



The real benefit of being in the United Kingdom

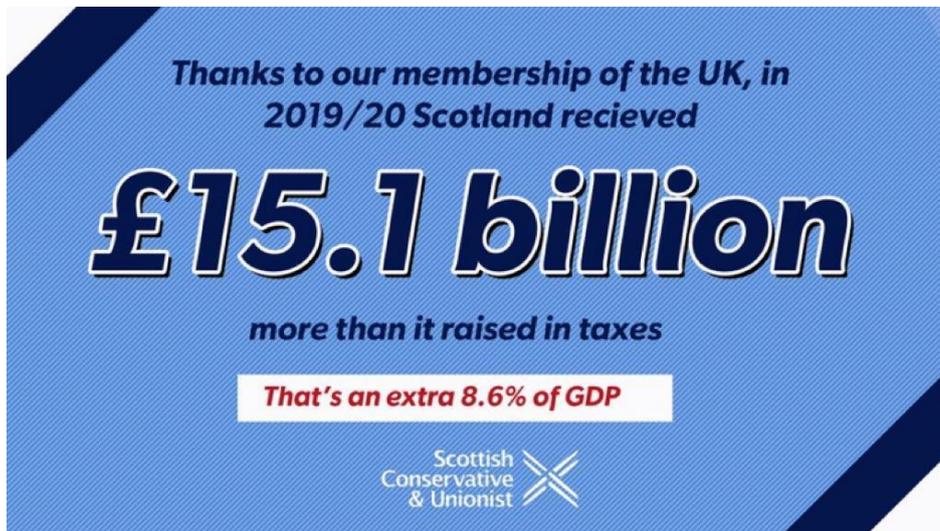
If ever there was proof of why the United Kingdom is so essential to the economic, social and culture wellbeing of Scotland, it was the recent GERS (Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland) statistics. These statistics measure the difference between what Scotland raises in taxation and what is spent on public services. This year, the statistics put the total at a deficit of £15.1 billion which is £2 billion higher than last year. The benefit - by the SNP's own working - is a £2,000 benefit for everyone in Scotland.

Today's GERS show that in 2019/20
Scotland's Union Dividend was worth:

£1,941

For every man, woman and child
living in Scotland

Scottish
Conservative
& Unionist 



The GERS debate



As ever, the GERS debate rages between nationalists and unionists about what the real implications are but one of the most thoughtful ones this year came from the Times in an article written by Kevin Hague, leader of These Islands, a pro-union think tank. Here is an extract:

“For Scottish nationalists, the diagnosis is irrelevant because the prescription is always the same. In the 1980s, by laying claim to the riches from North Sea oil, they argued that Scotland was a large net fiscal contributor to the UK. This was used as an unashamedly selfish reason for independence - it's our oil! Now, with North Sea oil revenues a trickle and the Barnett Formula protecting higher public spending, the Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland (Gers) figures show Scotland a clear beneficiary of fiscal transfers from England. With tiresome predictability, this makes no difference to committed separatists because, apparently, sharing with our neighbours is wrong no matter which way the money flows.

Scotland benefits from these transfers because the UK's deficit and debt burden is shared. This means Scotland's capacity to invest in public services is determined not by the 8.6 per cent Scottish deficit shown in Gers but by the far more manageable 2.5 per cent UK deficit. The Gers figures show that Scotland doesn't suffer from poorer revenue generation, it benefits from higher spending. Public spending per head is 12 per cent higher than the UK average, higher per capita than any UK region other than Northern Ireland. The nationalist logic here is ridiculous: if the Barnett Formula were scrapped and Scottish public spending decimated, Scotland's deficit would come into line with the UK average and, voila, the structural problem would be gone!

To share resources is to lack ambition, we are told. What nationalists are, in effect, demanding is an abandonment of the solidarity and common citizenship upon which the UK's welfare state was built. If we believe that a citizen's access to healthcare, education and welfare should not be constrained by their region's tax generation, we should celebrate that taxes from across the UK fund Scotland's fully devolved education and healthcare systems." Food for thought.....

The end of the transition period is all about a balancing act.



As readers know, following the Brexit vote, Britain is due to leave the transition period at the end of this year. That is why the UK Government is currently in the process of negotiating trade deals with different countries.

The new arrangements are all about a balancing act.

On one hand, we need to protect the integrity of the UK's internal market - and on the other, we must protect the ability of each part of the UK to diverge when it comes to specific policies, in other words protect the devolution settlement.

With regard to the internal market, It is not in anyone's interest (nationalist or unionist) to

make policies which will undermine economic growth and the ability of Scotland to deliver jobs and be more attractive to investment. Consumers, producers, manufacturers and distributors would all suffer if there was not a strong internal market. We should not forget that the UK's internal market is worth nearly four times as much to Scotland in comparison to the EU's single market.

With regard to the devolution settlement, it is vitally important that divergence can exist and that there is no discrimination against any one jurisdiction within the UK. This is exactly why Common Frameworks have been developed to try to maintain the necessary balance and protection.

However, these frameworks are not legally enforceable so there is a need to find a new structure which can give legislative certainty over the economic relationships within the UK. We need to strengthen and safeguard the UK's internal market. The new laws must enshrine not only mutual recognition and non-discrimination as foundational legal principles, but also the doctrine of proportionality. That way we can safeguard the internal market and protect legitimate policy divergence all at once.

Return of Farmers' Markets

It is very good to see that farmers' markets are back in business. Having been invited to the one in Kinross on 22nd August, I chatted with several stall holders who, quite clearly, had endured a difficult time in recent months but said they were hopeful that business would pick up quickly and certainly trade seemed to be quite brisk that morning especially for fresh farm produce.

Afterwards, I spent time with Cllr Callum Purves and Mr Jamie Montgomery of the Green Hotel listening to the ambitions for Kinross as it seeks to build on a lot of new innovation and on projects designed to increase tourism around Loch Leven and Vane Farm.





Environment visits



In late August, I had meetings with the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, with Scottish Land and Estates and an on-site meeting at Portmore with several members of the Scottish Gamekeepers Association. I am very grateful to all of them for giving me a substantial amount of their time and for providing me with a very full briefing about the issues which concern them right now.

Their work is extremely impressive but, in far too many cases, this is being undermined by the ongoing (and rising) incidence of anti-social behaviour in the countryside. They pointed to their concerns over the increasing number of irresponsible visitors to the countryside who do not understand the responsibilities that they ought to bring with them - only their rights. To be blunt, they are frightened by the deliberate attempts to ignore the countryside code, to undermine land management, even if that is carried out by experts on the ground, and to attack the rights of those who own land.

Indeed, I see one of the biggest challenges to Scotland at present is to address the significant division between those who give greater focus to rights over responsibilities and those who work hard to ensure that there is a workable balance.

The SNP programme for government

As is usual at this time of the parliamentary term, the governing party sets out its programme for government. This happened with the First Minister's statement in the chamber on 1st September followed by the debate on 2nd September to which I was pleased to contribute. My speech can be read using this link but I want to highlight two points:

Firstly, that for all the ambitious targets relating to climate change, biodiversity and the green recovery programme, all this will be undermined if there is an inability to change public attitudes. Local communities need to feel that they will be supported as they try to harness their goodwill, enterprise and creativity. As things stand just now, that is not possible because of the very real and increasing concern created by the triple blight of litter, fly-tipping and anti-social camping which is costing local communities and local authorities vast sums of money as well as significant aggravation and inconvenience.

Secondly, there is an urgent need to strike a balance between rights and responsibilities and to ensure that policy is evidence led. Just about every group which properly represents all those who look after the natural environment feel that legislation in Holyrood has not always been evidence led but, just as importantly, that legislation has been skewed towards the public's rights rather than towards the responsibilities which should come with them. In short, there is a wider political issue here and that is the SNP's increasingly statist and interventionist approach to government which the Scottish Conservatives need to counter.



Powering up Scotland



Last week, Douglas Ross set out his strategy for economic recovery in the Powering up Scotland Report.

The full report can be read through the link below:

Powering Up Scotland Report

Scottish Charity Air Ambulance



It was a pleasure to be updated on the work of the charity air ambulance most especially on the work it has been undertaking during the pandemic. Because our office in Scone is next door to the control tower room from which SCAA operates it is all too easy to take them for granted and forget about the immense contribution they make to medical safety every single day. They are a remarkable charity and we all owe them a very considerable debt of gratitude.

Blooming good



Throughout this pandemic, we have seen extraordinary efforts from members of the public to support their local communities whether that is helping with shopping, picking up medicine and prescriptions or providing additional supplies of essential items. We have also seen extraordinary efforts to keep towns and villages looking attractive and, in this regard, I was very pleased to accompany Cllrs Kathleen Baird and David Illingworth to Bridge of Earn to see the wonderful flowers on display in the Main Street.

Salmond update

As readers know from my two previous newsletters, the Scottish Government has been refusing to hand over key evidence to the Holyrood committee which is investigating the Scottish Government's handling of the complaints raised against the Former Minister. The

reason given for this refusal was the right to withhold legally sensitive information. However, it turns out that there have been occasions in the past when the Scottish Government has released this kind of information so we will continue pressing for this to happen in this enquiry.

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

WRITTEN ANSWER

1 September 2020

Index Heading: Organisational Development and Operations

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Scottish Labour): To ask the Scottish Government whether it has ever waived legal privilege to release legal advice given to ministers regarding (a) past court proceedings against them, (b) policy or administrative matters and (c) the making of potential decisions.

S5W-31274

John Swinney: By virtue of the right to legal professional privilege which attaches to all clients including Governments, the content of any legal advice received by the Scottish Government is confidential.

Successive Scottish and Westminster Governments have not disclosed the source or content of legal advice other than in the most exceptional circumstances.

The Scottish Ministers have authorised disclosure of legal advice in the particular circumstances of a very limited number of cases which each involved a judicial inquiry: the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, the (UK) Infected Blood Inquiry and the Trams Inquiry.

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