

Douglas Ross's speech to Conservative Party Conference 2020

3 Oct 2020



The full speech is as follows. Check against delivery:

Let's put an end to defeatism and disinterest

We are the Conservative and Unionist Party.

Unionism is in our name and for more than 100 years it has formed the core of our party's identity.

To be a member of our party, to subscribe to its values and support its principles, is to be a unionist.

As a Conservative and Unionist, it is as essential to believe that Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England form a greater whole together than they could ever do apart,

And it is the Conservative and Unionist party's job to continue to make the case that this partnership is as important now as it has ever been.

Unionism is written into our party's DNA.

You cannot be a conservative and not be a unionist, the two values are inseparable in our politics.

Or so they should be.

Far too many members of our party in England have forgotten this.

They either do not see support for the continuation of our United Kingdom as a core part of their politics,

or they see it as a nostalgic, historic value, rather than a living and integral part of our country's modern identity.

They do not value the importance of the Union to their own British identity.

As if somehow Scotland leaving the UK would not wash out the Union flag.

Or the rich tapestry of our shared history, woven through three hundred years of joint endeavour, would not be unpicked.

They too often see Britishness and Englishness as one and the same.

These attitudes extend, to how we govern our country.

Despite bold promises, the Union too often becomes an afterthought.

In successive governments, it is given warm words and lip service but sadly too often there is little action.

Across England, there are those that see Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as poor investments, recipients rather than contributors to the welfare of our country.

And who want to see a UK Government that is focused on England and minimises its responsibilities to our other three nations.

Saying that issues in the other three nations do not matter to them.

As if some workers in Berwick do not go home to live in Berwickshire.

And commercial deals in Glasgow don't affect businesses in Manchester.

Even more infuriating, are the people that have seemingly written our country off.

I'm patriotic. A proud Scot and a proud Brit.

In the House of Commons I represent the area I've lived and worked in my whole life.

I campaigned for three long years to win a referendum to stop independence, but I now get told that it is inevitable by people that have barely ever been to Scotland.

Who say it is no longer worth fighting for and that we should just give up.

As if we are wasting our time in trying to hold our country together because in their eyes the SNP have already won.

It apparently does not matter that just six years ago, two million people in Scotland gave a democratic mandate to keep the United Kingdom together.

They read an opinion poll in the *Sunday Times* and conclude that it gives the SNP a right to take our nation through that divisive process all over again.

They treat Scottish independence as a question of when and not if.

And therefore – they believe – there is no point in shaping the future of the UK around the needs of Scotland.

Their argument is – Why should Scottish interests ever be first, if soon it won't be part of the country anyway.

We like to pretend that these are the views of only a small minority, but I hear them far too often.

Talk of defeatism and disinterest towards the future of the Union is rife.

Is this really how members of our party see the future of our country?

By devolving and forgetting, you remove the UK Government from the everyday lives of people across Scotland.

Through moving the Union down the list of priorities, you send a signal to the Scottish people that the continuation of our country is unimportant.

And those who believe that independence is inevitable strengthen the SNP's own arguments.

I take no pleasure in saying this, but the case for separation is now being made more effectively in London than it ever could in Edinburgh.

This defeatism and disinterest only serves nationalism and divides our country.

The SNP have learned since their defeat in 2014, that it is much easier to get people and the media in England to accept Scottish independence, than it is to persuade Scotland.

If you stop believing in the future of our United Kingdom, then you are doing the SNP's work for them.

Giving substance to the nationalist argument that the rest of our country does not care about Scotland.

By talking down our Union you risk creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

My message to those of you who think this is, firstly, to ask yourself a question – whose side are you on?

Because if you're on the side of defeatism or you're on the side of those who say Scotland's place in the United Kingdom doesn't matter, that it isn't worth fighting for,

then you are on the opposite side from me and you are in the wrong party.

My party, our party, the Scottish Conservative and Unionists, are not going to give in, not now, not ever.

We know that a clear majority of Scots do not want another referendum now.

And that they find the specifics of independence, like a separate currency or a border between Scotland and England, less than appealing.

Just this week, a former SNP MP admitted that support for independence was "wafer thin".

At next years' election we are going to take on the SNP and yes, we can win.

I do not underestimate the difficulty or scale of this task.

They dominate Scottish representation at Westminster, Holyrood, our local

councils and have control over a £50 billion budget.

They are backed by a London media, that falls over themselves to praise the SNP and give them an easy ride.

They don't challenge Nicola Sturgeon on why she lied to the Scottish Parliament.

Or on the SQA examinations fiasco or the lack of planning for students moving to halls.

Or why Scottish schooling has reached record lows when Nicola Sturgeon said it was going to be her "number one priority".

But if you want someone who can beat the SNP, I've done it before.

In 2017, I beat Angus Robertson, Nicola Sturgeon's right-hand man, to win my Moray constituency.

And last year, despite an SNP surge, I won again.

I know how to beat the SNP.

And we have a simple message that we will be taking to the Scottish electorate.

As the Prime Minister said only yesterday, the last thing that Scotland needs right now is another independence referendum.

In the midst of a global pandemic that has caused the biggest economic downturn in our lives, the SNP are still talking about separating Scotland from the rest of the UK.

Instead of focusing 100% on our recovery from this crisis, they want to restart the same old tired constitutional debate that has held our nation back for the last 13 years they've been in power.

A debate that has always turned the focus away from Scottish priorities.

In that time, the public services that we rely on have gotten worse, communities have been left behind and our economy has stagnated.

So, we will say that this is our opportunity to finally move Scotland forward.

That we pull together, leave the old divisions behind and make it our uniting national mission to rebuild Scotland.

I know that this vision, of tackling priorities and moving forward, instead of more division and stagnation is one that is shared by the Scottish people.

We can defeat the SNP, so my second message to you is that it is time for the whole Conservative Party to rediscover its Unionism and get behind us.

Because I have heard enough of defeatism and disinterest on our side.

By virtue of being members of this party we are unionists and it's time everyone showed it.

The United Kingdom forms a much greater whole than just England alone.

A greater whole that is rich in diversity and celebrates the differences as much as it does the similarities between Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England.

And it is that greater whole that the rest of the world see when they visit, trade with and learn about the UK.

When people look at our country it is not represented by the St George's Cross but by the Union Flag.

And they see Glenfinnan and Stirling Castle as much a part of our country's heritage as they do the Tower of London and Hastings.

Yet if independence were to happen then that familiar image would be shattered, just at the moment when we need it most to make a success out of Brexit.

Instead of a Global Britain looking to build new partnerships around the world there will be a Little England.

And the Union does not just matter to our international image, it affects every single aspect of our lives.

Over half a million Scottish jobs depend on trade across the UK and there are many jobs in England that also rely on our Union.

We share the pound sterling and are part of the sixth largest economy in the world.

And our Union has once again renewed its importance during these difficult times.

As our outstanding NHS has worked to suppress the virus over the last six months through the heroic efforts of nurses, doctors and hospital staff.

As the public play their vital role following the restrictions to reduce the spread of Covid 19.

As staff in our care homes and in local communities protect the most vulnerable in society.

The United Kingdom delivered £16 billion of funding to support Scotland through this crisis, including the furlough scheme that has protected over 900,000 Scottish jobs.

Our Union also means that the rest of the UK shares Scotland's powerhouse financial services sector, travel and tourism industry or our renowned food

and drink exporters, like those here in Moray where I'm speaking from today.

The UK share our world-famous universities, comedy and music.

Our Union matters to all of us whether we are Scottish, English, Welsh or Northern Irish.

It unites us all in a shared endeavour that we should do more to celebrate.

But our Unionism cannot just be warm words and nostalgia.

It needs to be practical, it needs to be real and it needs to be shared across all four nations of our country.

We need to show that we have common interests.

That jobs in Glasgow matter just as much as jobs in Newcastle.

Or public services in Aberdeen as much as public services in Plymouth.

Just because there is a division of powers across our country does not mean that there should be a division of interest.

We also need to see this interest being matched by tangible action.

Because we have heard statements of intent too many times before.

And most importantly, we need to end this doom-laden talk coming from London of the Union being finished.

When I campaigned as part of Better Together and worked late into the evenings, knocking on doors, speaking at public meetings and manning street stalls,

it wasn't so that someone from south of the Border could tell me a few years later that the victory didn't mean anything.

that the SNP should have another shot and that we should do it all over again.

It was so that Scotland's future in the United Kingdom was secured.

And we could put the constitutional issue to rest and move on as one nation.

I frankly find it insulting to hear people from outside Scotland peddling the idea that there should be another vote on independence.

So, if this is the Conservative and Unionist Party, let's all stand behind the democratic decision that two million people in Scotland made to keep our Union together.

And promote its virtues, rather than helping the SNP by speculating about its end.

As I said, you cannot properly endorse our party without believing both in conservatism and unionism.

That is because our party shares both, and because unionism is conservatism.

The belief in respecting the rule of law and democracy.

Of pulling together and sharing resources as One Nation.

And of believing in gradual evolution rather than divisive revolution.

These are all deeply conservative values, but they are also unionist values.

So, if our principles are all the same, then we share the same fight.

The Scottish Conservatives I lead will stretch every sinew to stop the SNP at next year's election.

This is a fight we can win.

An SNP majority is not inevitable. Independence is not inevitable.

Yes, they look formidable.

But they did in 2016 too and we denied them a majority and delivered a record result for our party.

And in 2017 we forced them to pause their independence plans and won seats across our country.

When the SNP threaten a referendum, the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party is the tried and tested vehicle to put the brakes on their obsession.

The only party that has the strength across Scotland to stand up to them.

And next year I fully intend to take our party to new heights to again stop another referendum and steer politics in Scotland back to the priority issues of the Scottish people.

Like jobs, schools and tackling crime.

Because at this time of crisis we all need to pull together and focus on the things that really matter, not create more division and uncertainty.

So, let's put an end to defeatism and disinterest.

Let's instead recognise the positive impact of the Union on all our lives.

I challenge you today to make strengthening the bonds between our four nations the priority for our party that it should be.

So that the whole of the Conservative and Unionist Party rediscovers its Unionism.

And gets behind the Scottish Conservatives for next May's Scottish Parliament election.

Thank you.

ENDS