



HOUSE OF LORDS

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE EUROPEAN UNION CHAIRMAN'S MEETING WITH RT HON NICOLA STURGEON MSP, FIRST MINISTER OF SCOTLAND, WEDNESDAY 16 DECEMBER 2015, EDINBURGH INFORMAL NOTE

In the course of the EU Select Committee's visit to Edinburgh on 16 December 2015, the Committee Chairman, Lord Boswell of Aynho, met the First Minister of Scotland, Rt Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP. A note of their discussion follows.

Lord Boswell thanked the First Minister for her time, and said that he was anxious to get a sense of her view on the future of the EU, the forthcoming referendum on UK membership, and the Scottish perspective on these issues. He also wished to speak about the role of national parliaments in the EU, and the role that devolved parliaments could play in this regard. Lord Boswell asked if it was true to say that support for the EU was higher in Scotland than in other parts of the UK.

The First Minister said that the polls varied in terms of the margin of support in Scotland for the EU, but all had so far shown that a majority of Scottish voters wished to remain in the EU. However, she said that it was important not to be complacent. Nevertheless, it was true to say that euroscepticism was not as strong or as vocal as in England.

Lord Boswell observed that there were different attitudes towards migration within England, for instance when comparing London to coastal regions of southern and eastern England. He asked if there was a similar range of views on the issue in Scotland.

The First Minister said that it was a matter of degree rather than a substantial distinction. There were, for instance, areas of Glasgow with large migrant communities and a history of immigration. People in such communities were not hostile to migration but they may have more questions and concerns about the potential impact on their local community.

Lord Boswell asked to what extent the Prime Minister's letter to President Tusk, and President Tusk's subsequent reply, had shed light on the Prime Minister's EU reform objectives.

The First Minister said that the Prime Minister had set out his demands. Although there was now more detail than before, they were still quite vague proposals. The key question was what would constitute success, in particular with regard to the issue of migration within the EU. The First Minister warned of the danger of resting the decision whether to remain in or leave the EU solely on the basis of the outcome of the negotiations. She said that, whatever the final deal, it would not satisfy eurosceptics. The First Minister expressed concern that the Prime Minister had not made a principled case either to remain or leave, but rather was placing too much emphasis on the outcome of the negotiations.

Lord Boswell asked to what extent there was a distinctive Scottish attitude towards the EU, and whether such distinctions were sufficiently understood in London. He also asked how the mechanism for the Scottish Government to set out its views and concerns to the UK Government worked in practice.

The First Minister said that the Joint Ministerial Council was what it was. It was not sufficient in and of itself to involve the devolved administrations and to ensure they were able to make a contribution to the UK position on any policy proposal. She expressed her frustration of going through the Whitehall machine, and said that there should be more of a guaranteed expectation that Scotland should contribute and sometimes lead the debate on particular policy proposals. The First Minister added that there was a distinctive Scottish debate and vision. There were aspects of the UK Government's reform proposals from which the Scottish Government did not demur, such as competitiveness. Differences in this field were a matter of degree, and in particular the Scottish Government's concern to ensure that "increased competitiveness" did not lead to an unregulated free-for-all. On migration, Scottish opinion came from a different perspective. The Scottish Government stressed that free movement was a vital principle underpinning the EU.

Lord Boswell asked the First Minister what approach she thought the UK would take on continuing negotiations on in-work benefits.

The First Minister said that the UK had no choice but to take on board the concerns of other Member States. It needed to be open-minded about a potential solution to the migration issue. The First Minister added that the renegotiation process itself was completely unnecessary and a sideshow. It was not clear what purpose it was serving. The country needed to make a decision, and it was her view that the UK was better off remaining in the EU, notwithstanding its imperfections.

Lord Boswell asked the First Minister what her reflections were on the forthcoming referendum campaign in light of the experience of the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence.

The First Minister said that the campaign to remain in the EU needed to appeal to hearts and heads. If the "remain" campaign behaved like the "no" campaign in the Scottish referendum, then it would lose. She noted that the two campaigns were starting from a much closer position in terms of percentage support than had been the case with the Scottish independence referendum. The experience of the Scottish referendum demonstrated the need for a campaign that was positive and visionary, not presenting EU exit as a bogeyman.

Lord Boswell asked what the implications would be if Scotland voted to remain in the EU and the UK as a whole voted to leave. He asked if a second referendum on Scottish independence would become inevitable in such circumstances.

The First Minister said that, although nothing was certain, there was a strong likelihood of a second referendum in such circumstances. The SNP had offered the UK Government a way out of this difficulty by proposing a double majority lock, whereby any vote to leave the EU would need to be supported both by a majority of voters across the UK and in each of the nations of the UK in order to take effect. The First Minister said that this was an entirely reasonable proposal, but it had been rejected by the House of Commons. Time would tell, but in her view a second referendum was highly probable in such circumstances.

Lord Boswell asked what the First Minister's view was on the role of national parliaments, and the role that the Scottish Parliament could play in this regard. He also asked if there was

a central message that the First Minister wished the Committee to convey to interlocutors in London.

The First Minister expressed her frustration that the devolved institutions in Scotland were informed of developments rather than being involved in them. She stressed again that Scotland had a distinctive position on the question of EU membership. The renegotiation was a charade and there was a danger that its political ramifications could undermine the UK's relationship with the EU.

14 January 2016

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