

It's time for serious politics – not the SNP's game-playing

By Kezia Dugdale, Scottish Labour leader

WITH the Tories' Brexit Bill now published, Britain has moved even closer to the European exit door.

Every move by Theresa May, as she embraces the horror of a hard Brexit and the economic hardship that will cause, is a reminder of how reckless the Tories are in government.

Now, more than ever, we need political leaders who are ready to work in the national interest.

Theresa May has no such interest and is only concerned with keeping the hard right MPs in her party happy. Her claim that the Union is 'precious' to her is simply just empty talk.

And the divisions the Conservatives are causing create a political climate the SNP thrives upon.

Nicola Sturgeon is little better than Theresa May – she also refuses to put the national interest ahead of party interest.

It is time for her to stop playing political games.

One minute she says an independence referendum is 'highly likely', next she says it's off the table, then she says she's not 'bluffing' about holding another contest, then she ruled out a vote this year, and now she is threatening a referendum once again.

It is not just inconsistent and it is not just embarrassing – it is downright dangerous.

Last week's Supreme Court ruling made it clear that the triggering of Article 50 is a decision for the UK Parliament.

It was, of course, a UK-wide referendum.

That is not to say the Scottish Parliament's voice should be ignored, and indeed it will not be ignored.

So there will be a debate in Holyrood, and we will make clear that we oppose both the SNP's separatism and the Tories' separatism.

Let's be clear what any Holyrood vote is not: it is not a vote in favour of a second independence referendum.

There are absolutely no circumstances in which Scottish Labour will support

another referendum.

As Jeremy Corbyn said when he was in Glasgow earlier this month, Scottish independence would lead to 'turbo-charged austerity'.

That fact infuriated Nicola Sturgeon, as she prefers to deal in what Donald Trump would call 'alternative facts'.

The reality is there is a £15 billion difference between what Scotland raises in tax and what we spend on public services. That's a black hole that would cause further austerity in an independent Scotland.

Labour is the party for Scotland's workers, and we will never support something that would put jobs and livelihoods at risk.

Last week, new export figures revealed the value of the UK single market is four times more important to Scottish trade than the EU single market.

So while I will continue to argue that Brexit is bad for Scotland's economy, the SNP government's own figures show that independence would be considerably worse.

It is simply a reckless nationalist gamble to put access to the UK single market, and all the jobs that depend on it, at risk.

Contrast the SNP's dangerous approach in Holyrood with Labour's approach in Westminster.

Labour has tabled a number of targeted amendments to the Article 50 Bill, designed to ensure Parliament is able to hold the Government to account throughout the negotiations.

Labour has also tabled an anti-tax haven amendment to ensure the Prime Minister does use Brexit to weaken Britain's laws concerning tax avoidance and evasion.

In Scotland, we want to continue working with the Scottish Government to get the best deal for Scotland within the UK, but that will not extend to blind faith.

Unity cannot be achieved by a politics that sees one half of the country constantly facing off against the other. We are divided enough already.

Only Labour is standing up for what the majority of Scots want – a strong Scottish Parliament within the UK and close ties with Europe.

We are facing the biggest constitutional upheaval in this country for generations.

This is a time for serious politics, not the SNP's game-playing.

The Nationalists should ditch their obsession with independence and work with Labour to help secure the best deal for Scotland and the UK.

Nicola Sturgeon should be standing up for Scotland, not standing up for her party's own self-interest.

*This opinion piece first appeared in Scotland on Sunday on 29/01/17