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A Renewed Case for the Union

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Good evening and can I thank Tony for his kind words of introduction.

It is a real honour to be speaking at the LSE this evening and I'm very grateful for the opportunity.

And firstly, let me say how calm and pleasant this audience looks compared to others I've had to face in London in recent times.

I'm thinking particularly about last June's bear-pit at Wembley.

Two nights before the referendum vote, six and a half thousand people in the audience....all wondering who the hell is this small shouty Scottish woman on the stage.

And, as much as I enjoyed getting to know – and working with – Sadiq Khan and Frances O'Grady for the event, that sort of stadium gig it's not something I fancy repeating. And that is one thing I think I DO have in common with Boris Johnson.

So – in this more comfortable, civilised atmosphere this evening – I'd like to take this opportunity instead to turn down the volume from last year's shoutathon.

To calmly and rationally assess where we stand following that Brexit vote.

And to look at how we, as one United Kingdom, should now progress from last year's turmoil and meet the undoubted challenges that face us as we do so.

And, if you'll forgive me, I'd like to focus also on the very specific set of circumstances we face in Scotland as well.

Only now emerging from the divisions of the independence referendum campaign of 2014, hit sideways by the referendum decision of 2016, Scotland is having to face up to the grim possibility of – you guessed it – the demand for yet another referendum to clear it all up.

You might not realise this, but I am actually only 21. I just feel 104.

Now – I know how this can look from the outside.

People look at Scotland and the seemingly endless turmoil and think that separation is inevitable. Especially easy to do when a significant cohort of SNP politicians use the opportunity to say so, every time they are on TV.

But my central argument this evening will be that despite the uncertainty, the insecurity, and the challenges, the case for the Union – our Union – remains strong, if not stronger, than it ever has.

We just have to ensure that we make the right case; for an outward-looking Britain that provides us all with the opportunities and the stability we all crave.

So – seven and a bit months on from that night in Wembley – where do we stand?

In some ways, I feel a little bit like the man from Tipperary asking for directions.

As someone who campaigned to stay part of the European Union, it's only stating the obvious to say that, as we set out on our journey, I wouldn't necessarily have started from here.

But over the last seven months, politicians like me have had to make a decision and a choice.

Either to deny the message that we received from people across the UK last year. Or to accept the result and to put the work in to endeavour to make the best of it.

I have said this many times before and I will repeat it tonight: had the result of the Scottish referendum gone against my side in 2014, I wouldn't have denied the vote or demanded an immediate rerun.

In exactly the same way, people recognise that Brexit was voted for and is happening. I can either deny it or buckle down to make it work. And I choose to help to make it work..

As the Prime Minister has made clear, this will not be easy. One thing I will predict with 100% certainty is that, when the negotiations begin in earnest soon, we will be met with numerous voices across Europe telling us that our demands cannot be met.

That is how negotiations work. So prepare for 18 months of being told 'No' before the final few months where agreements are reached.

Of course, many in the EU 27 will be keen to demonstrate that there is a penalty that comes with leaving the European Union in order to act as a warning to others.

At the same time, it IS against the interests of all countries in Europe – outside or inside the EU – to damage relations and block free trade.

What is now key, I believe, is that we to turn down the temperature and focus on how to build this new relationship of respect, shared interest and mutual regard.

To turn away from the jingoism of some in UKIP who still seem to find this one big joke.

To recognise the genuine hurt and confusion that our decision has caused many in Europe, for whom the EU has always been an emotional project, as well as a practical one.

...all the better to convince our European partners that we want to remain a nation still fully engaged in the continent.

There is still a belief across the continent, I fear, that people across the UK voted Leave en masse out of xenophobia....that we are part of a continent wide insurrection that sets a course back to the thirties.

I hope that is now changing.

And I believe it IS changing, as we begin to set the clear strategic direction for how we want our country to progress in the coming years.

A direction which is neither a left-wing vision nor a right-wing one.

Not a party political plan at all; rather it is about the posture we adopt as a country, no matter which government happens to be in charge at any single time.

And in her speech at Lancaster House a few weeks ago, I believe the Prime Minister provided us with that direction very clearly.

...respecting the outcome of the referendum, but at the same time recognising that leaving the EU does not mean isolationism or economic nationalism – but a new type of relationship with Europe and the world.

With, at its heart, a determination to secure a new free trade agreement between the EU and the UK, and a commitment to strike new trade deals with other nations around the world too.

I repeat my words from earlier: anybody who thinks delivering these things will be easy is mistaken. Indeed, what is striking about the Prime Minister's proposals is their ambition and scope.

But for those of us who campaigned to remain in the EU for reasons of trade – and for the many, many Leavers who also backed Brexit to go global – this very ambition, and this desire to remain open to the world, is reassuring.

And it is necessary.

We do not have to look very far right now to see a very different form of economic theory being proposed across the globe.

One that seeks to provides easy answers to deep problems...

.... which lays the blame for legitimate anger and resentment at the door of the usual scapegoats.

Which says free trade and engagement with the world – despite having lifted countless millions out of poverty in the last 40 years – is now the cause of society's decay.

Well – every crisis is an opportunity.

And I believe that if we keep to the course set by the Prime Minister last month, there is an opportunity for us to demonstrate how a nation can provide more security and more support for its citizens by doing so.

To show that an open attitude to the world is actually beneficial to us, here at home.

...to show that by strengthening institutions such as NATO and the UN, that a global order adds to our own peace of mind.

... to demonstrate that international cooperation – whether through aid giving or through world wide campaigning – doesn't just help people on the far corner of the world, but also adds to our security and our prosperity too.

In many ways, it is the more difficult path. At a time of uncertainty, economic populism – a UKIP style retreat to a happier, non-existent past – would be a much easier course.

But if we are as a country to come back together again – if we are to heal the divisions between Remain and Leave – then I do not see another way forward.

It is the only path to take.

We have made our decision. Now, I believe we should, as a country, adopt the attitude of the entrepreneur – of the man or woman who surveys the landscape around them, and seeks to make the most of it.

And who knows? Setting an example post-Brexit as a free trade, open-facing country might just persuade some of our friends with whom we have a special relationship that their own path is the wrong way to go.

Though – of course – I name no names.

So, had I been a member of the Houses of Parliament last week, I would have voted for article 50 to be triggered.

Not because I have changed my mind about Brexit.

But because we said we'd take this decision as the whole UK. We'd ask the people to choose. And then we'd get on and deliver.

We should now seek to begin negotiations as expeditiously as we can, to provide security and stability as best we can.

Because, above all, people have had enough of uncertainty

And there is nowhere in the United Kingdom where that applies to more right now than in Scotland.

As I alluded to earlier, the referendum scrap last year was not our first adventure into the happy world of referendum contests.

Nor was it our first encounter with much of its language.

The term "Project Fear" was used by nationalists to dismiss any hard questions about what independence might mean, long before it was adopted by Leave to be similarly dismissive.

By the middle of last year, I can assure you the joke for us in Scotland was all wearing a little thin.

Because it is now nearly ten years since the SNP published their very first white paper on Scottish independence – described back then as a "national conversation".

Please, let me assure you: most of us are thoroughly talked out.

The arguments have been heard – easily twenty times over.

All that's left are the minor issues that the SNP still haven't cleared up – such as what currency an independent Scotland would have, how it would fill a £15bn annual deficit, why trade with our nearest neighbour, the United Kingdom, would be improved as a result of all this.

And the most basic question of all – why do the nationalists think Scotland leaving the wider union of the EU, our second biggest trading partner, is so damaging the only answer is to then leave the wider Union of the UK – our biggest partner which is worth more than four times more? Why is the answer to stubbing your toe, to then amputate your foot?

Despite this, however, the Nationalist bandwagon rolls on.

Nicola Sturgeon announced on the morning after the Brexit result – indeed, before some votes had even been counted – that she had already instructed officials to draw up legislation for another referendum bill in the Scottish Parliament.

And ever since, the drumbeat for “Indyref2” has grown ever louder.

Now – whenever I come to talk to a London audience, I feel it is necessary sometimes to set out some facts about all this.

The SNP is brilliant at making it seem that they – and only they – speak for Scotland.

For those of you who have other things on your mind most of the time, it’s quite understandable therefore that you assume this to be the case.

So, when you hear Alex Salmond declaring that independence is “inevitable” and that the people of Scotland are champing at the bit to leave the UK, I get that this can sound plausible.

However – if I may – let me provide a couple of facts.

Despite the SNP’s best efforts, support for a second referendum on independence in response to Brexit is now falling, not rising.

Indeed, one poll recently put support at just 27% – down from 43% immediately after the EU vote.

And, secondly, support for independence itself is flat-lining.

It is absolutely true to say that, since Brexit, some people appear to have moved from No to Yes. However, it is equally true that since Brexit, others have moved from Yes to No.

Broadly speaking, they have cancelled each other out. We voted 55-45 in 2014. A split that has proved remarkably stubborn.

Now – I am not complacent one bit about the state of the Union post Brexit.

The SNP is a formidable political operation which – I suspect – has learnt from the tactics of the Leave campaign last year and is itching to get its own campaign bus into gear as we speak.

So my view is that the case for the Union must be made afresh, and we have to persuade people once again that our own Union of nations still works for us all.

And there is something of a Brexit paradox here.

Because while Brexit has provided the means for Nicola Sturgeon to crank up her independence campaign once more – it has also made that case weaker and more illogical than ever.

Let me go back to trade.

The SNP’s case in 2014 was constructed around what might now be called a “soft independence”.

Scotland would become a sovereign country, the SNP declared – but at the same time, it would keep the pound and – like the rest of the UK – remain within the European Union.

It was independence – but, claimed the SNP, with Scotland still part of two wider Unions.

It was all bogus, of course. But, self-evidently, even that bogus case no longer stands.

Now, the SNP says, an independent Scotland would still seek membership of the European Union.

Which now means, if it ever happened, the border at Berwick would become a frontier of the European Union.

The SNP has also floated the idea that, rather than joining the European Union, it could simply ask to take part in the EEA.

This way, goes the theory, it could still keep a toe in both the UK and Europe.

But – even if this arrangement could pass muster in the court of public opinion – “we must go back on our word and rerun the independence poll because Britain left the EU, but we’re not arguing for Scotland to be an EU member”

Even if that doublethink could pass, frankly, the same problems would apply. Take one of Scotland’s most important sectors – farming.

Fully 85% of Scotland’s agri-products which leave Scotland go to the rest of the UK.

We are reliant on trade with the rest of the UK to a huge degree.

But as even members of the First Minister’s own standing council of European experts have admitted, if Scotland was in the European single market, with the rest of the UK out, there would inevitably be one set of regulations in England and another in Scotland.

Even if no tariffs applied, it would still damage trade – as we know, non-tariff barriers are disruptive.

I cannot put it better than the Scottish Government’s own export body, Scottish Trade International.

Two weeks ago, its director put it like this. “Why would we try to make it more difficult to trade with our largest trading partner or reduce the amount of trade that we do with the rest of the UK?”

He added: “Whatever circumstances play out, it will be paramount that we protect free trade or the open market with the rest of the UK.”

Because, as we learned only last month in official Scottish Government statistics, trade within the UK internal market is worth four times to Scotland than trade with the EU.

The logic therefore is clear.

If everyone in Scotland agrees that free trade with Europe is important – and we do – it is literally impossible to deny that trade with the rest of the UK matters four times as much.

I have – to be fair – seen some SNP figures – faces scrunched, jaws clenched – admit as much in recent weeks.

But rather than then accept the logic of this fact – to therefore protect our own Union first and foremost – the same old Nationalist contortions were applied.

Indeed, their actual, serious response to the figures showing how much extra we trade with the UK than Europe was to point out that while this might the case Europe has more people in it than the UK.

Now, to be fair – this is true. And I accept that this fact might be a fantastic case to make on trade if you're in Denmark, or Switzerland, or Slovakia.

But if you're in Scotland and you already part of a highly integrated economic unit called the United Kingdom, which buys most of your goods and services, and if you're separated from Europe by a few dozen miles of water, it is a fact which is somewhat missing the point.

Given the flaws of this argument, you won't be surprised to learn that the SNP has no intention of using economics to make the case for independence.

Instead, it is already cranking up the grievance machine in an attempt to push people towards the exit door.

As I suggested before, I do not doubt the power of such campaigns. And Brexit has provided the SNP with plenty of ammunition.

But I do believe the SNP will struggle to succeed. For a key reason.

For all they enjoy the status of plucky outsiders at Westminster, the SNP is no longer the insurgent in Scottish politics.

For ten years, they have been the government.

And after a decade of using that position to push their constitutional agenda, there is no question in my mind that people elected them last year on the condition they stopped banging on about independence and instead focused on the day job.

Partly this is due to the increased power they now hold. As of April, it will be the SNP that sets tax rates in Scotland, not Westminster.

Once a government begins to dig deep into your wallet, I wager that people will take a more active interest in how it is managing our money.

But partly it is also due to the growing concern over our own public fabric.

As in England, concerns over the NHS are growing. A failure to keep pace with demographic pressure, plus a growing recruitment crisis, requires government attention urgently.

And more than down south, there is now growing discontent with the condition of our education system.

Only last week, we had a further reminder of the state we're in.

A report by the Sutton Trust found that the education system is failing our most able pupils, particularly those from poorer backgrounds.

The findings in science teaching, in particular, were deeply worrying. Under the SNP, the performance of able pupils has declined under the SNP, equivalent to an entire year of schooling.

At a time when we know that expertise in STEM subjects are all the more vital, it is a record that requires emergency government action.

I have welcomed some of the plans the SNP has outlined in this regard.

Moves to push more funding direct to headteachers, to give schools more autonomy and to provide school by school data on performance are correct – if, after ten years of SNP Government, massively overdue.

But it poses a dilemma for the SNP.

When she won her election as First Minister last year, Nicola Sturgeon promised that education would be “her priority.”

Indeed, in response to me last week in Parliament, she declared she remained “absolutely focused on making sure that we take the action that will deliver further improvements.”

I welcome that commitment from the First Minister.

I applaud her for saying education will be her priority.

She is absolutely right to say that her focus should be to ensure real and lasting improvements to our education system.

But my point is this.

We have just lived through ten years of an SNP Government when – by their own admission – they have been asleep at the wheel on education.

Where constitutional division has taken precedence over education reform.

Now we’re told that’s changing. Yet at the same time, the threat of a second referendum is once again being revived.

So the questions that people will ask are these:

If the First Minister now says she wants an “absolute focus” on education, why is she considering another referendum campaign which will inevitably distract her from that goal?

How can education be “the priority” for her, if she plunges us back into another all-consuming fight over Scotland’s place in the UK?

If she spends the next two years fighting over a second referendum, how will her government have the time to deliver the changes in education she says she wants?

In many ways, the reforms the SNP has outlined will challenge some long-held orthodoxies.

We know from experience elsewhere in the world that such reforms only really work with a committed and focussed government at the centre, driving change forward.

So I believe the First Minister now faces a choice.

Either to focus on her own priority, and ensure our schools are turned around.

Or to push ahead with a second referendum which will only distract her from that goal.

She says she wants a second referendum. I say, Scotland's children won't get a second chance.

Either she focuses on her own-stated priority of education. Or she betrays that pledge in favour of the SNP's constitutional obsession. She really cannot have it both ways.

Simply put, I do not think the majority of people in Scotland will tolerate the SNP setting all things aside over the coming two years to re-fight a campaign on independence.

Not when, as our elected government, we want it to focus on actually running the country for a change.

My focus, as leader of the opposition in Scotland, is to hold the SNP to account in getting on with that job.

That is why we more than doubled our number of MSPs last year – because people of all political stripes wanted someone to do that job, after a period when it felt like the SNP could get away with anything.

To have someone who will stand up against yet more uncertainty and division, and say No to another referendum.

That is why, against their own expectations; all their attempts to weaponize Brexit to boost support for independence have simply not worked.

Incidentally, that is why I would also caution Labour against their own new wheeze in Scotland – to open up the debate once more by proposing a new constitutional convention of the entire UK with a new Act of Union to give the 1707 one a refresh.

One thing I have learnt over the last few years: beware Labour politicians with a plan to fix the Union.

But I want to say this too.

Those of us who hold our United Kingdom dear, and who want to keep it together, should not dismiss the challenge the SNP poses, no matter how weak the case for independence may seem.

Nor should we belittle it.

We should never forget that, in 2014, 1.6 million people in Scotland voted to leave the United Kingdom.

As I said before last year's election, we must now seek to listen to their concerns, their needs and their aspirations and convince them that the UK is a country they want to be part of.

Returning more power to our nations and regions under this Conservative government has, I believed, helped to do this.

At its best, devolution to Wales, to London and elsewhere, has reinvigorated the debate in parts of Britain and ensured that they can talk back to central government in a way that is only healthy and mature.

But in order to really address peoples' dis-satisfaction, I believe we also need to demonstrate we have a guiding sense of purpose.

My own preference would have been for us to make that case as part of the EU.

As we leave, however, there is no reason why we cannot make it now as well.

As a country that pushes at our boundaries, instead of building walls.

As a country that expounds the virtues of free trade and solidarity with our allies and neighbours, knowing that this is the way to ease poverty, to build a more just world, and to make us – here at home – safer and more secure.

As a country that seeks to balance people's hunger for self-determination in a fast-changing world, with the knowledge that we serve nobody by blocking that world from our door.

Ladies and gentlemen, I lost the case for one Union last year.

I have absolutely no intention of losing another.

But if we are to win the argument, we must step up – and demonstrate that our own Union is a living, breathing being which can change when required, which is responsive to people's needs and which is open to the world around us.

I remain confident that the UK is that country.

We just need to show it.

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