

## NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE SCOTTISH QUESTION

*Alex Salmond*

At its narrowest, the Scottish Question is the matter of the constitution - the matter of the failure of successive British Governments to address adequately the needs of the ancient European nation of Scotland, and the head of steam that has built up in the last few decades for profound and far-reaching change. Northern Ireland's relationship to that question is both simple and complex: in simple terms its relationship is the same as that of any other part of the UK - a bystander who can be helpful in asserting and re-asserting the democratic right of Scots to be governed in the way they wish, by whom they wish. In complex terms, the relationship would embrace our long shared history and the ties of family, religions, culture and geography that make us much closer than even we sometimes acknowledge.

But the Scottish Question is much more than simply that of constitutional government and the correcting of the democratic deficit. The Scottish Question ties together all aspects of our lives, and poses the most fundamental of enquiries: where are we going as a nation, and how can we get there together?

It is in that manner that I address the question in this article. It is a question of religion, politics and identity, and the article is organised under these headings. I shall from time to time have to refer not just to Scotland, but to Northern Ireland too, in order to compare the beliefs of these two places, and

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in so doing I hope I will throw a little light on the relationship between the two peoples, which is both wide and deep.

That relationship is founded on history. In pre-Christian times, the populations were interchangeable and Scottish and Northern Irish roots lie in the same place. In more recent history, the plantation of Northern Ireland and the Industrial Revolution both renewed an interchange and strengthened the common cultural roots. So distinctive are they that Scots/Irish is a term well recognised in America - a term that perhaps sums up the people of Northern Ireland as well as any other. And the people know it. Samuel Thomson, an eighteenth century Northern Irish poet, put it this way:

I love my native land no doubt  
Attached to her through thick and thin  
Yet though I'm Irish all without  
I'm every item Scotch within.

Maybe people in Scotland should return the compliment and call ourselves Irish/Scots!

So recognisable is the Scottish influence in Northern Ireland that Billy Kay, an expert on the Scots language and culture, has written that:

The only major recognisable Scottish cultural community outside Scotland is the one in Ulster. It runs in a huge arch from the Ards peninsula...up through Antrim and North Derry to taper out in the Laggan Region of Donegal. In religion, music, literary tradition and especially language it is thoroughly Lowland and Scots speaking.

Even in geography and topography, there is a sense of continuity from the long road from Dumfries to Stranraer, through 'bonnie Galloway' down to the car ferry at Stranraer, and the drive away from Belfast in almost any direction.

That sense of continuity can be felt by any Scot arriving to live in Northern Ireland or any one from there going to live in Scotland. The two peoples use the same words, laugh at the same jokes, often sing the same songs, send their young people to study in each other's colleges and universities and even swap their priests and ministers - and occasionally their football players!

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Scotland and Northern Ireland are perhaps examples of how the same people grow different habits on the surface after a period of separation, but who are deep down very similar.

#### **RELIGION**

There is an old joke in Scotland which goes like this. A Jew is walking down Sauchiehall St in Glasgow when he is pounced on by the by-standers at an Orange Walk. 'Are you Orange or Green?' is the question. 'I'm a Jew' he replies. 'Ah', comes the answer, 'But are you an Orange Jew, or a Green Jew?'

The same joke circulates in Northern Ireland. And underneath that joke lies the same problems of sectarianism and bigotry. There is an impression given in the media that in Northern Ireland there exists the last bastion of old time religion and its corollary - old time prejudice. But Scotland has its bastions too. There still exists in some few extreme hearts in Scotland a fierce prejudice. But whereas in Northern Ireland there can be day and daily reminders of this gulf in understanding and tolerance, in Scotland we had in the last thirty years lulled ourselves into a growing sense of security. We thought that the days of sectarian politics in Scotland were over and done with. Last year, we discovered otherwise.

I will not dwell on the detail of the Monklands East by-election, caused by the death of John Smith. Monklands District Council has become a by-word for nepotism and maladministration in Scotland, and the by-election was fought on those issues. But it was also fought in a barely concealed atmosphere of sectarianism. The SNP has in recent years achieved support from different religious communities almost in direct proportion to their strength in Scotland. But Labour in particular choose to smear the SNP by alleging Protestant bias when canvassing Catholic voters. This tactic probably helped them secure their narrow victory, although the SNP succeeded in reducing a 16000 Labour majority to one of 1600.

The aftermath of the by-election - exacerbated by a disgraceful leader in **The Herald** newspaper the morning after the poll, alleging sectarianism against the SNP - brought the issue of sectarianism in Scottish politics back to centre stage and the front page. For me, this was a profoundly depressing experience, but one that in retrospect has turned out to be most helpful. It made the SNP look very closely at the whole issue of discrimination, and over the last year I have been endeavouring to address that issue in a series of public speeches. I undertook this task with a very clear aim. As one whose ambition

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is to build a new Scotland, it seemed to me inconceivable that such a new country could have within its foundations the prejudices of the past. The SNP's commitment to a Bill of Rights and written Constitution means that we will outlaw any discrimination - but we also have to eradicate it from the dark recesses of the Scottish psyche. To do so, we have to stand four square behind equality of opportunity for all our citizens.

We also have to speak out against institutionalised discrimination. For example, it is a scandal of some considerable proportions that no Catholic can sit on the throne, or marry the heir to throne. But the nature of that scandal has nothing to do with Catholicism or those who profess it. It would be a scandal if any group was discriminated against in that way. And if we wish to oppose that discrimination by active politics, it is because all institutionalised discrimination is wrong.

Certainly, given the present popularity of the royal family, it is perhaps a matter of little practical consequence, but it does symbolise an attitude entrenched in law - an attitude that belongs to the archaic arrangements of the 18th century, not the bright prospects of the 21st.

Allied with the injustice of the Act of Settlement is the intertwining of Church and State that lies at the heart of the English establishment, and consequently the British state. No Catholic has ever been Prime Minister, and although such an appointment is certainly feasible, it is practically difficult. For example, special constitutional arrangements have to be made to have a Catholic Lord Chancellor or a Jewish Home Secretary - although a former adherent of one of the smallest Protestant sects in Scotland can sit, and does presently sit, on the Woolsack.

A modern secular state cannot flourish if its past interferes so unfairly with the present and future rights of some of its citizens. That statement should be a truism of politics, but the very fact that it is controversial shows we have a way to go yet.

Such discrimination has deep roots - roots nurtured by the experience of societies which experienced immigration, poverty and social uncertainty. Naturally, memory is long, and fear of 'losing out' is still in the genes after many generations. But the irony of such prejudice is that in reality both of the major religious traditions in Scotland have much in common - a sense of social justice, a concern for the community, and rugged independence of thought and action. It is all the more tragic, therefore, when some individuals see the preservation of often mythical rights as being only possible when

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others are denied them. The opposite is of course true. Only when all are able to partake of the same rights do such rights become secure and well entrenched. Without equality, they are always under threat.

More than a year on from Monklands, I think that the SNP has made considerable progress in facing and overcoming the issue of sectarianism in Scottish politics. We have set up a group to examine the issue, and it has made a number of reports. I have addressed the issue in several public speeches, becoming (remarkably) the first politician in Scotland to do so in modern times. And we have awoken within the SNP and further of the party an understanding that action is required if we are finally to lay the ghost of the sectarian past.

To be fair, the problem in Scotland always was, and still is, a problem in small areas, but a problem which still exists. If we remove the causes of division - prejudice enshrined by law and stereotypes enforced by popular prejudice - we can move out of our past and start the process of reconciliation and building. For a party seeking national independence, those tasks are of great, indeed central, importance. To move in that way we also have to recognise the importance of the tradition and symbols of the faiths of Scotland - all of the faiths of Scotland - and find ways not of replacing those badges (often worn with pride and as a defence against attack) but of adding new ones of equal power and of greater unity. The symbols of Carfin and Iona can and should live side by side within a new Scotland, enhanced by the addition of the Cross of St Andrew - the Saltire. When they do, one part of the Scottish Question - one part of the enquiry about our future - will have been answered.

In Northern Ireland, there is the same problem, but expressed in different ways and institutionalised in a different political structure. The difficulty of adding new symbols to unite is greater, but it is a task that should be tackled by all political parties. The aim of a legitimate and progressive political party should be to appeal to the widest possible audience, not narrowly define its target vote. The Liberal Democrats in Scotland have shown that the more you target the smaller your base becomes - a problem that I am sure will haunt them in the coming years. For a party with ambition, there has to be an inclusive, not exclusive, message and one that will stress the common future rather than linger on the divisive past.

## **POLITICS**

This political aspect of sectarianism brings me to the next issue I want to address. And this too is an issue of similarity and difference.

Scottish politics are very different from what the media represent on the networks as 'British' politics. The Labour Party's ascendancy in Scotland has lasted for almost 70 years. In a very real sense, the Labour Party is the Scottish establishment with a long lasting, although weakening, hold on local government and on the majority of parliamentary seats. The SNP is now firmly established as Scotland's second party, far ahead in terms of popular vote of the Liberal Democrats and the Tories, who owe their relatively large number of MPs to the vagaries of the electoral system.

Part of the reason for the SNP's growing success is its roots in all religious groupings. Whilst in Northern Ireland, nationalist parties are largely representative of the Catholic minority, in Scotland the SNP is more broadly based. However, since in West Central Scotland the Labour Party has traditionally been the party of the Catholic voter, the SNP has on occasion suffered from being identified as being 'not Catholic' rather than 'anti-Catholic'. In reality, the party at all levels has all religions within it, but it is and always has been a very secular party - perhaps in some ways too secular minded and too unthinking about deep religious and community loyalty.

Labour, in contrast, has managed to be all things to all people - particularly in terms of community and religious loyalty. It is a considerable success - if somewhat hypocritical - to be able to embrace a tradition of defending the Catholic community while containing members of the Orange Order, but Labour has been able to build such a coalition and to secure the primacy of social goals over the narrower perspective of sectarian groupings. In doing so, it achieved power.

However, Labour of the late 1990s is a very different proposition. The element of speaking up for, and uniting, the disparate parts of Scottish society has withered, and the result has been not a breakdown back into sectarian groups, but a progressive alienation from politics for many of the Scottish people. Tony Blair is leading the Labour Party in Scotland well away from the aspirations of ordinary Scots and very close to the aspirations of traditional Tory voters in South East England. That may or may not produce a period of temporary and very circumscribed Westminster power, but it certainly will de-stabilise and weaken the Labour Party in Scotland over the longer term. It will also damage Scotland and its people.

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And arching over the political landscape in Scotland is one issue that rises above all others. That is the issue of the constitution.

Since Keir Hardie promised the voters of Mid Lanark in 1888 that a Scottish Parliament was 'just around the corner' there has been a pressure for constitutional change in Scotland. But it has not been lost on the Scottish people that, 104 years later, at the last General Election in 1992, Labour was still promising yet still not delivering. In 1992, the slogan was: 'A Scottish Parliament will be along in a tick'. It wasn't.

Labour's commitment for most of the last 100 years to a Scottish Parliament has produced nothing, and the closest we have come to any real constitutional change - no matter how unsatisfactory - was during the period from 1974 to 1979 when the SNP had its highest ever number of MPs. It is a truism of Scottish politics that progress is only made on the constitution when the SNP does well, but that has had a down side as well as a positive aspect. The 'boom and bust' nature of support for the SNP in the period from 1967 to the late 1980s meant that Scotland's historic claims were also subject to fluctuating fortune.

With the SNP much more firmly established in the 1990s, and with opinion poll support for independence outstripping even the improved level of support for the SNP, the SNP has been able to make more consistent progress and to encourage the focus of Scottish politics to lie within the constitutional question.

There is no guarantee that the scheme of the Constitutional Convention will be Labour's final scheme. There is also every likelihood that the final scheme will have even fewer powers than those proposed for an assembly in 1979. The much discussed power of raising or lowering income tax by up to 3p in the pound - the only revenue power of the assembly - may also be subject to a veto by a nervous Tony Blair if he thinks he can get away with it. This summer's U-turn on English regional devolution will have increased nervousness among devolutionists in Scotland. Labour's devolution policy is certainly not safe in Tony Blair's hands.

This assembly would have no access to Scottish oil revenue, no ability to set or change benefit levels, no right to direct representation in Europe and no influence on defence or foreign affairs. It is wholly inadequate for today's Scotland, and it is also an inherently unstable solution, one in which there would be constant disputes on powers and constant dependence by the assembly on the whim of Westminster. There could also be no effective

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entrenchment of such an assembly, which might under a future Tory government go the way of the Greater London Council.

The SNP's position of full sovereign independence, and full membership of the European Union, is the only stable, logical and effective solution. It returns to Scotland and to the Scottish people - who are in Scots law sovereign, not the Westminster Parliament - the right to decide on their own affairs and to speak directly where their voice needs to be heard. The independence position, whilst the centre of the SNP's policy stance, is one that opinion polls show is also appealing to substantial numbers of Labour voters, and even an increasing number of Tories.

Yet, although there are great differences between the Opposition parties about the actual constitutional change that is required, they have in the past agreed on one thing. The Scottish people voted overwhelmingly at the last General Election (and indeed at every General Election since 1979) for parties that sought some form of assembly or parliament for Scotland. Scotland wants change.

After the 1992 General Election, Labour did not campaign for a referendum on constitutional change, preferring yet again to put its faith in a General Election some five years distant and a Labour victory. The Tories have been able to capitalise on Labour's timidity, and have therefore resisted the movement for change. Even electoral disaster at each and every electoral contest since 1992 has made little difference, although the advent of Michael Forsyth as Secretary of State for Scotland will see a Tory attempt at a fight back - but still based on the virtues of the constitutional status quo.

Scotland's powerlessness within the Union was well demonstrated by the arrival of Michael Forsyth. Probably the most unpopular politician in Scotland - an accolade for which there is some substantial competition - Forsyth's pragmatic support for John Major was the factor which got him into the position of what a former holder of the office likened to that of a 'Colonial Governor', what his predecessor has compared to a 'Viceroy', but which one famous Tory MP refused, dismissing the post as being the 'scullery maid of the Cabinet'. With only 10 MPs, 11 per cent of the Scottish vote and no victory at a country-wide election in Scotland for over thirty years, the Tories are still able to appoint whom they wish to the highest office in the country - and to block any constitutional change, no matter how many people support it.

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Scots cannot help but contrast that position of the Tory government with the position on constitutional change in Northern Ireland espoused by John Major. We do not oppose his stance on a referendum - indeed we welcome it. But we find it difficult to see why he should not only allow such a development - and indeed facilitate it - for Northern Ireland but actively and persistently refuse it for Scotland. This is the contradiction for which the UN Committee on Human Rights saw fit to ask for an explanation from the UK Government.

You do not have to believe in independence, or the process of independence (because in Scotland independence is a process, a moving towards that ultimate change which I believe is being seen each day in small but significant ways) to accept the democratic right of people to choose the constitutional structure they live under. That right of choice and self-determination is basic to modern citizenship. The denial of Scotland's democratic rights - a denial based upon an archaic incorporating Union entered into in very different times and within the context of a very different society - is a running sore on Scotland's body politic. But the frustration with that situation has not expressed itself in violence, and in my view never will, but rather in disillusionment with the political process. It is much better to have disillusionment than bloodshed - but better by far to have democracy and participation.

How Scotland moves from its position as 'the invisible county of Europe' - to use Professor Chris Harvie's term - to the status of a full democracy is the issue that the SNP exists to address. The existence of the other political parties is predicated by different priorities, and ones that ultimately will not provide a reinvigorated national life. The 'Highway to independence' is not just a series of legal and democratic steps, it is also a series of actions and reactions, which must strengthen confidence, build ambition and improve self image. People in Northern Ireland are familiar with such tasks too, but they will be assisted in them by the development of a new and modern system of government appropriate to their needs. Scots are not yet in that position, and yet all they have to do is vote for it.

Clearly, there are strong differences in the political structures and the political expectations of Scotland and Northern Ireland. Nationalists in Northern Ireland wish to join an existing state, perhaps to renew and develop it. Nationalists in Scotland wish not simply to re-create what was, but for more than that - to create anew a modern Scotland full of aspiration and ambition. Scotland and Northern Ireland have both been too long without adequate representation and decision-making structures. A settled

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constitution will be the key to a settled and effective democracy in both places. We need to revive and renew the democratic process in order to achieve lasting stability and prosperity.

The process of independence, the re-discovery of democracy and the effect of full statehood are answers to this political part of the Scottish Question.

### **IDENTITY**

John Hewitt, in whose memory the Summer Schools are held, would not *quite* have agreed with me - at least on constitutional structures. In 1947 he wrote:

Regional identity does not preclude, rather it requires membership of a larger association. And, whatever that association be, as I hope, of a federated British Isles or a federal Ireland, out of that loyalty to our own place, rooted in honest history and familiar folkways and knowledge, phrased in our own dialect there should emerge a culture and an attitude individual and distinctive, a fine contribution to the European inheritance and no mere echo of the thought and imagination of another people or another land.

Clearly, we would have had a fine political debate, but I want to use those ideas of John Hewitt to bring me to consideration of the final part of the question - the issue of identity. Perhaps with the emergence of Europe as a political as well as an economic entity, John Hewitt and myself would have had more in common than might have been thought.

Just as we in Scotland require a reconciliation in religious traditions, and a uniting in the process of democracy which will lead to independence, we also require a coming together of our different identities - a development of new badges, as I put it earlier, to wear alongside the old.

Those old ones in Scotland are varied and colourful. The Gaelic Highland tradition has been weakened by two centuries of emigration and by a cultural and social assault on fragmented and weakened rural communities. But there is still a strong sense of identity and a consciousness of the need to preserve and develop language and culture.

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Lowland Scotland is not so homogeneous. The North East retains a powerful rural tradition, both seafaring and agricultural, as well as traditional industries and a sense of entrepreneurial 'smeddum' and self reliance which is impressive and ingrained. The Central Belt has suffered greatly from de-industrialisation, poverty and neglect, but there is still a vibrant and distinctive culture and a strong human resource. The Borders and the South West are different too - with a particular view of the world, bounded in as they are by the industrial north, and the English south.

There are, of course, other important identities in Scotland - strong yet diverse Asian, Chinese and other communities which are contributing a great deal to the building of our country. And we must not forget the strong English influence, and the large number of English and other European nationals who support and endorse change.

Binding together such a nation and defining its identity is no easy matter. Certainly, it cannot be done by a backward look at stereotypes and mythical images. It can certainly help to acknowledge accurately if sympathetically our past and the influences that have shaped our country, but such acknowledgement must pay full attention to all those influences, not just those which lie within our borders or which belong only to the majorities. None of us, I think, would echo the sentiments of the **Belfast Weekly News** when in 1913 it fulminated against a by-election victory in Derry by a Scottish Presbyterian who espoused Home Rule (a rather attractive combination) with the verse:

What care you for kith and kin  
Butter's thick and blood is thin  
Majorities are sure to win  
Minorities be hanged.

Acknowledging that varied but rich identity for the nation is vital. Welcoming it is even more vital. No new Scotland can be built on false foundations - neither on the foundations of bigotry, as we have seen, nor on the foundations of a false understanding of who we are. The reconciling of all the disparate parts may seem an overwhelming task. But it does not have to be. It requires only the willingness to encourage participation (that word again) and the patience to overcome mistrust and misunderstanding. In fact, one of the best ways to do it is to embark upon an ambitious project - a project of nation building, or of forging a new society out of the parts of the old.

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What will we lose in such a process? Nothing except our isolationism and a lack of confidence bred by three centuries of dependence. What we will gain? A stronger, more diverse, more interesting, more sharing society - and one more capable of playing a full part in the new Europe, which will be a Europe of small nations and regions.

Much is made by the Tory government of the Europe of strong, large states. Much is made by the Tories and Labour of the strength which this gives Scotland, and no doubt they believe gives Northern Ireland too. And the more negative aspects of this point are made even closer to home. The former leader of the Ulster Unionists, James Molyneaux, in an interview recently in **Public Policy Review** referred scathingly to the ambition for independent Scottish membership in Europe. That would lead, he said, to a situation in which

the European Community would treat Scotland as a third world country, as they do Greece and Spain and Ireland: they would become beneficiaries. British taxpayers and German taxpayers would subsidise all these expenditures in the European Community and all those other countries, those other poor countries within Europe. That's what Mrs Thatcher used to kick against.

Now, certainly, it is useful to know what Mrs Thatcher was kicking against, because to most of us it seemed only a xenophobic, isolationist, Little Englander spasm. But Molyneaux's remarks are far from the truth. Ireland as a beneficiary has been able to build strength that has allowed it to become a significant player. Its people are more able to contribute to Europe today because of the importance and strength of membership of the EU.

And Scotland is far from being incapable of contribution. We have 70 per cent of Europe's energy reserves. We have in our capital city the third largest financial centre in Europe outside London. Our computer and high tech industries and our skilled and flexible workforce constantly help in attracting new investment. We export one-third more per head than the rest of the UK. In fact, we export more per head than Germany, the US or Japan.

What Scotland lacks is the power to shape our economic opportunity, and the voice that will make the invisible nation visible again - as a nation that gives as well as receives. And that political change will help provide the stimulus to economic progress. Just over one hundred years ago, Scotland was one of the most prosperous countries in the world, and the north of Ireland was also an

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industrial power house. Now Scotland is number 21 in the world and declining, and Northern Ireland has fared even worse.

The European Union is a key factor behind constitutional progress in both Ireland and Scotland. I wouldn't go quite as far as Garret Fitzgerald, who said during a speech in Stirling a few years ago that EU membership provided Ireland with the 'clearest ex-post facto justification' for achieving sovereign independence, but it has certainly been the most important feature of the constitutional debate in Scotland in the last ten years, making independence much more likely, indeed probable.

For Ireland, the emergence of Europe as a political force means that there is no longer an absolute choice between London and Dublin, which means that with any constitutional settlement there are no absolute winners or absolute losers between the Unionist and nationalist communities. For both communities, the European dimension can soften the choices, as well as increase the opportunities.

Internationalism is part of Scottish identity. This year, we celebrate the 700th anniversary of the Auld Alliance - an alliance that built bridges between Scotland and France that have survived undermining by the Union. Scots, like people in Northern Ireland, have been contributors of expertise and labour in every country in the world - sometimes enforced contributors because of poverty and lack of opportunity at home, but contributors nonetheless. The fact is that the Europe we have, and the Europe we are going to have, is one in which small countries gain power and prestige, and can sit at the top tables on equal terms. There is no power to be had in allowing someone else to speak for you for, as Jim Sillars once memorably remarked, you either exercise power over yourself, or someone else exercises power over you.

Scotland and Northern Ireland, working within that Europe, can make what John Hewitt called 'a fine contribution to the European inheritance'. And if we are secure in our identity and united in our purpose we will be, and will be able to be, heard as: 'no mere echo of the thought and imagination of another people and another land.'

### **CONCLUSIONS**

In the course of this article, I have addressed the three issues which, at the outset, I identified as being crucial to an understanding of and solution to the

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Scottish Question. Let me conclude with some thoughts on where the Scottish - and Northern Irish - Questions go from here. The bringing together of the issues I have identified is part of a process. In Scotland, that process is the process of independence. Uniting Scotland in that process is a priority - it is what the SNP calls building the coalition for independence.

Building that coalition is a pre-requisite to achieving our aim. It can only be built by acts of reconciliation, and it can only be built by embarking on a journey that is broader in purpose than simply the achievement of a political aim. There may be - there will be - a defining moment, an instant of change from political dependence to independence, from Union to sovereignty. But that moment will be a mark of our progress, not the beginning or end of the process.

Similarly, I believe that the process of change in Northern Ireland cannot be understood within the conventional view of all or nothing. There must be time to change, a process of change and building towards a future. That should be the concept at the heart of the peace process, and it is one that the SNP supports and encourages wholeheartedly.

I am hopeful of the outcome of that process, just as I am confident that we are living in days of change in Scotland. And in our future relationship, the changed Northern Ireland will be of importance, not just because of the ties of family and culture but because we shall continue to live as neighbours. Our ties may not make the people Northern Ireland uncritical supporters of the views of any one of the Scottish political parties. The SNP welcomes support, but we do not ask for it. What we do ask for is an acknowledgement that we have the right to independence, and that if we as a nation choose that route we can look forward to the continued and even more productive friendship of a new and positive Northern Ireland. Similarly, if Northern Ireland chooses a new constitutional relationship, that will be its choice, and it will receive support from the SNP for whatever it decide.

A former Prime Minister of Northern Ireland once memorably remarked: 'Ulster stands at the cross-roads'. Those cross-roads turned out to be dark and terrible, but at last the people of Northern Ireland are passing them by onto a new, brighter and firmer track.

Scotland has also reached the cross-roads. We have before us a clear and wide pathway. We are making a slow but steady advance. Along that pathway, we can see a brighter future beckoning us to better times.

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