

Scotland gets chance to go it alone in Brussels with own mini-embassy

SCOTLAND is to be given its own mini-embassy in Brussels as part of the Government's devolution plans.

The scheme will give Scotland a smaller representation - possibly called Scotland House - to that of Catalonia in Spain, which has its own system of self-government.

Ministers have agreed that a European unit to be established by the Scottish executive, and Scotland Europa, a body which represents a wide range of organisations, should come together in a single office.

Significantly, the new unit will be separate to UKRep, the office which represents the UK government. However, there will be close liaison between the Scottish and UK offices, senior Government sources have emphasised.

The Scottish Office has had two representatives in Brussels for some months, piloting the plans for a permanent presence in the city, and they have examined a number of options.

One issue which remained uncertain was whether the Scottish executive would locate its operation in the offices of Scotland Europa or be part of

Scottish Office ministers are likely to be at pains to emphasise in the coming months that while the arrangement will strengthen Scotland's interests in Europe they are keen to retain the positive links they have with UKRep.

Far from seeing UKRep as a rival, its officials are regarded as having been helpful in strengthening Scotland's hand and in assisting with the creation of the new Scottish Office arrangements.

Scotland Europa was set up five years ago as an umbrella organisation representing business, commercial, academic and local government interests in Brussels.

Although Scotland Europa would be located in the same building, the Scottish executive unit would operate separately from it because its officials will have a different role to play as part of the Holyrood government.

Controversy arose earlier this week when it was reported that senior civil servants had recommended the setting up of a powerful European affairs department for the Scottish parliament.

It was claimed that ministers were likely to be embarrassed and angered at the report's suggestion that the proposed department might report to a minister for Europe.

Calum MacDonald, the Scottish Office minister responsible for Europe, did not deny the existence of the report but strongly rejected suggestions that it was the cause of any embarrassment. He pointed out that the Scottish Office had already created a European affairs division headed by a senior civil servant.

The SNP will regard the new office as a useful development, arguing that it is in favour of as many links with European institutions as possible. But it will continue to stress its view that a representative office is no substitute for a minister of external affairs.

Scottish Office ministers will reject any suggestion that its Brussels plans in any way parallel those of the SNP. They believe the proposals are designed specifically to ensure that the new Scottish administration can maximise its influence in Brussels as part of the devolved system of government.

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New unit means the Holyrood parliament will have representatives at the heart of Europe



the UKRep set-up. The Scotsman has learned that, while the final decision is one for the Scottish executive, when it is appointed next year, it will be recommended that the existing Scotland Europa office should be re-located, with the new accommodation also housing the officials representing the Scottish executive.

The new office will be close to the European Commission headquarters, Scotland Europa's office is not near any of the main European offices in Brussels and is no longer felt to be adequate.

One Government source said: "We have taken advantage of the need to relocate the office in a way that will bring full benefit

to Scotland. It is felt that the Scottish Office should be accommodated in the same building with Scotland Europa to form a new Scotland House. It would effectively become the shop window for Scotland in Brussels."

The proposal will not be enough to satisfy the Scottish National Party, which has called for the appointment of a Scottish minister of external affairs with responsibility for European Union and international matters.

Leading figures in other opposition parties are likely to accept that the best compromise is an arrangement ensuring Scotland has a presence in Brussels separate from UKRep.