was much mocked, although it could be argued that the speed of recovery in those nations has been even more spectacular than their fall. In spite of this, the SNP continues stubbornly to insist that Scotland is potentially one of the wealthiest nation in the world, needing only full self-government in order to exploit its material and human resources.

Scandinavia, the Baltic, the lesser Atlantic nations have all furnished models which Scots have admired, not always justified by the facts. But a model is not an ideology. Outside influences on the gestation of nationalist thought in Scotland have not come from the north or east.

Scottish writers helped to provoke national and social revolution across Europe in the 19th century. Ossian, Burns and Walter Scott were read in Germany, Poland, Italy, Hungary and even Russia in ways undreamed of in Edinburgh. Off Friedrichstrasse in Berljn , there’s a plaque to 1848 insurgents who died on a barricade there , and it carries the words of Robert Burns’s song to equality and fraternity: ‘A man’s a man for a’ that’. My point is that the flow was not reciprocal. The national movement in Scotland itself has often been interested in outside models, but has been amazingly suspicious of outside ideas.

The Rights of Man and the early nationalism of the French Revolution evoked a strong response among Scottish working people, the weavers especially, but their movement was put down by force. In contrast, the wave of romantic national revolution which swept over Europe and culminated in 1848 left Scotland almost untouched. The struggles of Ireland for Home Rule or independence which ended with the 1922 Treaty roused little sympathy in Scotland; the Liberal-Presbyterian establishment still showed intense sectarian, and occasionally racist, dislike of Irish Catholicism. Instead, there was solidarity with Protestant Unionism, and especially with the exclusionary stand of Ulster and its Ulster-Scottish culture. But a by-product of the long Irish crisis, in the years before and during the first world war, was the proposal of ‘Home Rule All Round’ ; a quasi-federal UK including Irish, Scottish, English and possibly Welsh legislatures under one imperial parliament in London . The scheme was widely popular in Scotland, and when it came to nothing, disappointment was a factor in the development of a modern nationalist movement in the late 1920s.

The young SNP was guarded about foreign influences. Nevertheless, President Woodrow Wilson’s support for European nationalisms gave the SNP a lasting interest in the right of self-determination – that slippery right which sounds so respectable but which resists all attempts to define it. But early Scottish nationalists were more impressed by the 1931 Statute of Westminster, granting Britain’s imperial Dominions full independence, than by ethnic struggles in Europe.

An exception was the leadership of T.G. Masaryk in the new Czechoslovakia – the stern old dominie who told the Czechs: ‘Don’t be afraid, and don’t steal !’ For Masaryk, independence was above all a moral aim, to do with personal and collective responsibility and with truth-telling. Many Scots have felt like that, and still do.

In the post-1945 decades, the SNP remained wary about its contacts. The 1930s had given Continental nationalism a bad name. The party voted for withdrawal from the European Community in 1975 and in 1976, suspicious of the wartime backgrounds of some Breton, Flemish and Alsatian delegates, refused to attend the Council of Unrepresented Nations in Bilbao. . Another factor here was the rising tide of European regionalism; the SNP was rigidly opposed to all attempts to classify Scotland as a region rather than a nation. But here again, an exception was made. In the late 1970s, regular contact with Catalan nationalists began, at a time when the Convergencia was aiming at federal autonomy rather than secession. Jordi Pujol, founder of the Convergencia, became a regular traveller between Barcelona and Edinburgh, conferring with SNP leaders and political scientists and meeting the media.

To conclude, a glance ahead. In 2016, there are Scottish elections. We can guess that they will return another SNP government at Holyrood, though PR should ensure the resurrection of a lively opposition – no more ‘one party state’. Then, in that year or the next, David Cameron’s referendum on EU membership. That could face the SNP with a crisis which many observers think they want, but for which in fact they are ill-prepared. I mean the scenario of a British majority for exit but a clear Scottish majority for staying in.

If that happens (and personally I don’t believe that the English will vote to leave) , the Scottish government will have little option but to call another independence referendum – which might well be declared illegal by Westminster. But it’s far from clear what the result would be. All the political dramas since last September have scarcely shifted that referendum’ s 10 per cent majority for staying with the United Kingdom – I think polls now show it down to about 8 per cent. But that could change fast if the British government mishandled the crisis and showed disrespect for Scottish rights and feelings.

Where will it end? I could make a case that the EU should leave Britain, rather than the other way around, expelling the United Kingdom as an impossibly obstructive partner and instead welcoming the membership of England, Scotland and Wales. In the same way, our constitutional crisis might end not with Scotland walking out of the UK but with the UK walking out of Scotland, thus cutting short the prospect of eternal wrangling and expensive demands. That’s how Vaclav Klaus brutally solved his Slovak problem in 1993, and the evidence is that relations between independent Slovakia and the Czech Republic are better now than when they shared a state.

Finally, it seems a fair guess that in the medium future Scotland will walk, drift or be pushed into independence within Europe. If that happens, Scotland’s immediate neighbourhood will probably be a confederation of British or perhaps West-Atlantic nations, with England and maybe the Republic of Ireland as main partners. Tom Nairn is surely right to argue that only a decisive break with the institutional architecture of the British state can release the democratic imagination of the English. The muddle of identities and constitutional rights provoked by the inflamed ‘Scottish question’ would dissolve, and England would be free to rediscover itself. For another tenant of the island, that small but infinite, multiform and independent Scotland, no change could be more welcome.