

# Douglas Ross: Why is our Union special?

2 Nov 2020



Please see below Douglas Ross MP's speech to the Policy Exchange on 2nd November 2020

## **Why is our Union special?**

Thank you Dean.

In my speech last month to Conservative Conference, I said that the "case for separation is now being made more effectively in London than it ever could in Edinburgh".

Of course, I knew when I made that statement it would be seen by some as provocative.

But I also said it because it reflected growing frustration in Scottish Unionism.

Frustration at how actions taken by the UK Government in London have affected views in Scotland towards our Union.

Now there has been much discussion lately about the need to strengthen the Union.

I have heard lots of views on the need for 'Union policy' or a 'Union agenda'.

But I have not heard a consensus on what those are or on what strengthening the Union actually means.

That is why I have taken the opportunity to make this speech at Policy Exchange today.

Having identified a problem last month, I now want to offer a solution.

To set out my view on how the UK Government can successfully rebuild support for our Union in Scotland,

And the challenge that they face in doing so.

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I must start by noting that we are discussing our Union just as we are on the cusp of forging a new relationship with another union, the European Union.

There can be no doubt that Brexit will change the relationships between Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England.

On a practical level, leaving the EU has meant a reallocation of powers previously legislated for in Brussels,

they are now going to be exercised in Holyrood, Cardiff Bay, Stormont and yes Westminster

In a way that could never have been envisioned by the architects of devolution and the settlements were not originally designed for.

Powers in areas such as environmental regulation, animal welfare and public procurement.

The majority of these are being transferred directly and will make our devolved legislatures among the most powerful of their type anywhere in the world.

But the EU is not just a trading bloc, it has an interest in a wide range of areas relating to economic development, management of natural resources and culture.

Sectors of our economy and communities across our country have benefited from EU funding programmes over 47 years of membership.

And those programmes straddle areas of devolved and reserved responsibility, they are not constrained by our devolution settlement.

Those funds will now have to be replaced by the UK Government and the Devolved Administrations.

Working together to ensure that communities and people receive the support that they deserve.

But more importantly, on an emotional level, leaving one union has changed how some people view our own Union.

Those people who voted for Scotland to remain in the UK in 2014 but also in the EU less than two years later.

Now that we are leaving the latter they are now questioning their decision to support staying in the former.

Our opponents say that this result has invalidated the 2014 Referendum.

On a practical level, we could answer this by simple democratic mandates.

In the 2014 Independence Referendum, 55 percent of voters were against leaving the United Kingdom.

And in the 2016 EU Referendum, 52 percent of voters were in favour of leaving the European Union.

In a democracy, we respect the outcomes of both referendums.

Then there are the economic arguments.

The rest of the UK is the destination for 60 percent of Scottish exports, supporting over half a million jobs.

In comparison, the EU is the recipient of only 19 percent of our trade.

The UK is also worth £10 billion in additional public spending in Scotland.

While Scotland is a net contributor to the EU.

Yet these practical arguments do not address the emotional disconnect that a person in Edinburgh who voted No and Remain felt when they saw celebrations in London on the 31st of January.

Or the frustration that they feel when the UK Government continues to prepare for no deal, while seeking to deliver a new partnership with the EU.

Instead of taking pride in the decision that they made in 2014, there are people who have begun to question it.

They ask "Why is our Union different?"

The UK is a partnership of nations just like the European Union.

Scotland is a European country like those across the North and Irish seas.

We are going to face years of uncertainty whether we are part of the UK or independent anyway.

Why is our Union special and why should I continue to support it?" Is their question.

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There are many countries and international organisations that are officially unions.

The European Union has continental counterparts in Africa and South America.

Across the Atlantic, the constitution of our American friends refers to the United States as a union.

And it would be remiss of me not to pause and note, that we are just a day away from the US Presidential Election.

I hope we can all look forward to a fresh approach.

Yet when they are talking about a union, it is clear that they are referring to an institution, be it a state or trade bloc.

Whereas, here we do not just use the term Union to refer to the state that

was created by union, the United Kingdom

But also, the important ties which hold our country together.

Because our Union is not just one single relationship,

Yes, there was an Act of Union in 1707 that brought Scotland and England together and created the United Kingdom.

But before that event there was already a tight web of connections, tying together our four nations.

And that web of connections is deeper today than it has ever been.

It brings together not just nations but communities and people.

23,000 students from the rest of the UK are enrolled in Scottish universities.

Lincolnshire farmers supply barley that produces Speyside Whisky in my Moray Constituency.

And the most popular children's book series in the world was written by an Englishwoman in Edinburgh cafes.

The political institution is underpinned by social and economic ties that affect every aspect of our lives.

Our Union even exists in our families.

My grandfather – Geordie Sorrie – was one of nine boys, brought up in small tin-roofed two-bedroomed croft in Monymusk, Aberdeenshire.

One of his brothers – Jimmy – moved to Corby originally employed in the Steel Works and then with Golden Wonder. Our family kept close links with Jimmy and his Evie and their family as well as cousin Mervyn and his family in Northern Ireland.

Maybe after Saturday's rugby score it's for the best that our ties in this example don't extend to Wales.

But just like families, our Union has created a common history, culture and identity that is shared across our four nations.

At the same time, while it has shared values, our Union is also open and inclusive.

It allows us to continue to express our national differences while being part of a greater whole.

I do not believe that the most passionate of nationalists could credibly argue that being part of the UK makes us less Scottish.

Our Unionism is flexible enough that it can accommodate multiple national

identities.

It celebrates our differences and cherishes inclusion over uniformity.

Contrast this with nationalism.

It defines identity as singular, as if it is a commodity that you can only have one of.

By its very nature it is narrow and divisive.

It requires an other to exist, someone who can never be part of the group.

The SNP is no exception to this.

Nicola Sturgeon has done a good job of papering over this for appearances' sake, but the view of many in the SNP is no different from nationalist movements we see in other countries.

They see nothing wrong with blacklisting a shop because of the way the owner votes.

Or boycotting a product because it has a union flag on it.

Over the summer we were reminded of this again when people crossing the border for work and travel were shouted at to "go back to England".

And in the middle of a global pandemic.

When thousands of Scots have lost their lives and tens of thousands of jobs are at risk.

There are many SNP councillors, MSPs and MPs who believe that preparing for an independence referendum now is a good use of their government's time.

Who show more interest in the latest poll numbers than the latest R number.

Instead of trying to bring people together in a time of crisis.

They are frothing at the mouth over what they see as their golden opportunity to push independence.

I truly believe that given the choice between a divisive and narrow nationalism and an inclusive and open unionism, our No/ Remain voter from Edinburgh would choose the Union every time.

And it is that attitude that has allowed our Union and the United Kingdom to endure.

It has the weight of history and of social as well as economic and political partnership that the EU lacks.

But recognises our national diversity, our union of peoples, in a way that could never exist in the United States.

Our Union is special because it respects our right to have multiple identities while still building a deep and strong partnership.

We do not have to choose between being Scottish and being British, we can be both.

This extends to how we govern our country.

Scotland has two governments and in contrast to international comparisons, there is no rigid hierarchy between the different tiers of government.

They both have areas of responsibility and management.

They both have a role.

The decisions made in both the Scottish Parliament and Westminster affect the way that we live our lives.

And people look to both their MPs and MSPs to resolve their issues.

This political devolution is still a relatively recent invention, though its administrative roots run deep.

But it's very existence shows the inclusivity and adaptability of our Union.

That we were able to find an answer to the calls in the 1980s and 90s for more distinction in how Scotland was governed.

And that we could change the way that the United Kingdom operated to accommodate those wishes,

while retaining all of the benefits of our Union for all of our people.

To the effect that we do not have to choose between governance from Edinburgh or London, we have both.

In contrast, our departure from the EU was driven by its inability to shift away from ever closer union, to adapt and change to our needs.

In February 2016, when David Cameron asked the EU for a "special status" he received very little.

So, the flexibility of our Union is also part of what makes it special.

That willingness to adapt, to have diverse and changing governance structures across its four nations and increasingly within those nations,

While still ensuring that every community across the UK shares equally in the benefits of the Union,

is another of its great strengths.

But if our Union is to endure then it must continue to be special

It must play to its strengths by remaining open, inclusive and able to adapt to the times.

As I have said earlier, there is a lot of debate and discussion right now about how we strengthen the Union.

It is an easy soundbite inserted into many speeches and comments.

Yet there is not a shared understanding of what this means.

There are those who see devolution as a massive strategic error.

As a Pandora's box that once opened was a "process, not an event" not towards a stable settlement but towards independence.

One that has given the SNP a platform from which it has the resources and the exposure to destroy the British state.

And therefore, the only way to strengthen the Union is to abolish the Scottish Parliament and return to a pre-1999 situation or severely constrain its powers.

I say to them firstly, we live in a reality where devolution enjoys widespread public support.

And secondly, our problems lie not with the machinery of devolution but with the SNP Government that is controlling them.

And they will not vanish with the removal of the Scottish Parliament.

So, I say to those people to keep their eye on the prize of defeating the SNP rather than attacking a settlement that the Scottish people support.

We will not strengthen the Union by turning back the clock.

We will only strengthen support for independence

And my party will not win by putting itself on the wrong side of that argument again.

On the other hand, there are also those that see the answer to strengthening the Union in another round of devolution.

One more Scotland Act, to join those of 1999, 2012 and 2016.

Devolution in 1999 was an effective response to support for home rule, and in the 2010s for its expansion.

It was not designed to be an effective response to Scottish independence.

My concern would be that another transfer of power, like those we have seen previously, would not shift the dial in any meaningful way.

While it may endanger the enduring principle that all parts of our Union share equally in its benefits regardless of where they live.

So more devolution is still not going to be an effective response to independence.

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As I have said, our Union's strength is its adaptability, in being able to deliver imaginative responses to the challenges that it faces.

I believe that imaginative response exists if the UK Government has the will to lead rather than reacting to events.

Brexit has brought with it many challenges, such as replacing EU funding schemes, legislating in areas of former EU regulation and the end of freedom of movement.

The black and white approach of our devolution settlement no longer looks adequate.

The UK Government needs to seize the opportunity to create a more tangible role for itself in delivering previous EU funding schemes.

Yet, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, for example, remains just a name and little more.

We need to see an approach taken that allows for UK-wide programmes of investment in communities.

But that does not replicate or take away funding from what the Devolved Administrations are already delivering.

On the other hand, the UK Government needs to do more to involve the Devolved Administrations in delivering our new international role.

They will have to implement trade deals so should have a role in producing their terms.

And with the end of freedom of movement we will need to see more flexibility in our immigration system to account for the needs of different parts of our country,

which the Devolved Administrations are well placed to represent.

Key to this working will be a restatement of the "respect agenda" in engagement and communication.

Our devolution settlement was conceived by a Labour Party that arrogantly presumed that they would remain in power in all parts of the UK.

It was designed with informal resolution rather than open political disagreement in mind.



The Covid-19 crisis has put the structures for interaction between the UK Government, Devolved Administrations and indeed the English Mayoralities to the ultimate test.

And I think that even the most committed defender of the current system would admit that they have been found wanting.

On one hand the UK Government's suspicions around the security of information has been legitimate.

But on the other, Devolved Administrations, responsible for managing the virus in their nations, have been forced to look for detail on announcements from publicly available press releases.

Trust has broken down and when it does we see time and time again popular opinion siding with their devolved representatives.

The SNP benefits from inter-governmental disputes, the UK Government does not.

The solution lies in a formal framework for interaction, with rules underpinning the flow of information and regular engagement.

Supported by a clear arbitration process to manage dispute and disagreement.

This will not just reduce the opportunities for nationalists to claim a "constitutional crisis" but encourage more collaboration and working together,

That is what the Scottish people want to see from their governments.

It is also time that we delivered a voice for the Devolved Administrations and English Mayors at Westminster.

It is ridiculous that the Church of England and hereditary peers are better represented in the UK legislative process than the Scottish Government.

Many governments have flirted with Lords reform, but when we finally get around to it, we need to deliver formal representation for our nations and regions.

These suggestions are in no way the totality of what the UK Government could do,

but they do show how our Union can evolve to meet current challenges,

how it can encourage the collaboration that the Scottish people want to see between their governments.

while continuing to ensure that all parts of our country share equally in its benefits.

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Ultimately though, we are not going to rebuild popular support for our Union just with constitutional change.

While our Union is special because it is flexible it is also so because it is underpinned by common values shared across our nations.

Brexit has been damaging to support for the UK because it undermined, in the eyes of many, those shared values.

We failed to bring our country back together again after the vote.

Leave and Remain parts still feel divided more than four years on from the decision.

For many the 31st of January represented a triumph but for others all they felt regret.

We did not build a consensus around delivering Brexit.

Instead there has been a 'winner takes it all' approach.

And that has alienated former Remain supporters who still feel aggrieved at the referendum result.

In Scotland, the outlet for that anger and frustration is the SNP.

It is not the benefits of separation that is driving support for independence.

But instead a perception that Scotland and England no longer share common values.

The Prime Minister said after last year's General Election that we need to "let the healing begin".

And I agree that "healing" is what we need right now.

We need to reunite our country around a new consensus, re-establish our shared values and move our country on from the division of the EU Referendum and the process of Brexit.

Because I truly believe that is what the vast majority of people in our country want to do,

come together and move on.

That is always going to be difficult in a pandemic that has seen a differential approach across our country, between and within nations.

But if this terrible virus has shown us anything it is that time is too precious to continue fighting the same arguments for years to come.

Instead we need to unite our country around the values of openness and inclusion that have always defined our Union.

That is the single most important thing that the UK Government can do to strengthen it.

Yes, we need to see a more visible UK Government in Scotland and for it to have a more defined, mature relationship with the Scottish Government.

But our Union is greater than the governmental ties between nations.

It is a Union of communities and of people.

And those ties need to be reinforced by shared values that the UK Government needs to promote.

So even more important than “Union policies”, we need to see factoring in upholding our open and inclusive Union into everything the government does,

To reemphasise the shared values that exist across our four nations.

These shared values were clear when Rishi Sunak delivered the furlough scheme that protected millions of jobs in every part of the UK.

The furlough scheme has not just been a lifeline to people who would have otherwise lost their jobs, it is also a real and tangible reminder of the economic security of the Union.

It shows exactly how boldly we can act as a United Kingdom.

Now that the scheme has been extended to cover the impact of a second lockdown in England, how could a Unionist government not restart the scheme if a second lockdown is required in Scotland?

It cannot be that furlough is not affordable when Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland or parts of Northern England need to go into lockdown – but when all of England goes into lockdown, the taps are turned on.

So this has to be cleared up, now.

Commit to extending furlough if Scotland needs to go into lockdown.

We all hope that by following the guidance and doing the right thing, a second Scottish lockdown will not be necessary

But if it is, the UK Government must treat Scotland the same way as England.

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Last month, I said that independence was not inevitable.

I truly believe that is the case.

The bonds that we share across our four nations and between the people and communities that make up our country, are deeper and more essential now than they have ever been.

But you can't ignore the way that Brexit and how it has been delivered has undermined the perception that there are common shared values that unite us.

We can continue to talk in facts, about the economic importance of the UK or the democratic mandate which meant that we had to leave the EU.

And about practical changes to the way that we govern our country to empower the Devolved Administrations and increase the visibility of the UK Government.

These are important but the key driving force behind the independence movement right now is the perception that our values are no longer shared.

After the Brexit process and the handling of the pandemic they no longer see our Union as underpinned by shared values, as special.

And the challenge to this UK Government if it is serious about strengthening our Union.

Is to bring our country together.

Let the healing begin.

Do not govern solely for the majority but for everyone across our four nations.

Make restating our shared Union values of openness and inclusion a part of everything the government does.

And if we do that then I believe that we will see support for independence fall.

We will make that Edinburgh voter proud again of the decision that they took in 2014.

Because independence remains as unattractive a proposal as it has ever been.

The Scottish people do not want to have to go through another divisive referendum right now.

They do not want to give up sterling for the euro or an unidentified other currency.

And they do not want a border at Berwick separating trade and families.

So, if we want to strengthen our Union then we need to restate and rebuild our shared values.

We need to show why our Union is special.

So let us unite this country,

Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland

Leavers and Remainers.

Around our shared Union values

And move forward together from division.