

News story: PM to visit Scotland to set out plan for Britain

The Prime Minister will visit staff at the East Kilbride base of the UK's Department for International Development on Monday to set out her aim of building a global Britain that fully embraces its role on the world stage.

As the UK prepares to enter into negotiations to leave the EU, the Prime Minister will make clear that the deal we seek will have at its core the aim of making Britain a stronger, fairer, more united and more outward-looking country.

She will also set out that the deal struck must work for all nations of the UK, and the UK as a whole.

This Plan for Britain, she will explain, will be about getting the right deal for Britain abroad and a better deal for ordinary, working people at home.

The work you do here – in conjunction with your colleagues at the Department for International Development in London – says something important about Britain.

It says that we are a kind and generous country. It says that we are a big country that will never let down – or turn our back on – those in need. And it says that we are a country that does – and will always – meet our commitments to the world – and particularly to those who so desperately need our support.

And that is important to remember.

For we stand on the threshold of a significant moment for Britain as we begin the negotiations that will lead us towards a new partnership with Europe.

And I want to make it absolutely clear as we move through this process that this is not – in any sense – the moment that Britain steps back from the world. Indeed, we are going to take this opportunity to forge a more Global Britain. The closest friend and ally with Europe, but also a country that looks beyond Europe to build relationships with old friends and new allies alike.

The work you do will be at the heart of that effort.

Because from this building, work is co-ordinated that saves lives around the world; that builds a safer, healthier, more prosperous world for people in developing countries; and that makes our own country and people safer and better off too.

It's not all about charity of course. You know that better than anyone. So often, the work you do is about empowering people to live better, fuller

lives.

For example, your work is leading the world in efforts to end the outrage of violence against women and girls. That is a cause that is particularly close to my heart.

You ensure that the UK is working well with important international institutions like the UN and the Commonwealth.

And researchers here are exploring the potential for new vaccines to prevent the devastation caused by serious illnesses and epidemics. I know, for example, that the work to tackle the awful Zika virus that is a source of such anguish for people across Latin America is being led by researchers at Glasgow University, supported by UK government funds.

But sometimes events happen that simply require an immediate and significant response.

And it is because of the work you do that we have recently been able to announce significant support for the nations facing up to major humanitarian crises this year.

Somalia, where we have pledged £110 million of UK aid to provide up to 1 million people with emergency food assistance, over 600,000 starving children and pregnant and breastfeeding women with nutritional help, over 1 million people with safe drinking water, and more than 1.1 million people with emergency health services.

And, of course, our commitment to Somalia goes further than money. We look forward to bringing the international community together in London in May for the second London-Somalia conference, where we hope to be able to help that nation secure and build on the progress it has made in recent years.

It is because of the work you do that the UK was one of the first major donors to respond to the UN's appeal for South Sudan. We are leading the way in that desperate nation by making sure millions of people get the food, water and medicine that they so urgently need.

That includes food for over 500,000 people, life-saving nutritional support to more than 27,500 children, safe drinking water for over 300,000 people and emergency health services for over 100,000 more.

And it is because of the work you do that the UK is able to lead the way in helping countries elsewhere in the region – in Uganda and Ethiopia. And in Kenya, where the Hunger Safety Net Programme aims to reduce poverty and hunger in the short-term, and to build economic resilience for the most vulnerable people in the poorest parts of the country. And that is the best way to give them a sustainable, long-term route out of poverty.

Across Africa, vulnerable men, women and children are being helped by initiatives and projects that come with a simple badge of hope: a badge that says UK Aid.

And the same goes for other parts of the world too. Wherever people are in need, that same badge of hope appears.

The UK is at the forefront of the response to the Syria crisis, with life-saving humanitarian support reaching millions of people inside Syria and in neighbouring countries.

In 2016, the UK was the third largest bilateral contributor to the humanitarian response in Syria, and the second largest overall since the start of the response in 2012. We have pledged more than £2.3 billion to support those affected by the conflict, our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis.

That is a record of which we can all be proud.

And because we are a country that does not duck our responsibilities, let us remember the amazing work being done in Afghanistan today. One of the legacies of years of conflict in that country is the deadly phenomenon of landmines that still lie strewn across hundreds of acres of that land.

But thanks to UK Aid – and in particular, thanks to the work of organisations such as the Halo Trust that has its headquarters right here in Scotland – almost 100 square kilometres of contaminated land has been cleared. And more than 1 million people have benefited as a result.

We will continue with that work – and continue to support Afghanistan's security – because that is in the interests of Afghanistan and in the interests of Britain too.

UK Aid is a badge of hope for so many around the world. It appears on the side of buildings, school books, medical supplies and food parcels in some of the toughest environments and most hard-to-reach countries on the planet.

And it says this: that when this great union of nations – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – sets its mind on something and works together with determination, we are an unstoppable force.

That is why the Plan for Britain I have set-out – a plan to get the right deal for Britain abroad as well as a better deal for ordinary, working people at home – has as its heart one over-arching goal: to build a more united nation.

Because I believe when we work together, there is no limit to what we can do.

A more united nation means working actively to bring people and communities together by promoting policies which support integration and social cohesion.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that means fully respecting, and indeed strengthening, the devolution settlements. But never allowing our Union to become looser and weaker, or our people to drift apart.

So in those policy areas where the UK government holds responsibility, I am determined that we will put the interests of the Union – both the parts and

the whole – at the heart of our decision-making.

International development is a prime example of that, and your work here, on behalf of your fellow citizens across the United Kingdom, has a huge impact.

Indeed, the work we do as a United Kingdom on the world stage make an eloquent case for our Union as a whole.

It is about the values we share in our family of nations.

Values of freedom of speech, democracy, respect for human rights, the rule of law.

This proud shared heritage provides the bedrock of our lives together in the UK.

And on that foundation we have built a country where we share the challenges that we face, and bring all the expertise, ingenuity and goodwill we share across this Union to bear to tackle them.

That allows us to do amazing things, like the life-saving work which is led from this building.

So as Britain leaves the European Union, and we forge a new role for ourselves in the world, the strength and stability of our Union will become even more important.

Alongside the visit to DFID, the Prime Minister is also due to meet officers from Police Scotland to discuss counter-terrorism issues.

She will then be joined by First Minister Nicola Sturgeon for a bilateral meeting.

Press release: Secretary of State's statement on NI political talks

Mr Brokenshire commented:

Three weeks ago the people of Northern Ireland voted overwhelmingly for effective, devolved, power sharing government.

Since then I have been working intensively with the political parties and with the Irish government to find a way forward,

including putting forward a number of proposals

I am determined to see a functioning Executive in place at Stormont. I have spoken to the Prime Minister this afternoon and this remains the UK government's continuing priority.

This is the necessary first step to addressing the issues of greatest public concern – health, education and other public services in Northern Ireland.

Even at this stage I urge political parties to agree to work to form an Executive and provide people here with the strong and stable devolved government that they want.

Kezia Dugdale outlines best Brexit deal for Scotland

MONDAY 27 MARCH 2017

Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale has written to Prime Minister Theresa May to outline the best Brexit deal for Scotland ahead of Article 50 being triggered.

The best Brexit deal for Scotland, as outlined by Ms Dugdale, includes:

- *Access to the single market.*
- *Retaining the benefits of freedom of movement.*
- *Guaranteed rights for EU nationals currently resident in the UK.*
- *Access to EU research funds.*
- *Access to the Erasmus programme*

The full letter is as follows:

Dear Theresa,

On Wednesday you will trigger Article 50 by giving formal notification of the UK's intention to withdraw from the European Union. This will initiate a two-

year negotiation process, which will both decide the terms on which the UK leaves the EU, and set out the broad parameters for our post-Brexit relationship with the remaining 27 member states. I did not vote for Brexit, and nor did Scotland as a whole. However, I am committed to making the best of it, and that means securing a deal that safeguards Scotland's economy and labour market, and retains, as far as possible, all that is best about our relationship with the EU.

I believe a deal can be negotiated – on differential terms if necessary – which ensures that the interests of people across the UK are well-represented. In the rest of this letter, I will set out the key areas that must form a part of your negotiating stance if Scotland's interests are to be taken into account, as you have promised they will be. It is vital that your government works closely with the devolved administrations in the months ahead, and all constitutional focus must be on securing the best Brexit deal for the UK. The First Minister of Wales, Carwyn Jones, has committed to working tirelessly in the pursuit of the best deal for the people of Wales. It is disappointing that the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, is ready to disengage from the process. As leader of Scottish Labour, I will always stand up for the people of Scotland and I believe on that basis we should engage directly on these matters.

Access to the single market and freedom of movement

I am extremely concerned that your present negotiating stance – and in particular your prioritisation of immigration controls over access to the single market – risks an unnecessarily hard Brexit that would damage the economies of the UK and Scotland. Although it is widely predicted that Brexit will have a negative impact on Scotland's economy, the extent of the damage inflicted is very much dependent on the approach that your government takes to the negotiations.

Independent estimates suggest that the impact of Scotland losing access to the single market and reverting to WTO status would be that Scottish GDP would be five per cent lower (equivalent to £8 billion in 2015-16 prices) over the next ten years than would otherwise have been the case, real wages would be reduced by seven per cent (equivalent to around £2,000 per year), and overall employment would fall by three per cent (equivalent to around 80,000 jobs).

Such an outcome is unconscionable and must be avoided. If the interests of Scotland are to be taken into account, you will pursue a deal for Scotland which allows Scottish businesses to maintain unfettered access to the single market, and EU and Scottish workers to retain the benefits of freedom of movement.

The benefits to Scotland of unfettered access to the single market are widely accepted. It generates over £12 billion a year for Scotland's economy and is vital to Scotland's manufacturing and services sectors. Meanwhile, and as the Fraser of Allander Institute has recently noted, Scotland's working age population is already projected to decline over the next few decades. Any post-Brexit deal that limits the number of people coming to Scotland could

have significant consequences for Scotland's economy and public services.

A deal that serves Scotland's best interests would, therefore, retain tariff and non-tariff barrier free access to the single market for Scottish exporters, and allow Scottish firms to continue to recruit workers from elsewhere in the EU, and Scottish workers to continue living and working elsewhere in the EU.

As I have made clear in recent months, Scottish Labour believes that a more federal UK will help to fix the failures of politics that led many people to vote for Brexit in the first place. Negotiating a distinct Brexit deal for Scotland – and indeed other UK regions – would be a signal of intent on your part, symbolic of your willingness to explore alternative constitutional structures that increase democratic accountability and place the UK on a surer footing.

Guaranteed rights for EU nationals currently resident in the UK

An issue that demands immediate attention is the status of non-UK EU nationals currently living in the UK, and Scotland. There are over 180,000 non-UK EU nationals living, working, and studying in Scotland. They make an immense and invaluable contribution to Scotland's economy, culture and society.

However, since the Brexit vote your government has ignored the calls of business, public sector employers, and universities, by refusing to guarantee the rights of European nationals living and working in the UK. Instead, you have chosen to use them as bargaining chips. I would urge you to put an end to this and make guaranteeing the future status of EU nationals living in the UK – and UK nationals living elsewhere in the EU – an absolute priority in the early stages of the Article 50 negotiations.

Scotland's higher education sector

Every effort must be made to ensure that Brexit does not damage the international standing of Scotland's universities, or detract from the quality of teaching they provide, the research they produce, and the opportunities they afford our young people. This requires action in three areas: research funding; freedom of movement; and the Erasmus programme.

1) Research funding

Scottish universities have benefited enormously from EU research funding, securing 11.4 per cent of the total allocation to the UK as of July 2016. Maintaining this level of funding is integral to ensuring Scottish universities can continue to uphold their international reputations as centres of academic excellence.

Regrettably, it is currently very unclear how, and to what extent, Brexit will affect the ability of Scottish universities to secure EU funding. We don't know whether Scottish universities will be able to continue accessing EU research programmes such as Horizon 2020, and ministers have repeatedly declined to give assurances that the government will maintain current levels

of funding post-Brexit if access to EU programmes is impaired or lost altogether.

Ensuring that Scottish universities can continue to access EU research funds after Brexit should be a key plank of your negotiating platform.

Concurrently, the UK government should provide assurances that, whatever the outcome of negotiations, current levels of research funding will be maintained post-Brexit.

2) Freedom of movement

Freedom of movement is of great importance to the higher education sector. In 2014-15, 11.1 per cent of staff in Scottish Higher Education institutions were EU nationals. Among academic staff, the figure was 14.8 per cent. High quality research depends in large part on international collaboration, which is facilitated by the free movement of people across the EU. Any perception that EU nationals are no longer welcome in the UK could impede the ability of Scotland's higher education institutions to attract the most gifted staff and students. This would have pronounced and unwelcome consequences: it could damage the international reputation of Scottish universities and lead to a reduction in standards of teaching and research. It is vital that any such perception is avoided, so that Scottish universities can continue to attract the brightest and best staff and students, both now and in the future.

3) Erasmus

Since 2008, over 10,000 young Scots have studied or worked in another European country, courtesy of the Erasmus programme. The benefits of Erasmus are well established: it broadens participants' educational, cultural and social horizons and equips them with the transferable skills they need to be successful in a globalised marketplace. Consequently, any limit imposed on Scottish participation in Erasmus is tantamount to a limit imposed on the aspirations of our young people. This we cannot afford, and will not accept. I would urge you to do everything in your power to ensure that Scottish students and young people can continue to access Erasmus following the UK's exit from the EU

Conclusion

As the Prime Minister, you are negotiating on behalf of people throughout the whole of the UK, something I trust will be at the forefront of your mind throughout the Brexit negotiations. As I stated at the start of this letter, I want to secure a positive and progressive outcome from the Brexit negotiations; one that limits the damage of leaving the EU, maximises the opportunities, and lays firm foundations for the future of this country, whose best interests we each seek to achieve. That means negotiating to secure the best possible deal for Scotland: one that allows us to retain what is best about our relationship with the EU while remaining an integral part of the UK.

Yours sincerely

News story: Foreign Office statement on demonstrations in Belarus

We have closely followed events in Belarus leading up to, and during, the Freedom Day demonstrations. We are concerned over the actions of the law enforcement agencies in Minsk. A large number of citizens, activists and journalists appear to have been arbitrarily and indiscriminately detained.

There is no justification for the use of force or intimidation against those exercising their right to peaceful protest. We urge the Government of Belarus to respect and uphold the right to freedom of association, assembly and expression. We further call on the government of Belarus to release all those peaceful protesters still detained.

Taiwan reports new outbreak of bird flu

Taiwan has confirmed a new outbreak of bird flu at two poultry farms and culled more than 14,000 birds to prevent further infection, according to the local animal inspection authority.

Ducks at a farm in Pingdong county were confirmed with the H5N2 virus and more than 6,000 were culled.

A chicken farm in Tainan city also reported outbreak of an H5-type virus on Saturday, and more than 8,000 chicken were slaughtered.

Taiwan is a common destination for migrating birds. Its farms have reported more than 15 avian flu cases this year, including cases related to the highly pathogenic H5N6 virus.

The general bird flu situation is "under steady control" despite sporadic infections, the animal inspection authority said.

It warned farms to strengthen quarantine and sanitation work and report any unusual death of poultry. Those who report infections will get compensation for culled poultry, while cover-ups will lead to hefty fines.