

A personal account of the Association of European Journalists' discussion meeting with Scottish politicians in the Scottish Parliament on September 26 and travels to the Highlands

By Anthony Robinson

Brexit has been educational. Over the last three years British voters have had a crash course in the British Constitution. Pre-Brexit, only Vernon Bogdanor and a few academics had a clue about the mechanics of parliamentary government or the conventions of a constitution which many doubted even existed.

The widespread ignorance exposed during the run-up to the referendum vote three years ago also reigned over the nature and powers of the EU. Why was it so wonderful/deeply objectionable and above all – what would a post-Brexit UK look like and why was it significantly better or worse than continuing membership under the favourable terms won by wily negotiators such as Margaret Thatcher and John Major.

They secured significant opt-outs to the Maastricht, Schengen and Lisbon treaties and the dogged EU march towards greater federalism, a rebate from the common agriculture policy (CAP) , and, above all, kept the UK out of the Euro zone. It is a source of astonishment to the 27 remaining EU members that the UK wants to throw all this away. Many remainers, I assume, feel much the same way.

Above all, and forgive me if I have taken so long to get to the point, so bewitched were English leave voters by the promises of future abundance for the NHS, regained “sovereignty” and “taking back control” that the possible impact of Brexit on England’s future relationship with Scotland and both sides of the island of Ireland, seldom, if ever, hit the headlines or the national consciousness.

Reality dawned only after “safe pair of hands” Theresa May botched the 2017 general election for the Conservative and Unionist Party and was forced to make a billion pound bung to Northern Ireland’s DUP in return for the votes of its ten Westminster MPs. But Northern Irish support for the Tories was conditional, as ever, on no Tory wavering about support for the DUP’s traditional “never, never, never” approach to virtually any change to Northern Ireland’s status in the UK, or to the Good Friday agreement which was made possible in large part thanks to the reality that Ireland and the UK – including Northern Ireland – were EU member states.

No wonder the “Irish backstop” is proving problematical – especially in the light of the 400 year history of England’s fraught relationship with the island of Ireland. (See the brilliant article by Professor Brendan Simm in the New Statesman for details.)

Thanks to the AEJ’s recent annual meetings in Kilkenny and Greece and last week’s memorable AEJ-UK visit to the Scottish Parliament, members have had a great opportunity to hear non-English perspectives on Brexit – and the downside of Euro zone membership, which the UK avoided.

The EU referendum vote revealed that the United Kingdom was in fact deeply riven. Scotland and Northern Ireland, which are aware of the many financial and other advantages they have received from EU membership, voted heavily to remain. Only Wales and England, with its often scathingly anti-European, flag-waving popular press, voted to leave.

Overnight the ruling Scottish National Party (SNP), led by the formidable, sharp witted Nicola Sturgeon, saw a heaven sent opportunity to press for another referendum on Scottish Independence. This was a bandwagon supposed to have been stopped in its tracks for a generation at least by the 55/45 remain vote five years ago.

No wonder Ms Sturgeon was sounding chipper as she fended off attacks on the SNP government's actions by Scottish Conservative and Labour opposition MPs at question time in the bright, super modern and above all semicircular debating chamber of the Scottish Parliament.

I don't know how stage managed questions to the First Minister sessions are, compared to PMQs in the rectangular, confrontational and essentially Victorian House of Commons. But the proceedings we watched were formal, measured and respectful of the Presiding Officer (equivalent to the Westminster Speaker.) The semicircular layout made it easy to determine where the questions were coming from. The Scottish Conservatives sit on the right of the chamber, a handful of Greens, Liberal Democrats and Labour to the left and a solid phalanx of SNP members occupied most of the centre behind the First Minister as she spoke.

Ms Sturgeon came prepared with copious, detailed notes as MPs read questions from their own printed briefs and nobody seemed surprised by the tone or content of the replies. It all looked much more like a somnolent session of the German Bundestag, or in the even larger semicircular chamber of that modern tower of babel in Strasbourg/Brussels, the European Parliament, except when scandalised by the loud and disrespectful tirades of Nigel Farage et al.

The departure from active politics of the feisty Conservative ex-leader Ruth Davidson, and the overwhelming pro-Remain vote in the EU referendum appear to have cancelled out the bad publicity surrounding former SNP leader Alex Salmon's alleged Weinstein-like proclivities. That combination has boosted both SNP support and pro-independence sentiment, according to the latest YouGov polls and analysis by Professor Sir John Curtice of Strathclyde University.

But the splash about wasteful SNP government spending in the following day's Scottish Daily Mail dented somewhat the panglossian confidence demonstrated by Ms Sturgeon in the £411m parliament. (It opened several years late in 2005 and cost twice as much as budgeted after complicated building and expensive, top quality outfitting. But that is still a snip compared to the estimated £7bn cost of modernising the Houses of Parliament in Westminster.)

"SNP blows £135m of your (underlined) money on failed loans" the SDM shrieked. The dud loans included £45m to one of the last remaining shipyards on the Clyde, £37m to BiFab, a Fife engineering company and a £39.9m loan to prop up the rarely used Prestwick airport. (I could not help reflecting that this again was small beer compared to the £6/7bn plus cost of building and equipping the two new aircraft carriers ordered by then chancellor Gordon Brown to be built in two traditional labour voting Scottish shipyards adjacent to his own constituency. Mr Putin has dismissed them as "nice targets." I fear he may be right.)

I stayed on in Scotland for a few days to find out a bit more about life in Scotland's two main cities, Edinburgh and Glasgow, and travelled through the Highlands up to Fort William and Mallaig on Scotrail's wonderfully scenic Highland Railway.

Edinburgh's grand Royal Mile has suffered a similar fate as Venice, Prague and other meccas of mass tourism. But the looming volcanic core supporting the grand castle overlooking Princess Street forms a grand backdrop to the New Town of 18th/19th century Georgian terraces and elegant circles with views beyond to the port of Leith and the Firth of Forth. The headquarters of once grand

Scottish banks are now flanked by the discreet offices of Mayfair style financial boutiques and enterprising startups reflecting Edinburgh's role as Scotland financial as well as political capital.

But for my money, it is Glasgow's huge, modern Strathclyde University and associated educational facilities, which stretch the length of George Street from the eponymous square uphill to the ancient cathedral and necropolis which most eloquently illustrates the transformation of Scotland's economic life. Until thirty years or so ago the mighty River Clyde with its shipyards, bridge and locomotive building and heavy engineering plants reflected the wealth and economic dynamism unleashed by the 1707 Act of Union. This gave England a Scottish King and opened up the expanding markets of the British Empire to Scottish traders, entrepreneurs and colonists. The Scots took full advantage.

South of St George's Square, the grand red sandstone houses, churches and institutions of the Merchant Quarter remain as witness to those golden years of great wealth mixed with dire poverty as displaced Highlanders and famine stricken Irish flocked into the grim tenements of the Gorbals, desperate for work and food. Glasgow is also home to one of the UK and Europe's greatest museums and art gallery, housed in the impressive red sandstone Scottish baronial style pile at Kelvingrove in the city's elegant West End, not far from the lovely botanical gardens. Main draw is Salvador Dali's haunting painting of St John on the Cross, with Dali's beloved Catalan fishing port of Port Ligat and a fisherman as its backdrop.

But the old, heavy industrial Glasgow has changed beyond recognition. Now Clydebank has been grassed over, the shipyards replaced by shiny new museums and exhibition centres and the former hard working and hard drinking industrial working class largely rehoused in decent housing. The once raw tribal Catholic/Protestant sectarianism remains, but expressed mainly in support for the city's rival Celtic or Rangers football teams and tempered by a big influx of foreign immigrants, not all from the EU. The new sources of wealth are tourism, education, finance, pharmaceuticals and niche engineering – and the wider transformation of the country as a whole has been fuelled and facilitated by Scotland's share of North Sea oil and gas related jobs and income – plus budgetary and other support from both the UK and the EU.

What I learnt on my travels confirmed what we were told during the AEJ session with representative of the three major parties in parliament and summed up by Labour MSP Alex Rowley. He told the AEJ that "the quality of life, educational and health standards are better in Scotland than the UK as a whole." This was a view obviously shared by remain voting Conservative MSP Donald Cameron and our main host, the SNP's Joan McAlpine.

Conservative MSP Donald Cameron recalled that all 13 Scottish Conservative MPs had voted for Theresa May's proposed EU deal on the third attempt, largely because Scotland's trade with the rest of the UK is four times greater than its trade with the EU while the Scottish budget would be £10bn poorer without various forms of contribution by the UK taxpayer.

Both Labour and the Conservatives favour staying within the United Kingdom for essentially practical reasons – notably the steadfast refusal of Spain, and others, to encourage separatism in their own countries by accepting an independent Scotland into the EU and the Eurozone as a sovereign state.

The Bank of England has also made clear that an independent Scotland would not be able to use the pound sterling. On national security grounds too, both Labour and Conservatives are wary of the security issues surrounding the nuclear submarine facilities in Holy Loch and Scotland's

geographical position guarding the northern approaches to the Atlantic from marauding Russian submarines and aircraft.

But our main host, Joan McAlpine of the SNP was critical of the way successive Westminster governments had either kept Scotland in the dark or at least not sufficiently consulted on key policies – including most obviously on Brexit. Joan was also very positive about the impact of immigration on Scotland and critical of the Tory government's restrictive policies. "Scotland has an ageing population. Immigration especially from the EU is like an injection of youth," she explained. She also rejected the UK government's £30k minimum wage requirement designed to limit immigration to skilled people. "Some 63% of all Scottish workers earn less than that", she told us.

The handful of thoughtful Scots I met on my travels, including Ian Low, an SNP supporting voluntary guide in Glasgow's ancient and wonderful cathedral, echoed a mix of pride at what Scotland has achieved in recent years, concern over a possible no-deal Brexit and a somewhat reluctant willingness to stay within the UK, as reflected in the Scottish independence referendum.

"Westminster is a long way away and we don't feel that London really listens to us," Mr Low told me. "Many feel that we should have done better out of Scotland's North Sea oil and there is a lingering resentment over how Scottish soldiers have often been treated as cannon fodder and pushed into the most dangerous situations. But at the end of the day we've tried to go our own way and it always falls down somewhere. The best solution after Brexit is for us to remain in the UK – but press for maximum devolution."