

England and the Union

It's always a great pleasure to be with Policy Exchange in any format and as you say it's my first time as Chairman of the Conservative Party – a role I'm hugely proud to be able to fulfil because it's now over 100 years since my party became the Conservative and Unionist Party, and, through a century now of change, I would argue that the Union of the United Kingdom has remained a core part of our country's identity.

As Unionists we don't just cherish it because of our shared and proud history I think that we cherish it because it's becoming more important in ensuring the prosperity and security for everyone across these isles in all corners of our United Kingdom. For me as someone who was born in London, grew up between Essex and Norfolk and now serves as a Member of Parliament for Great Yarmouth I have seen how our Union and England's place within it has changed during my lifetime in ways that make me optimistic about the future.

Since the Act of the Union in 1707 we have at times experienced a tumultuous past. Hundreds of years ago we spent rather a lot of our energy fighting each other. But I for one grateful that is generally at least a distant memory. In more recent years our country has changed for the better. We are working together. But there are two specific things that I would argue have made the most impact over the last 20 or so years.

Firstly I'll touch on devolution. I think a huge credit is due to everybody who has been involved in moving devolution forward because devolving powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has made this country different and I think improved by changing us for the better. Over the last few decades through what has been momentous political and constitutional change the Conservative Party has been on its own journey with devolution as well.

Our record in Government is a good one. The two Scotland Acts have made Holyrood one of the most powerful Parliaments of its kind in the world with substantial new tax and welfare powers. And we have developed a modern industrial strategy which supports the industries of the future where Northern Ireland particularly is at the cutting edge.

And last year's Wales Act marked the coming of age for Welsh devolution, putting more decisions, more powers into the hands of Welsh Ministers. Giving them the important powers and new powers that they need to grow the Welsh economy. And as devolution itself has evolved with it each national has grown in its political and its own cultural identity even further. And I think as a result of that our Union has become stronger.

Because principally we are one nation. Yes we have strong and different identities but we come together as one nation. The fact that you can come from any corner of the world and still be Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish, Cornish or even a Norfolkian and yet still be British that is the spirit that makes the United Kingdom truly special and pretty much by definition unique.

The essence of our unity is that we can pool those shared resources that we have and at times the risks. The size actually of our individual economy of any one of our nations or population doesn't make us any more or less important in that greater good. It makes us equal partners. And that's why the United Kingdom is so unique and why there's been such a force for good, not just in this country but I would argue around the world.

And the second development I would argue for is that citizens of our country have created for themselves an inclusive and actually a thoughtful identity. One based on the values of freedom, fairness and justice, principles that are not just shared in England under the St George's Cross but right across the whole Union. In England it is important that people feel able to celebrate their English identity as well as their British identity.

And that's something I think we shied away from at times but it is now more important than ever. I represent a constituency that voted, over 70% to leave the European Union and many of them voted with optimism about the future for Britain. A future that is more outward-looking with a close connection to the Commonwealth; as close a connection to the Commonwealth and elsewhere in the world as with the EU.

And I know that people in this country want to see both. They want to see a Britain that is more united and one that has strong links across the globe taking a lead on the world stage. And that is exactly what a Conservative Government is focused on delivering. As a Unionist I will never stop saying why standing together as one nation is in the interests of all our nations. As a United Kingdom we are able to sustain the largest defence spending in Europe.

We're able to lead from the front in NATO and in the UN Security Council. Our standing on that world stage not only makes the UK safer but we make the world safer. And no single part of our Union could do that on its own. I feel more secure because of our Union.

And as the world's fifth largest economy being part of this Union makes us all more prosperous as well. Our economy is successful and stable because we have a shared currency, a central bank and a shared positive interest. Our businesses are able to thrive thanks to UK-wide investment. And I've seen this myself even recently when visiting Wales and looking at the 80% of their work that is linked to the economy of the UK as a whole. It's just one example of a range of practical benefits which are unique to our Union and come as a result of our shared common goals. They empower each and every nation and in doing so that empowers our wider United Kingdom.

As Chairman of the Conservative Party, a Party of the Union I am committed to working in the best interests of people right across the United Kingdom. And I am proud that under a Conservative Government the devolved administrations have been given even more power and greater influence than ever before. As I said just last week I was in Wales, next week I'll be in Scotland as I have been more recently in my previous roles and over the summer I'll be in Northern Ireland.

And in my travels I see this first-hand. A Britain where in all four corners, different cultures, different histories and faiths have in themselves enhanced our identity. I see a Britain where political, constitutional or technical change means that we now know and understand more about our four nations than ever before.

Our Union is not yet perfect it is a project but it's a project that's based on a shared history. It's bound together by a common desire to share the risks and the rewards that it brings. It is a beacon of democracy, freedom and justice for people right around the world. Now I am deeply proud to be able to call myself English but I'm even prouder to be British.

Now as many of you in this room might be sitting here this morning just like me you may well be a living, breathing example of the multi-layered identities that we all have. On my mother's side my family can trace its roots back to the Domesday Book in England, to Gunn tartan and its time in Scotland, and then on my father's side to Poland. But the fact that all of us are becoming more aware and more confident to be able to speak about our genealogy, about our multi-layered identities that I

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think is testament to the power of devolution. To not only reflect on and understand our past but to shape our future.

It's only by drawing on the strength from all of our parts and seeing our values as the principles that bind this great country together that we can continue to thrive. We may be four nations but at our core we are one people.

Thank you.