

Scottish Nation's Place in the World ' _Speech to House of Lords 13.05.21 4.14pm

Lord Howell of Guildford

(Con) [V]

Trying to halt Scottish independence and maintain the union by infrastructure largesse—seemingly partially bypassing the Edinburgh Government in the process—appears to be the current policy thrust. It will fail and, on the contrary, will greatly strengthen the support for departure. The same is bound to go for Wales.

Scotland is a proud, ancient and supremely talented nation with an amazing world cultural footprint. For over three centuries it has played a leading part in the most successful marriage or alliance between nations ever recorded, whether we are talking about the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution or—like it or loathe it—the largest empire in history.

Scotland rightly seeks a voice on the international stage and in the comity of nations commensurate with its influence and potential. Policymakers in London do not always seem to understand this. The British diplomatic establishment, which prides itself on its deep knowledge of 160 or more nations around the world, has tended to forget the one right next door. This is one place where we really do want to see a dedicated union board member of the kind proposed by my right honourable friend Michael Gove; it is urgently needed.

Of course, the arguments for staying close to the rest of the United Kingdom seem blindingly obvious to many of us on both economic and security grounds, but those who think that this will prevail against nationalist and independence emotions are ignoring history, as the noble Baroness, Lady Crawley, made out in her crystal-clear speech.

The economics of a trade break with England may seem crazy. The world is now an increasingly dangerous place for small nations, as many have found out to their cost. Economic infiltration from Russia or China is widespread, and lethal cyber intrusion and hacking can literally switch a nation off. Edinburgh already seems to be toying dangerously with deals with China, so we hear.

To counter these powerful and dangerous trends, first, we need to press the SNP far harder than we have so far about what it really means by independence beyond just disliking the UK. Does it want a separate republic, as some are calling for, or the continuation of a joint monarchy and constitution, presumably including currency and Armed Forces? Does it want Commonwealth membership, EU membership or both?

Secondly, Scotland must be offered a place in a better union than the one it is part of now. That is the new reality, and the constitutional framework of our whole nation is going to have to adapt and evolve to reflect it. Gordon Brown, the former Prime

Minister, is right that change on this front has to come, and could well affect your Lordships' House fundamentally. However, it needs to be gradual and happen step by step. Attempting a new settlement in one fell swoop would be fatal. A start in this House would be much better scrutiny of government by strengthening both the resources and the powers of our committee system, as many of your Lordships have urged.

Technology can be our friend in building a better union, as the absolutely excellent Dunlop report recommends; I greatly look forward to hearing from the noble Lord, Lord Dunlop, shortly. A far more intimate, practical, continuous and daily—indeed, hourly—two-way contact between Westminster and Whitehall and the devolved Governments, peoples and businesses is now fully possible thanks to the miracles of connectivity and big data. A truly innovative and modern union, unlike any traditional federal structure anywhere else in the world, based on deep respect and fully sensitive to national feelings, can be steadily devised and assembled if we are clever.

I detect that inside the Executive and the English Civil Service there is now, belatedly, some acknowledgement of that fact. Of course, the question arises as to whether Scotland, like Northern Ireland, should have a separate civil service. I always found the Northern Ireland Civil Service absolutely superb to work with, even under the most challenging conditions.

But meanwhile, here in both Houses of this union Parliament, we will also have to make major adaptations. If we are not to face grievous harm and a dark, dangerous and divided future, this will need to begin very soon indeed. There is no “normal” after the pandemic to which to return.

4.20pm