

Prospects for Scottish Unionism

Rt Hon Ruth Davidson MSP

Good afternoon.

I'd like to thank Policy Exchange for staging this important conference today and for taking such a timely interest in the question of our Union and its future.

Like the UK itself, this subject is complex and multifaceted, but the bit I want to focus on today is to discuss the constitutional state of play in Scotland as I see it.

To give my own assessment of where we are, and explain some of the apparent contradictions we see in Scottish politics.

And then I'd like to use this opportunity – here in London – to throw out a challenge.

To make the case – as it were – that if we want things to stay the same, then things will have to change.

Or rather, to argue that, if we want the Union to flourish, indeed the UK to continue, then we need to work at it, to embrace change, and to think harder about how to do so.

But to talk about the future, let me rewind to the past.

The first talk of independence started in earnest in 2007 – 11 years ago – when the SNP had their breakthrough at Holyrood.

In 2011 they won a majority and the button was pressed on a referendum.

In 2012, in a move unprecedented in my lifetime, Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties joined forces to create a campaign group called Better Together, led by the man responding to me today, Alistair Darling.

In 2013, Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon named the date for the referendum, which would, they said, be a once in a generation vote.

In 2014 the country voted by 55.3% to 44.7% and by 28 local authority area returns to four, to stay in the United Kingdom in a vote which, by the last few days had been billed by the nationalists as 'once in a lifetime'

In 2015, the SNP rode a post-referendum wave and took 56 out of the 59 Scottish seats at the general election, securing more than 50% of the popular vote in Scotland.

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In 2016, the SNP lost their majority at Holyrood in May and in June claimed the Brexit result meant they should get another shot at independence.

In 2017, Nicola Sturgeon made an official call to request a second independence referendum in March. In April, Theresa May called a snap general election. In June the SNP lost 21 seats and nearly a half a million votes.

That brings us up to yesterday, where Nicola Sturgeon went on the Peston on Sunday program to say she was going to restart the debate on independence. This came as news to much of Scotland as we'd never heard her stop it.

I have been leader of the Scottish Conservative party for six and half years. In that time, I have fought six national elections and two referenda and each and every one of them has either been partially coloured - or out-and-out dominated - by the constitutional question.

Sometimes, the past feels like another country. At the start of Better Together, Alastair was surrounded by David McLetchie, Charles Kennedy, Jim Murphy, Johann Lamont, Douglas Alexander, Danny Alexander – and in the final weeks we saw interventions from Gordon Brown, David Cameron, Nick Clegg and Ed Milliband.

Two gone forever, the rest departed from the political front line. In many ways I feel a little like the last woman standing.

But for all the changing of the guard, the debate hasn't changed. We still have Nicola Sturgeon push, push, pushing to rerun a vote she promised the people of Scotland would be settled if they did their democratic duty. And they did, in spades.

And the tragedy of all of this, is the capacity it uses up. The 'restarting of the debate' the First Minister proffered on television yesterday, is to hang on a long-awaited Growth Commission report setting out a new economic path towards independence.

It appears that the old plan – having been rejected – is now to be trashed, and a fresh plan put in its place.

As the saying goes: I have my principles, and if you don't like them, I've got others.

This will undoubtedly be surrounded by a new push, launched at party conference next month, with a new domain name, a change of branding and government ministers spending as much time on the campaign trail as they do on their briefs.

Ask about falling school standards, question missed NHS targets or challenge an economic growth rate half that of the UK's and see those legitimate questions of efficacy and governance swept aside in renewed enthusiasm for the old project.

As I said, this debate started in earnest 11 years ago. Imagine if, for 11 years, education had dominated our national debate or we'd spent 11 years finding real solutions to social care amid an aging demographic, or if we'd used that decade and more to champion Scottish business, entrepreneurship, enterprise and export.

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But we find ourselves, 11 years on, back almost where we started. With a minority nationalist government wanting us all to take one more go round the merry-go-round. - I suspect, to end up exactly where we began - with a majority unpersuaded, unconvinced and unimpressed.

In the face of this, complacency among Unionists might be tempting.

But it would be wrong.

Because the facts are these:

Anywhere between 40 and 45 percent of my fellow country men and women currently say they do not want to be part of the United Kingdom.

That our parliament in Edinburgh currently has a majority of MSPs who support independence and want the 300 year old Union to end.

And that the SNP, having just completed its 11th year in power, continues to use all the muscle and measures and influence government provides to prise apart the UK ever further, every hour of every day.

So: for all that independence seems to have lost momentum and may feel like yesterday's battle, it is still real and present.

The Union continues to be under threat.

Those of us who want to protect it should not therefore downplay the challenge we face.

What is the nature of that challenge?

Time, perhaps, to get straight to the Brexit elephant in the room.

As you all know, Scotland as a whole voted to remain within the European Union two years ago.

And as you all remember, this was seized on immediately by Nicola Sturgeon as giving her the right to demand a second referendum.

For a few weeks, Brexit looked to the Nationalists like it would provide them with a new rationale for separation.

And it's fair to say many pro-Union politicians feared they would be successful.

Nearly two years on from the Brexit vote, the picture has - however - turned out to be far more complicated than we might have imagined.

And, as Sir John Curtice recently explained, Brexit has turned out to be as much a problem for the independence movement as it has been an opportunity.

This is not because the majority of people in Scotland have changed their minds on the EU - there is scant evidence of that.

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Largely, I would suggest, it has been due to the fact that none of us – including the First Minister herself – quite foresaw the way the electorate would respond to the SNP's demands.

Firstly, the SNP attempt to corral the votes of Remain voting Scots to the cause of independence backfired.

I didn't vote Remain to have my vote co-opted as a proxy for separation, and nor did thousands of Scots like me.

And there is no doubt the SNP has lost trust among many voters for having tried to claim that proxy.

But secondly, and perhaps more significantly, the simplistic claim that "Scotland voted to stay in the EU" ignored the fact that, in fact, more than 1 million people in Scotland actually voted to leave.

And it also ignored the fact that a large number are – or *were* - supporters of the SNP and independence.

The result, as Sir John has added, is that Brexit has "served to expose a fissure in the nationalist movement that Nicola Sturgeon has struggled to straddle."

The consequence was apparent in last year's General Election, when nearly five hundred thousand former SNP voters deserted the party - Leaving the pro-independence cause severely damaged.

From having insisted on a referendum as early as next year, the official SNP stance is currently to wait and see what Brexit brings.

Reverting back to its favoured position of seeing if anything turns up.

Now, at this point I could easily talk up the theory that Nicola Sturgeon has blown it.

That the Union is safe. That independence has had it.

But – again – I would repeat my warning about the dangers of complacency.

The SNP government is still working every day, with every vehicle at its disposal, to try and prise our country apart and use the consequences of Brexit to do so.

And given we don't yet know those full consequences of Brexit – who does? - we simply don't know how people will respond over the medium term.

We do know that, just as some pro-Leave Scots have left the independence side, so some pro-Remain Scots have gone the other way.

And all of us – all of us – who want to see our United Kingdom endure and flourish should therefore agree that we must be careful not to push more people into following them.

For example, I hear it said from some pro-Union Scots that, following Brexit, they now feel their relationship with the rest of the UK is "transactional".....

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...that where once emotion and a sense of shared values bonded them together with the UK as a whole, now it is down to brass tacks and necessity. Of economic security and regulatory ease.

Because the alternative is worse and it's there's just far too much upheaval already.

Make no mistake, these are adequate reasons for the United Kingdom.

They speak to the Union's utility and its usefulness.

But I find them insufficient nonetheless.

Firstly, because this provides a shallow basis for an enduring relationship – more like a pre-nup in the lawyers' office, ready to for use when the split comes along.

But secondly because it doesn't speak to the Union we have experienced these last 300 years.

Our Union has always been about much more than mere convenience.

We are not tenants in a shared block of flats, known only to each other when we pass one another on the stairs.

We are a Union of peoples, not of convenience.

And – despite the best attempts of those attempting our break up – the Union is not something that is done TO us. It is something that we have ownership of; that we've built and fashioned and sculpted again and again.

And we should hold ourselves to that standard.

So while Brexit may not have made the headline difference to percentage support for or against the Union, we must be careful that it does not erode support for the Union beneath the numbers.

We must do all we can to add to the reasons for continuing engagement.

The question is therefore – how do we do that?

Let me use up the rest of my time throwing up some ideas.

Over the last twenty years, the conventional solution to Scottish disaffection with the Union has been to devolve power.

In the 80s and 90s devolution was viewed - primarily by Labour - as an answer to the complaint that Scotland had to accept a government it didn't vote for.

This process has now convincingly taken place.

Three Scotland Acts have been passed: the first devolving power to Holyrood, the second devolving greater say on taxation and borrowing powers, and the third – two years ago - devolving all income tax and now huge powers over welfare too.

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This has been a remarkable reform in the history of the UK.

It is still taking time to bed in - don't just take my word for it, take it from the SNP which is finding the task of building a new welfare state so difficult it's had to ask Westminster to hang on to welfare provision for several extra years.

Once it is settled however, the up-shot will be that the Scottish Parliament will be the most powerful parliament of its kind anywhere in the world.

Free to set taxes; create new benefits; run health and education any way it sees fit, take control of everything from weapons licensing to speed limits to the Crown Estate to abortion law.

The Scottish Conservatives, from being sceptics of devolution in the late 90s, have long since changed their position to welcome many of these reforms.

Indeed, it was the Strathclyde Commission, set up under my leadership, which first proposed the transfer of income tax and welfare to Holyrood – something Labour had to be forced into supporting.

As we catch breath on this incredible period of constitutional change, here's where, I think, we stand.

First, the Union has proved it is good as its word.

As promised, power has been devolved out of Whitehall. We have created a genuinely autonomous and powerful Parliament for Scotland – something the country wanted.

The settled will has been acted upon and it has changed the Union for good.

Second, that the hectic progress we have seen in devolution over the last twenty years is going to continue, when – thanks to Brexit – even more powers come back to the regions and nations of the UK.

Far from it being a power grab, as the SNP's spurious claim goes, Brexit will see powers that have been held at a Brussels level for the entire period of devolution, be transferred to Holyrood for the very first time.

And, third, that – as a consequence of all of this – the institutions of the Union are being tested in their ability to keep up.

This is something it has, in truth, struggled to do over the last few years.

As the Prime Minister said last year, there has been a tendency to “devolve and forget” in Whitehall.

Powers head out of London. Whitehall closes the book. It's as if, with so much power going to Scotland and Wales, SW1 takes the view that it can happily let us get on with it.

That's all very well.

But it causes problems when, inevitably, Westminster does indeed have to turn its attention to matters in Scotland or Wales – as it must.

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Westminster is the UK's national Parliament after all.

Nor does it reflect the reality of devolution. For all the increases in devolution over the last twenty years, the Scottish Parliament isn't in charge of an independent state – the Scottish electorate made sure of that.

Power in Scotland is more accurately shared between our two governments. We need to reflect that better.

We must never get to the stage where Scotland, or indeed Wales or Northern Ireland, are somehow deemed “other” to the UK.

Where UK Ministerial visits take on the appearance of state visits to a foreign nation. This simply isn't what Scotland voted for when we decided to stay part of the UK.

So – to back to my question: what do we need to do?

I'd like to suggest two things.

Firstly, the Union needs to catch up with the constitutional revolution it has overseen in the last few years and administer this system better.

And secondly, Scotland and other parts of the UK don't just need more devolution, they now need more Union too – to show that all parts of the UK are just that: part and parcel of our great Union of Nations which each, in their part, has helped to build.

To take the first point in detail.

Britain's operating system needs attention. And there are plenty of ways to do this.

Practically, we need to see greater collaboration between our layers of government.

Let me provide an example of where good practice is already taking place: the expansion of City Region Deals across Scotland.

In Glasgow, in Edinburgh and in areas right across the country, funding from both the UK Government and Scottish Government is pooled to support regional economic plans, led by local leaders.

Political turf has been set aside. And we are seeing progress in areas of local priority thanks to governments working in unison.

Of course this level of intervention won't be appropriate day to day in areas which are fully devolved – like education and health.

But on strategic public investment, it is entirely appropriate that the UK Government is part of the mix – not forgetting, nor interfering – but sharing responsibility.

And in addition to practical ideas like City Deals, we also need to work on the structures that underpin joint working between our governments in the UK.

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Something that is all the more pressing now that Brexit is coming.

In the early days of devolution – when Labour was in power both at Holyrood and Westminster – the relationship seemed to be governed by a series of phone calls between colleagues in London and Edinburgh, generally sorted out when Gordon Brown decided to get involved...

..perhaps Alistair can let me know whether I'm right or wrong about that.

Either way, it is no way to run a country – especially when – as now - one side of the relationship is in politics specifically to break that country up.

So we need to do more. More joint working at official level. A deeper understanding on both sides of the constitution we've created.

And ironically - for all that the SNP is trying to use Brexit to muster as much discord and friction as it can - the way we are handling the process of leaving the EU shows the way to go.

You wouldn't know it from the SNP press releases, but the truth is that, behind the scenes, officials from the UK Government and the devolved administrations have been working hard.

Quietly detailing how to transfer EU powers back into the UK.

To see where UK wide frameworks will be required.

To examine which require legislation and which don't.

To agree where powers can safely be devolved without harming the UK internal market.

As the Welsh have acknowledged, this process has been conducted collaboratively. It has been a more equitable approach to inter-governmental relations.

It has shown – through dialogue, open discussion, and close contact - how our national and devolved governments can work across political boundaries to achieve common goals.

This kind of approach now needs to be built upon.

So I'm pleased that the UK Government has agreed to review the current intergovernmental structures to ensure they are fit for purpose as we leave the EU.

Not as a stepping stone to federalism, as some might have it.

But a focus on how to make devolution – and our Union with it – work better.

And just as I want to see the institutions of the Union working better with our devolved nations, I'd also like to see more of them in our part of the world too.

We've had more devolution in Scotland, we now need more Union too.

As I said in my speech to the Conservative party conference last year, we remain far too London-centric as a nation.

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No other comparable developed nation is as dominated by its capital city quite as much as we are.

The consequence of this is that the Union too often can feel like something done to people, rather than something they take part in.

So, while I speak as someone who is a happy and affectionate visitor, I also would argue that we must start to divest London of some of its power.

As our own manifesto put it last year: "For too long, power has been centred in London. This means opportunity has centred in London too. It is time major cities around Britain shared in the government of the United Kingdom."

Indeed: "For our civil service and major cultural bodies to claim to be UK institutions, they need to represent and be present across our whole United Kingdom."

It is good to see the UK Government delivering on this – most notably with the current plan to move Channel 4 out of London.

Of course I am biased and think that Glasgow is the clear, stand out, candidate to host it. But wherever it goes, Channel 4 should be just the start.

For example:

A new UK Government hub is opening soon in Edinburgh. It's not just a chance to create more public sector jobs, it's an opportunity to ensure government officials are closer to industries with importance to us, like clean energy.

Arms' length bodies – they're all still mostly based in London. Forgive me, but if they're arms' length, why do they need to be within touching distance of SW1?

Our cultural institutions. We see progress being made already – I'm thinking in particular of the soon to be opened V+A museum in Dundee. But why not more?

Why is it we must come to London to see the wonders of the British Museum? Why not create a second home for the Museum nearer to where most of the rest of us live?

On Brexit. We know huge new powers will be repatriated to these shores. Should our newly empowered fisheries industry be run from London? Shouldn't it instead be based in Peterhead?

Instead of EU Structural Funds, poorer parts of the UK are to be supported by a new UK Shared Prosperity Fund. Shouldn't it therefore be based in one of the poorer parts of the UK, instead of one of the richest city's on the planet? I think it should.

Or take sport. Nothing has the power to bring a country together more. Ironically – given what I've just been saying - it was the London Olympics, which shared its venues across the UK, which provided the most vivid recent example.

So we should be thinking of what other events we can bring to our nation.

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I hesitate here in floating the idea a joint UK wide World Cup bid – knowing just how much trouble it would land me in with the Scottish FA.

But it's a thought isn't it? And this is a think-tank, so - as long as it doesn't mean a joint team on the pitch - what the hell....

The point is this: a country that spreads its power and culture networks across the country will ensure that all of us, no matter where we live, feel we have a real stake in it.

Too many people feel that the Union is something projected onto them. Spreading its benefits around more evenly will ensure it is something they own; something they want to belong to.

That is a prize all Unionists should commit to working towards...building a Country – a union of nations - that isn't held together by mere convenience; but is kept together by the deeper bonds of shared identity and mutual values.

Because, frankly, I cannot be satisfied in fighting for the UK solely by pointing to the many flaws of separation.

I don't resile from exposing the SNP's arguments, of course.

But doing *only* that doesn't do justice to the country I love – and the country I want others in Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland to love too.

So, I believe, we must confront a paradox.

Part of what I love most about Britain is its very messiness.

No founding texts, no single document constitution: uncodified, relaxed and flexible: this is the British way.

We adapt and accommodate – not least by cordially agreeing a referendum that could have ended our very existence.

And in so doing, we have survived and prospered in a way that other nations have failed to do.

But the paradox is this: if we want this flexible messiness to continue then, faced with the constitutional challenges of the coming few years, we need to pay more care and attention to the way we do our business.

It's fine being flexible. Not so good if tolerance lapses into indifference.

And so if the UK is to stay, we must face reform with boldness.

And we will, I believe, find a receptive audience if we do so.

All the evidence shows most Scots don't want to go back to yet more constitutional division.

They just want the UK state to act in a manner with respects their interests and seeks to make life better for us all.

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We have delivered a better system of devolution.

Now the challenge is to deliver a better Union too.

And if we do that, I'm confident that we can see off separation, we can meet the aspirations of people who don't currently see their future in the UK; and we can build a stronger nation for all

Thank you.