

A Differentiated Approach for Scotland Makes Sense

Alyn Smith | 22 March 2017

Scotland is a European nation but since June last year that position has been under threat. To me, Brexit is not an academic exercise but a punch to my stomach. It offends me intellectually, it offends me politically, and it saddens me greatly. Right now we should be leaping to the defence of multilateralism, not sowing the seeds of division. Blaming others is simple but working together and showing solidarity is a challenge that must be risen to.

The reality is that Europe faces not one but a whole series of challenges: climate change, the refugee crisis, the financial crisis, the fight against terrorism. These can only be resolved by working together. After the US election, Europe is needed more than ever, to lead – not follow – the rest of the world.

The independence referendum and the result of last year's EU referendum have presented us with a conundrum. The conflicting results from across the nations and regions of the UK have presented a challenge to politicians to find a solution that measures up to what the UK majority want (assuming a consensus can be found) while taking into account the specific political and economic circumstances in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Gibraltar.

Since the vote we have attempted to work constructively to find a compromise that reflects the political reality. The Scottish Government has published an options paper, setting out the circumstances we see as the least worst variant of Brexit. We want the UK to remain within the Single Market and are urging that, but if that is not possible, there is going to be an exceptional status for Northern Ireland, and Gibraltar, so we want a distinct status too with our preference being EEA membership for Scotland. Such a compromise would not only protect our economy but also prove that Scotland's voice matters and that the UK really is a family of nations.

This is a significant compromise on our part and an attempt to square the results of the independence and EU referendums.

I know this is difficult. Any solution will be complex, awkward even, and will need serious political heft behind it. But solutions are possible. The existing variable geometry within the EU does not provide a direct template for Scotland but does illustrate that flexibility exists and can be deployed to find answers that work. The EU can and does provide flexible solutions.

The response from the European Parliament thus far has been simple, and the EU should be ready for such a request. But this response is clearly set within the rules of the EU as a club of member states. Scotland cannot directly ask for this – we need the UK Government to represent us. What we need therefore is for the UK Government to engage with our proposal and incorporate it into the Article 50 letter that is going to be submitted to the EU.

The announcement that we should begin to prepare for an independence referendum is a response to the utter lack of engagement from the UK with our compromise. As the First Minister has made clear, the door is still open. Unfortunately, UK ministers are spending more time establishing a 'punishment narrative' that the pending failure of talks is the EU's fault rather

than their own. The reaction across the continent is utter bafflement and impatience. There's increasingly little goodwill left towards the UK, thanks to the attitude of the Brexiteers.

Nothing in relation to Brexit is going to be simple, but our starting point is simple. We want to stay. We argued for Europe, we voted for Europe, and we're trying hard to find solutions to the dilemma we all face. With our renewable energy, our oil and gas, fish, farming, banking and biotech, we want to remain part of the EU family, united in diversity. We want to play our part; with or without independence I believe there are ways we can remain engaged.

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