Why I can be a patriot and a proud European

MEP Alyn Smith on Brexit, national identity and the SNP's unashamedly pro-EU agenda

Scotland is a European nation, but since June last year that position has been under threat. To me, Brexit is not an academic exercise but a punch to my stomach. It offends me intellectually, it offends me politically, and it saddens me greatly. Right now we should be leaping to the defence of multilateralism, not sowing the seeds of division. Blaming others is simple, but working together and showing solidarity is a challenge that must be risen to. The reality is that Europe faces not one, but a whole series of challenges: climate change, the refugee crisis, the financial crisis and the fight against terrorism can only be resolved by working together. After the US election, with Donald Trump to the West of us and Vladimir Putin to the East, Europe is needed more than ever, to lead not follow, the rest of the world.

Set against all this, the UK's decision to leave the European Union seems an ugly, thoughtless act of gross narcissism, as self-indulgent as it is petty. I have campaigned for Scottish independence my entire life, not because of any sense of exceptionalism, but because I wanted Scotland to stand on its own two feet, side by side with our European friends, as equals. Independence, for me, is not about being separate or apart, but joining the world in our own right, working with our friends and neighbours to common endeavours. Because we do not have any other word for that in the English language, that makes me a nationalist, but I would gently suggest that nationalism in Scotland is different to nationalism elsewhere, not least other parts of the UK. Brexit is the very antithesis of everything the Scottish independence movement stands for. The question of independence for Scotland remains a live issue. We had, of course, a referendum about that in 2014. This was a referendum that enriched political debate in Scotland and has left a legacy of political engagement to the envy of the rest of the UK.

Independence, for me, is not about being separate

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mind, there are three facts that I want you to remember about our referendum. Firstly, our definition of Scottish is very simple - "Do you live in Scotland?". If you do, you're Scottish. In contrast, for the EU referendum the UK government decided we were going to have a debate and a vote about the rights of 2.6 million EU nationals living in the UK, but denied them a vote. This is a politics that I and my party find offensive in every way. Secondly, we published a detailed White Paper of 650 pages which set out our prospectus for independence and our plans for what we wanted to do. Ultimately, this plan was found wanting by the people of Scotland, but publishing such a plan was the right thing to do. It meant the referendum was considered and informed, in marked contrast to the EU referendum last year. And finally, EU membership was a central argument in our proposition. We are not uncritical of Europe, but neither are we fair weather friends. We believe that Europe is about more than funding and regulation. To us the EU is an opportunity to exchange ideas across borders and to tackle the issues that are bigger than any one country. As I listed earlier, we are not short of these. People voted Yes or No for a million different reasons, but there is no question that a great many people were swayed by the argument that in order to guarantee EU status, we needed to stick with the UK.

The outcome of the vote was an unprecedented turnout, record voter engagement, and 55% choosing to remain with the UK, 45% voting for independence. We respect both this, and the result of last year's EU referendum, which was a slim UK wide mandate to leave. But this is not the whole story. There was no prospectus, plan or white paper, so what Brexit is has yet to be decided. Beyond that, in Scotland the people spoke too. Scotland voted by 62% to 38%, across every counting area, to remain. Northern Ireland also voted by a majority to remain, and the star pro-EU vote goes to Gibraltar, with upwards of 97% of the residents wanting to remain.

With Donald Trump to the West of us and

So we have a conundrum. Scotland has voted to stay in the UK and the EU. We are democrats

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and again, I ask you to judge us by our actions. Since the vote, we have attempted to work constructively to find a compromise that reflects the political reality. The Scottish Government has published an options paper, setting out the circumstances we see as the least worst variant of Brexit. We want the UK to remain within the Single Market and are urging that, but if that is not possible, there is going to be an exceptional status for Northern Ireland, and Gibraltar, so we want a distinct status too, with our preference being EEA membership for Scotland. Such a compromise would prove that Scotland's voice matters and that the UK really is a family of nations.

Clearly, there are practical issues to be overcome in that, but, I firmly believe, nothing that cannot be overcome with sufficient goodwill. Variable geometry is already a reality for millions of Europeans. I and David Martin, one of the Scottish Labour MEPs, have jointly published an analysis of all the places that have different status across the EU. It is extensive, and even I was surprised at the scale of diversity that already exists. Neither the UK nor the EU is a coherent bloc and therefore it is perfectly possible for Brexit to respect that diversity and allow Scotland to continue to play a role in Europe, as we voted for.

We want to stay. We argued for Europe, we voted for Europe, and we're trying hard to find solutions to the dilemma we all face. With our renewable energy, our oil and gas, fish, farming, banking and biotech, we want to remain part of the EU family, united in diversity. We want to play our part, and even short of independence, I believe there are ways we can remain engaged. The future is not yet set. There is time for the UK government to come to its senses and seek a settlement that is in the interests of the people of Scotland, Wales, Ireland and England rather than their current narrow immigration-focussed agenda. I hope they will, but that is not in my hands. In the wider world, we need to defend solidarity, multilateralism and internationalism like never before. If we do not learn the lessons of history, we will repeat the mistakes.



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