

“The Impact of Brexit on Scotland: The AEJ hears three contrasting views from north of the border” – A discussion in the Scottish Parliament chaired by Rick Thompson on Thursday 26 September 2019

By Charles Jenkins

Joan McAlpine (SNP) is the Member of the Scottish parliament (MSP) who sponsored the visit of AEJ members to the impressive modern parliament building in Holyrood, Edinburgh. She is the Scottish Parliament’s Convener of the Committee on Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs, and she opened the debate by saying that she believed the 62% vote to remain in the EU in Scotland in the 2016 referendum had since strengthened. There were, she said, already signs of negative impact on the Scottish economy, with unemployment slightly rising and previously strong investment falling. A major concern was the effect of prospective immigration restriction, since immigration to Scotland from Europe was important for demographic reasons. The proposed £30,000 income threshold would severely affect Scotland where 63% of employees currently earn less than that. With immigration restrictions in place Scotland would be likely to have a 5% smaller workforce over the next two decades, affecting especially social care and hospitality. The ‘differentiated’ arrangements for Scotland – including continued membership of the EU’s single market -- that the Scottish government had at first proposed were brushed aside by London without even being considered; and since then, she said, the interests and proposals of the Scottish government and Parliament had been consistently ignored.

Donald Cameron, the Scottish Conservatives’ Brexit and External Affairs spokesperson, introduced himself as a recent newcomer to the committee chaired by Joan McAlpine. He had been on the Remain side in the referendum but the vote in favour of the UK leaving the EU applied to the whole country and he was deeply convinced that the result should be honoured. When he had taken his seat in the Scottish Parliament three weeks before the EU referendum he had declared that he hoped to be the first generation for which the constitutional set-up would not be the leading topic of discussion. The EU referendum had overturned this hope, and he repeated the Conservative party’s opposition to a second referendum on either EU membership or Scottish independence. He observed that all Scottish Conservative MPs had in fact voted for Theresa May’s deal. There were now differing views amongst Scottish Conservatives about the effect of No Deal, but he felt it would be very damaging generally and particularly for the Scottish Highlands which he represents. He did however note that he had heard some more upbeat views about the prospects from his constituents, notably fishermen, including shellfish farmers. So there would indeed be short-

term disruption, Mr Cameron said, but there could also be long-term advantages. A many as one million Scottish voters had voted Leave, he said, and they had been “airbrushed out” of the Scottish debate.

Alex (‘Alec’) Rowley, the Scottish Labour Party’s Brexit spokesperson, said that all the Scottish Labour MSPs had supported the composite motion narrowly agreed at the Labour Party’s conference earlier in the week. That motion was for renegotiating Theresa Mays’s deal and holding a referendum to choose between a new deal that Labour promised to renegotiate and Remain within six months of a Labour government taking office, with ministers and others being allowed to campaign as they wished. He was clear that the position of the whole of the Scottish Labour Party in such a second referendum would be for Remain. He believed that a Conservative-led “hard Brexit” would indeed boost support for Scottish independence. He also noted that the SNP’s election manifesto had called for a new Scottish independence referendum in case Scotland was forced to quit the EU against the will of its people.

So far, he said, there was still no clear majority support among the public for such a new independence referendum. But support for independence would further increase if there were No Deal and the government’s Yellowhammer prognosis proved correct. In his view, recent events showed that “Westminster is broken”. For the future, Labour favoured substantially more devolution but not independence. He saw important parallels between the moves towards devolution to the English regions and the situation in Scotland (although Scotland would always have more powers than English regions) and admired Andy Burnham for giving a political voice to Greater Manchester. One of Scottish Labour’s demands for greater devolution powers was over immigration, and Alec pointed to Canada as a country that was already operating different immigration regimes for different provinces.

In response to a question about the wider strains on the UK constitution and the recent Supreme Court judgment, Joan McAlpine paid tribute to Joanna Cherry who took the case against the prorogation of the UK Parliament to the Scottish Court of Sessions and on to the UK Supreme Court. But she said that Article 50 had been triggered before the UK government had responded to Scotland’s proposals, showing contempt for the Scottish point of view. Although the constitutional affairs committee of the UK Parliament had made a sincere attempt to take Scottish concerns into account, she said its deliberations had also been ignored by the UK Parliament and government. And the joint ministerial committees that were set up to jointly deliberate Brexit-related issues had failed to produce any changes in the UK’s negotiating position in Brussels; they had

shown themselves to be “not fit for purpose”. She concluded that the constitutional inter-governmental structures of the UK were not working.

Donald Cameron did not accept that Scotland had been ignored. He pointed out that some ministers in the UK government represent Scottish constituencies and that Michael Gove is from Scotland. He saw the fact that the Supreme Court largely upheld the finding of the Scottish Court of Sessions on the prorogation of the UK Parliament as a demonstration that the constitution was working well. He added that Brexit would have a profound impact on the devolution settlement for Scotland, with some of the powers now exercised by the EU on behalf of the UK as a member state, like those related to the environment, agriculture and industry, being devolved directly to Scotland after Brexit. Joan was sceptical of this given the pressures to maintain a level playing field within the UK. She said the SNP was demanding new powers over immigration, employment and additional areas of taxation. Donald Cameron made clear that apart from the transfer of specific powers recovered from the EU, the Scottish Conservatives oppose further significant devolution.

Alec said that Scotland had not been forgotten but at a political level it had been ignored, despite the proactive efforts of the Scottish parliament as a whole. He said that the Smith Commission appointed after the Scottish referendum to recommend more devolution had disappointed in its recommendations for modest changes on income tax and social security and certainly not lived up to expectation to make the Scottish Parliament the most powerful devolved Parliament in the world.

In response to a question as to whether Scotland would be able to maintain its relatively high level of public spending under more difficult conditions ahead, Joan said the SNP was proud of the high level of public spending. She thought the rest of the UK would also benefit if levels of public spending were increased there, too. Alec claimed that the Southeast of England received a higher share of UK public spending than Scotland.

Questioned about the possible disruption caused by a second Scottish independence referendum, if it happened, Joan McAlpine remarked that Scottish people were now suffering from “anarchy” in London, and Scotland did not want to part of what she called “this failed state”. A new referendum on Scottish independence would above all be about what kind of country the people of Scotland want to live in. She said that Scotland would differentiate itself by being more welcoming to immigration, including refugees.

Asked how they saw Scotland's future evolving in the next 10 or 20 years, Joan expressed confidence in the strength of Scotland's "international brand" and sense of identity; she saw its future as a returning member state of the EU. Alec saw Scotland as well-placed compared to other countries where right-wing populist governments were getting elected, but insisted that the idea of Scotland's economic self-sufficiency and a separate Scottish currency would continue to be unrealistic. Donald believed that the younger generation of Scots wanted to be part of an internationally connected and outward-looking world with fewer borders.