

The future of the Union of the UK

I am pleased the UK held a referendum in Scotland to see if people there wanted to leave the UK, after years of pressure from the SNP to break up the Union. It was a great contrast with the tactics used by the Spanish government to prevent such a vote in Catalonia over the future of the Spanish union. I agreed with the SNP in the Commons before the vote, when they said it would be a once in a generation event. These votes are of course divisive, as each side needs to heighten the differences to bid votes its way. They are necessary divisions to reveal the views of the public and to provide instructions to the politicians. They are not a good idea to keep repeating. They are also asymmetric, as the wish to have votes to ask if people want to be independent would presumably stop were a vote ever to be won for independence. Seeking to re enter a Union you have left is altogether more problematic and would clearly require the consent of the Union as well as of the country which had left.

Gordon Brown's intervention in the debate was predictable and unhelpful. It was his recommended policy of offering devolution that failed to stem the tide of Scottish nationalism, though he thought it would. He now wants to try it again. He as always wishes to split up England into artificial regions, when England wishes to be afforded the same level of devolution and self government as Scotland enjoys. He has not taken on board the rejection of elected regional assemblies in England as an unwanted and expensive burden on the taxpayer. A few of my critics do not like my wish to save public money by asking Westminster MPs elected for English seats to handle the devolved business for England and want an English Parliament with more politicians.

The UK government says it does not intend to legislate for another referendum as it is too soon to re open this issue. The government currently needs to show how the Union works well for all parts of the UK. It needs to revisit its Single market legislation to make sure we have full powers over GB to Northern Ireland trade which matters to Scottish, Welsh and English businesses selling into Northern Ireland. The government could set out clarifying legislation to say that any load certified as a load for a final consumer in Northern Ireland should not suffer any further or additional checks to those that applied prior to Brexit. The UK would of course police against smuggling product via Northern Ireland to the Republic without the EU checks they want and co-operate with the Irish authorities as they did when we were both in the EU where smugglers tried to evade Excise and Vat differences between the jurisdictions..