

Alex Salmond 29 November 2016

Notes courtesy of David Lennon and Rick Thompson

The Alex Salmond meeting on Nov.29 was the most remarkable of the year. Our guest was trapped in the Heathrow Express and arrived 45 minutes late. Fortunately for us he had insisted on bringing along two SNP members of parliament.

Stephen Gethins, SNP spokesman on Europe at Westminster, stepped in to speak to our members and valiantly tried to respond to repeated direct questions about what the SNP plans are for dealing with the approach of Brexit.

His colleague Tasmina Ahmed-Shah, SNP spokesperson on trade and investment, feistily fielded many of the questions about just what the SNP was planning to do, arguing that they could not reveal their plans until they knew what the UK government was up to. As the government had not revealed its plans for dealing with Brexit, she said, then it was impossible to specify SNP tactics and strategies.

When Alex Salmond arrived we quickly briefed him about the questions: what are the SNP's strategies for dealing with Brexit?

Succinctly he laid it out: a desire to stay in the EU, maintain trading and economic relationships in Europe, and as necessary hold a referendum on independence for Scotland.

He said that the SNP had a large number of scenarios in its planning. His view was that if during the negotiations to come between the UK government and the EU, it became apparent that a 'hard Brexit' was going to be the outcome, with Britain excluded from the single market, then Scotland would seek a second referendum on independence. He said this could happen in the autumn of 2018, which could avoid the need for a re-application for membership in the EU by Scotland.

He also indicated that Scotland's membership of the EEA (European Economic Area) which includes Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein in the single market - and Switzerland via bilateral agreements - could be a mechanism to keep Scotland in the free trade area even if England and Wales leave the EU. Similarly he said Northern Ireland which voted to remain could pursue a similar route.

Salmond discounted suggestions that Brexit could be stopped by vote of parliament, counting maybe only a hundred MPs willing to vote against invoking Article 50 expected next spring. In his view, MPs with constituencies that voted Leave would not go against the referendum result in their own areas.

Noting the strong Remain vote in Scotland in the Brexit referendum, he suggested that people who have experienced much emigration "do not have the same reaction to immigration", adding that "Scotland is one of the few examples of populism that is pro immigration and progressive."

And he had this comment on the western world's biggest populist, Donald Trump, with whom Salmond had many dealings over Trump's golf course in Aberdeenshire:

"He's convivial and jocular until someone says no to him."

The former Scottish First Minister said he hoped the burden of office would temper that.