

The Independent

Independence row gets vicious as First Minister Alex Salmond accuses UK Government of being 'thieves' who plunder Scotland's oil and gas reserves

- [Andrew Grice](#)
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Alex Salmond has branded the UK Government “thieves” who have plundered Scotland’s “black gold” as he and David Cameron clashed over the future of North Sea oil and gas reserves.

Apparently by coincidence, the UK and Scottish Cabinets held separate meetings a few miles apart from each other in the Aberdeen area yesterday. They remained many miles apart in their rival visions for Scotland ahead of the referendum on independence in September.

Mr Cameron ducked an inevitable challenge by Mr Salmond, Scotland’s First Minister, for a head-to-head debate while they were in the same area. With the "No" camp ahead in the opinion polls, Mr Cameron judged that he would have little to gain but everything to lose from a high-profile confrontation with Mr Salmond, which might provide the “game-changer” the Scottish National Party needs.

Mr Cameron said: “I don’t have a vote, sadly, in this referendum; I’m the Prime Minister and I’m passionate about this issue and I hope the Scottish people choose to stay within our family. But the debate that needs to take place is between Alistair Darling [leader of the "Better Together" campaign] and Alex Salmond. What I don’t understand is why Alex Salmond doesn’t get on and hold that debate.”

The Prime Minister said he “let out a little cry of joy” when David Bowie sent a message to Scots to “stay with us” via Kate Moss at last week’s Brit awards. Acknowledging the Conservatives’ unpopularity north of the border, he quipped: “I’m sure that someone like David Bowie might be able to reach parts of Scotland that perhaps I can’t.”

Yesterday Mr Cameron kept his media appearances to a minimum as he sought to keep the spotlight on the benefits to Scotland’s oil and gas sector from remaining part of the UK. Visiting a BP installation 150 miles east of Aberdeen, he argued that the industry is better supported by the "deep pockets" and "broad shoulders" of the UK economy than it would be if Scotland were independent.



First Minister Alex Salmond joked that EastEnders would be safe in an independent Scotland

“Because we are a top-10 economy, we can afford the tax allowances, the investment, the long term structure that is necessary to make sure we recover as much from the North Sea as possible,” he said.

Although the oil and gas are now harder to extract, the remaining reserves are estimated at between 15bn and 24bn barrels of oil and could provide another 30 to 40 years of production.

Mr Cameron promised to fast-track proposals presented to the UK Cabinet yesterday by Sir Ian Wood, a retired businessmen asked to review how to maximise the remaining oil and gas resources. He said that the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) was "significantly under-resourced and far too thinly spread" to manage effectively the increasingly complex business and operating environment.

Sir Ian, who kept out of the heated debate over independence, proposed the creation of a new regulator to oversee the industry, which will also improve collaboration between the Government and energy sector. He said the changes would add "at least" £200bn to the economy over the next 20 years. "I see this as a watershed opportunity," he added. "We need to maximise the recovery of our hydrocarbon reserves and attract more investment."

The UK Government announced that Peterhead would be the location of the world's first gas-fired carbon capture and storage (CCS) facility as part of a £100m investment in the ground-breaking technology. Ed Davey, the Energy and Climate Change Secretary, denied the move was a bribe but said it would be "more difficult" to fund the project if Scots voted for independence.

Mr Salmond, a former energy economist, spoke of the "thieves" at the House of Commons, adding: "it hasn't been so much the broad shoulders of Westminster as the vast cavern in the Treasury over the last 40 years where they've accumulated massive oil and gas revenues from Scotland. The reason they want to hang on to Scotland's resources is that they've done so well out of them over the last 40 years. I think the next 40 years should be Scotland's turn."

The First Minister argued that Scotland should follow the model of Norway.

"We are told today that North Sea oil and gas is better handled by a big country like Britain as opposed to a small country like Scotland. That's a very interesting concept for people in this part of the country, who can glance across the North Sea to Norway, a country smaller than Scotland but a country which by every observation has handled its oil and gas resources better than the stewardship of Westminster.

"Norway has accumulated much of its revenues for a futures fund for future generations."

Dismissing the UK ministers' awayday in Scotland, Mr Salmond said: "the UK Cabinet has come to Aberdeen, but they're not going to have any public discussion or access. It does seem a wasted opportunity, not just for the First Minister and the Prime Minister to debate, but to have people from this area question the UK Cabinet over its range of responsibilities."

Baroness Goldie, former leader of the Scottish Conservatives, said of Mr Salmond's "thieves" jibe: "Language like this ill becomes a first minister. Playground yah-boo politics have no role to play."