Brexit, Devolution and the General Election

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Thank you for inviting me to deliver the Annual Lecture of the Welsh Governance Centre. It's a pleasure and a privilege to be here. The Centre is a hugely important resource, needed more than ever in the world we now find ourselves in. Both in and out of government, I have been a consumer and a beneficiary of the work that you do and the understanding you bring to devolution and to the place of Wales in the United Kingdom and the wider world. Your research has not always been comfortable reading for someone who was responsible for delivering the policies of the UK government of the day and rightly so. But it has invariably added richness to the public debate and informed the appreciation of the choices that governments, UK and devolved, are charged to make.

When we agreed the date for this lecture, I'm not sure that Richard and team knew that they would land me with the peculiar challenge of speaking just 3 days before one of the most seismic UK general elections in decades. If I were them, I would put it down to the brilliance of their political forecasting. The timing certainly adds piquancy to any attempt to describe the murky territory into which this country now heads. Any reflective analysis of the state we are in risks being swept away in the torrent of post-election excitement. But I hope that at least some of what I have to say leaves a lingering resonance and helps you here to imagine yourselves into the possible futures that lie ahead and to shape your responses accordingly.

I will say a little about the possible outcomes of the election on Thursday and what they might mean, while skirting the risk of outright prediction. I guess like many of you, I am schooled enough now in the vagaries of our democratic events to be ready to be surprised. But mainly I want to peer a little deeper, to seek to understand the nature of what is going on in this country of ours and what it might mean for the future of the United Kingdom. For whoever claims the keys to No 10 in the days ahead will have to deal with surging crosscurrents of newly forming and reforming questions of identity and national allegiance that have the capacity to rock this Union to its very foundations.

Brexit, at heart, is about sovereignty and, through that, identity. I want to look at how the concept has played out in the Brexit debate and how it relates to the pattern of nationalism within the United Kingdom. I will explore how the forces unleashed by the EU referendum might resonate through the British state and its structures. I will examine the capacity of our institutions to handle the roiling pressures of identity politics and finish by asking how the incoming government might cope with the challenge of holding this other Union together.

There is no common template here. As all this plays out over the years ahead, the story will look and feel different in different parts of the UK. One of the frustrations of dealing with UK governance issues at the centre of the UK government was getting the devolved parts of the UK out of peripheral vision into clear focus. Many of you will have shared that frustration, directly or vicariously, with the added irritation of almost invariably finding Wales as an afterthought to the more pressing politics of Scotland and Northern Ireland. As a Yorkshire-born Englishman who has lived over half his life in Scotland and who worked for 20 years for various incarnations of government in Scotland, I have my own biases. But one of the happy responsibilities I held for the seven years I led on devolution issues in the UK government was to work with the wonderful folk in the Wales Office, to whom I pay the

warmest tribute as great friends of Wales and advocates for its interests in the counsels of the UK government. So I have no excuses; Wales is central to what I have to say.

First to the election.

You can all read the polls and you will all have your private and public predictions as to the outcome. Some of us will prove to have been wise before the event; more of us, as is the way of these things, wise afterwards. We have still, I think, three plausible outcomes, in order of plausibility: a Conservative majority government; a hung Parliament leading to a minority Conservative government; and a hung Parliament leading to a minority Labour government in some sort of loose deal with one, two or more other parties.

So far, so unspecific. Is there anything crunchier that we can say now? Three things.

Firstly, whatever anyone has said in the course of this campaign, Brexit will by no means and in no guise be 'done', anytime soon. The likelihood is that we will leave on January 31st, but the resolution of our new relationship with the EU will be years in the sorting. Indeed, in most Brexit futures the UK will be in interminable negotiations with the EU, pretty much for ever. Get used to it.

Even if we find ourselves led by a government committed to a re-negotiation of the Withdrawal Agreement and a subsequent referendum on the outcome, do not be beguiled by the falsely comforting notion that there is somehow a return to the status quo ante if the result of that referendum is a decision to remain. The last three and a half years have fundamentally altered perceptions of the UK in the EU and of the EU in the UK. Likely close on half the country will be bitterly disappointed at the outcome and feel cheated by it. Every move by every UK minister in every EU council will risk becoming the object of political controversy and cries of betrayal at home. At what point can a new normal emerge, when the trials and tribulations of membership become again no more than a background grumbling to the more intense drama of domestic politics and the UK can be reliably predictable on how it holds itself in the affairs of the Union? No time very soon.

Secondly, this election really has been the Brexit election. Despite all the attempts to distract attention on to other issues, including the NHS, Brexit has stubbornly remained the top issue. The Leave and Remain camps have been sorting themselves, the former clustering round the Conservatives, the latter assigning themselves less comfortably and variably to Labour, Lib Dems or nationalist parties. The centrality of Brexit is not, I contend, an artefact of clever campaigning by any particular political party. That is, I think, rather insulting to the intelligence of the electorate. It is rather because more people now care about what membership of the EU or otherwise means for them and their sense of identity. Maybe it took a visceral referendum campaign to unleash that concern; but unleashed it is and I see no prospect of it going back into its box. To quote Peter Kellner of YouGov: 'Brexit has completely transformed Britain's political landscape by prompting millions of voters to rethink their politics and their party loyalties'.

Thirdly, as with other recent elections, this campaign has not really been one, but more like four. Northern Ireland has always danced to its own tune. In Scotland, the layering is multiple, left-right on nationalist-unionist on leave-remain. Wales is different again, hovering closer to the English pattern, but driven by different crosscurrents. After the relative success of Plaid Cymru in the European elections, will the traditional Labour dominance reassert itself, while holding off the Conservatives? And in England we may be about to witness the biggest reorientation of political allegiance in modern times.

Where does this election campaign leave us? It leaves us, I suggest, with questions of self-determination, of identity and of sovereignty preeminent in our politics in a way that we have never really experienced before. To choose self-determination, at whatever level of governance, is of course a legitimate political act. It has been a fundamental tenet of the rise of the nation state across the globe since at least the mid-19th century. And it is a concept of such enormous political power because it speaks to our sense of who we are and of our place in the world.

That power has been self-evident in the whole Brexit debate but underestimated throughout, and still underestimated, by those whose own sense of identity is less thirled to the nation state and more comfortable with membership of a wider community of nations. For the assertion of sovereignty as an end in itself is really the only point of Brexit. There is barely any other question to which Brexit is the answer.

Why the Brexit campaign became to be so dominated by the question of sovereignty will be long argued over by future historians. I doubt any analysis will find that there were many in the country who shared the peculiar neuroses of the hardline Eurosceptics, prone to night terrors about the supremacy of the Court of Justice of the European Union or the extension of co-decision and qualified majority voting. Rather, I suspect that the evidence will show that this was not simply an argument about the EU, but more an upwelling of discontent arising from a deeper sense of disenfranchisement of which the EU became the symbol. Take back control was such a powerful slogan precisely because it spoke to that sense of disenfranchisement and promised the return of something that many felt they had lost, a re-finding of a more stable sense of identity for themselves, their families and their communities.

This is powerful stuff, as illustrated in the way in which the arguments about Brexit have been proofed against fact, both through the campaign and beyond. Many people were not looking to the facts to make up their minds but were willing to retrofit or ignore the facts as suited their deeper emotional attachment to the cause they espoused. We saw the same in the Scottish referendum and we see it still, with ever more imaginative interpretations by those of a nationalist inclination of the Scottish Government's own numbers on the size of the Scottish deficit. Burns might have claimed that 'facts are chiels that winna ding, an downa be disputed'. Unhappily, in these debates, facts really have been dinged quite a lot recently.

In short, it was the sovereignty argument that won it.

The problem this leaves us with is working out precisely whose sovereignty it is that we have taken back control of. Sovereignty needs a boundary, a state apparatus, a national identity. But the sovereignty of Brexit has been layered on the complex of existing identities within the United Kingdom. Who owns Brexit sovereignty?

Not the Scots, at least not the sizeable majority who voted to stay in the EU. For some in the nationalist community, sovereignty is indivisible, and they duly voted to leave the EU, having already voted to leave the UK. But for most nationalists, EU membership is part of the means to the greater end, Scottish separation from the UK. And there are many other Scots, not of a nationalist persuasion, whose view of this Union has been shaken by the decision to leave the other one.

Not the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, who also voted by a majority to stay in the EU. Perhaps the DUP, but they may by now have realised that if there is a planet on which Brexit would further consolidate the place of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom, it's not this one.

What about Wales? Not the nationalist community here, nor the indy curious, nor most of Welsh Labour.

Perhaps then those who cleave to a British identity? For many, undoubtedly, in all parts of the UK, Brexit is a reassertion of Britishness. But that cannot be the whole of the explanation. We know that identification as British is more consistent with an urban, more culturally mixed demographic, not the heartlands of leave support.

Which leaves us with the nationalism that rarely speaks its name, English nationalism. The evidence is there; the correlation between self-definition as English and hostility to the EU and the apparent willingness of Leave voters in their majority to prioritise leaving the EU over sustaining the United Kingdom. Has Brexit given form to something so long unexpressed in British politics?

This confronts any incoming government with an unprecedented concatenation of pressures. Whether we head through the exit door and into the fraught negotiations on the future relationship or towards a re-negotiation and another bitingly awful referendum campaign, the swirling winds of identity politics that Brexit has further strengthened are unlikely to die down any time soon.

The future trajectory of the three devolved parts of the UK is as uncertain as it has ever been.

The prognosis for Northern Ireland is difficult to read. Will there have to be further Assembly elections in another attempt to break the impasse? Will the DUP and Sinn Fein feel obliged to resurrect the Executive? Beneath the surface polls seem to indicate a shift in sentiment, not yet decisive enough to trigger a border poll but indicative of a significant change in mood. A mid-September poll had a slight majority in favour of unification. As importantly, younger people are more likely to vote for unification than the older generation. There is already a longer-term drift of demographics in favour of the nationalist community. Whether through a front stop or a back stop, one way or the other, post-Brexit arrangements will lead to further integration of the all island economy. Is Brexit accelerating the momentum towards majority support for unification?

Scotland is remains split down the middle on the question of independence. Some recent polls have the split now at 50:50., though a poll for the Times last week saw support for independence dropping back to 44%, in other words around 2014 levels. So there is some volatility. There have been shifts beneath the surface, as some who voted no to independence now prioritise putative membership of the EU for an independent Scotland over remaining in the UK. In the other direction, some former yes voters appear to be even less happy about membership of the EU than they are about continuing in the UK. All told, there is now a fair majority of Scots who have either voted already for independence or now say that they would. There may be a bumpy few months ahead for the SNP but placing a bet right now on the outcome of the May 2021 Parliamentary elections would be brave. If the Nationalists and their allies win a majority on an explicit referendum ticket in those elections, can Westminster refuse it without risking a lurch towards Catalan style disfunction? How would the Nationalists respond? Would such a scenario precipitate a split between the gradulalists and the fundamentalists? Either way, not a comfortable situation for the stability of the country.

What about Wales? Are we really looking now at about 20% of Welsh voters supporting independence as recent polls have suggested? Is that a quirk of disturbed times or the start of something new? Either way, will we see pressure on Welsh Labour to continue to outflank Plaid Cymru by asserting ever more vigorously its defence of Welsh interests? And how is this squared with a continued defence of the Union?

And whither England? Will all the passion that has been stirred up by the Brexit debate simply seep away into the sands if and when we actually leave the EU? What happens when people wake up to the inevitability that Brexit is very far from being done? And what if taking back control is not all it's cracked up to be? Espousing a cause like Brexit, even if in defiance of the economic logic, is still driven by a belief that it will make people feel better about themselves and their place in the world. For communities which had no control, economically and politically marginalised, buffeted by globalisation and incomprehending of a metropolitan value set, Brexit was one way to put their stamp on the world. What happens if nothing really seems to change, if politicians are locked in endless debates about how to deliver Brexit, if the UK economy grinds along the bottom in the slough of Brexit uncertainty, if Britain is palpably diminished in the world, what then?

So Brexit gives additional momentum to the centrifugal forces already apparent in the UK. Are these forces now stronger than those that held the UK together? Certainly, the factors that drove Britishness in the 19th and 20th centuries and earlier have long weakened; Protestantism, Empire, existential threats from a dominant military power on the Continent. There was some compensation in the second half of the 20th century through the common endeavour of the creation of the National Health Service and the welfare state and a common cultural identity reinforced by the BBC. There are still important resonances here, but devolution will over time shift perceptions of a previously monolithic NHS and the common cultural experience is eroded by the explosion of personalised content.

None of this is destiny. There is nothing ineluctable about a slide into disintegration of the United Kingdom. In no part of the UK is there yet a consistent majority in favour of separation. But the pressures are immense and show no immediate signs of dissipating.

It stands to reason that the primary responsibility of any incoming Prime Minister ought to be the territorial integrity of the state they inherit. There is nothing more important. I shouldn't really have to labour the point, but the breaking up of a Union such as the United Kingdom would be a shatteringly complex and disruptive business.

That does not belie the obligation of the Prime Minister of the land to respect the sovereign wishes of those peoples who make up the United Kingdom. Indeed, the duty to call a border poll if opinion in Northern Ireland looks as though it has shifted in favour of unification is baked into the Good Friday Agreement. It was, surely, a huge sign of democratic confidence and good sense that David Cameron agreed to the holding of a legal independence referendum in 2014 when the argument was strong that a resolution to the question – a once in a generation decision – was necessary to maintain the stability of the Union. Things, of course, have not worked out quite like that, but the handling of the 2014 referendum remains an example to other more troubled parts of the world.

You would expect any Prime Minister to wish to avoid having to take such a step, with all the risks attendant on it. By extension, you would expect the Prime Minister of the day to bend the will of the state to do its utmost to reinforce the value of the Union, to make the positive case for its continuation.

So where will a Union strategy be on the priority list of the incoming Prime Minister? And what actions will they take?

Let me review the current state of affairs to ask what more, if anything, might be done to respond to the rising tide of identity politics.

The Welsh Government has got there before me, with a series of typically cogent and logical proposals for reform of the UK constitution, set out in the recently published document 'Reforming our Union; shared governance in the UK'. Committed to the Union, yet deeply uncomfortable with the direction of travel of the UK Government, above all on Brexit, the Welsh Government has perhaps the most difficult position of all in these debates. That tension obliges it to be reasonable in but it finds its voice drowned out by the cacophony of more strident views.

There is little I would argue with in the Welsh Government proposals. But let me give my own take on what an incoming UK government might – or ought – to contemplate.

Firstly, devolution.

Devolution to Wales and Scotland and, in its current form, to Northern Ireland, is barely 20 years old, and yet has undergone much change in that short space of time. The three Wales Acts and two Scotland Acts since the original acts in 1998 perhaps speak to the hurry to get devolution done in the first instance. In its own way, a classic of British constitutional change; pragmatic, conceived in response to pressure exerted from outside Parliament, enacted without a firm grounding in constitutional principle and thus incomplete.

So the changes subsequent on the 1998 Acts could be seen as filling out that original conception of devolution as devolved governance has found its feet. Perhaps the lukewarm support for devolution in Wales in its very early days was reason to constrain the legislative powers of the Assembly, but once established it was entirely logical that the Assembly should insist on full powers to make its own legislation and to call itself a Parliament. Likewise, the almost token tax-raising powers of the early devolution settlement have given way in Scotland Act 2016 and Wales Acts 2014 and 2017 to something that finally begins to match the power to spend money with the responsibility to raise it.

The decision to design the devolution settlements without reference to some sort of benchmark of constitutional principle has also left them differentiated in ways which, at the margins, look perverse. Perhaps the best example is justice and policing, devolved in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but not devolved in Wales. Why? As the Thomas Commission found, there is no good reason why the Welsh Parliament and Government should not manage its own police force and justice system, and, as the Welsh Government has argued, the case is made stronger as the devolved legislature creates its own body of law.

Moreover, devolution remains something that is handed down, from the sovereign UK Parliament, to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This is a constitutional principle, but one that seems now very detached from constitutional reality. In theory, the UK Parliament could by its own act abolish the devolved legislatures. In practice, that is now unthinkable. This may seem like constitutional pedantry, but that sense that devolution is only there by grace and favour of a Parliament dominated numerically by one of the four parts of the Union is surely a factor in how the Union is perceived.

We have the declaratory provisions in the Scotland Act 2016 and the Wales Act 2017. Is that sufficient? Push much harder on that brick and does the whole constitutional edifice start to wobble? This is perhaps the central quandary for any future UK Government. Can the ramshackle structure that is the British constitution withstand the pressure on it? Would an attempt at a major rebuild, including an Act of Union and radical reform of the House of Lords, consolidate the Union or simply lead to the crumbling of what might turn out to have been load-bearing walls? I see no easy answer to that question, but it is one that cannot for much longer be ducked.

Which brings us to England. We encounter again the transactional nature of British constitutional practice in the stop-go, stop-go relationship between Whitehall and the English regions and localities. Each Government seems pretty much to want to do its own thing which leads to the unravelling of the efforts of the previous incumbents and leaves precious little time for anything to settle down to prove that it can actually work. The letting go of power from the centre is grudging and piecemeal, and liable to be reversed when a competing ideology overrules any localizing instinct, as we have seen with school education.

Perhaps metro-mayors represent a point of no return, when the momentum for the devolution of powers within England becomes irreversible. That is probably so already for the Mayor of London and the Greater London Assembly; it is becoming inconceivable that any Westminster government could do to the Mayor's office what Mrs Thatcher did to the Greater London Council. But metro-mayors and local government with their limited powers in the face of a still overbearing Whitehall can only absorb so much political pressure.

Sensible and sustainable devolution within England is of course made tricky by the lack of identifiable regions of roughly equal scale and the very different strength of regional identities. That makes some sort of asymmetry in arrangements within England inevitable but should not be an excuse for the failure to devolve meaningful power away from London. Surely one lesson of the Brexit referendum is that the sense of disempowerment and disenfranchisement in the English regions has to be addressed. Taking Brussels off the scene is not very likely to change that lived experience for most people in the UK. Giving them a connection to a more localised polity, with real powers to improve the lot of local communities, might.

England itself remains without representation other than the thin ground cover of English Votes for English Laws and, at the national level, England remains a puzzle, not least in the sphere of inter-governmental relations within the UK.

By any reckoning, Brexit, if it happens, will demand a radical shift in the way the four governments of the UK interact. The current system of inter-governmental relations was designed for what feels now like a very different era, when one political party was dominant in England, Wales and Scotland and when the division of devolved and reserved responsibilities was for the most part reasonably clean. That has already begun to change, with the devolution of tax and welfare powers, but accelerates as powers come back from Brussels. Those powers, almost by definition, create cross-border impacts in their exercise; that was the reason for holding them at the Brussels level in the first place. Allowing each part of the UK to utilise those powers to the benefit of its own territory while at the same time protecting the internal market of the UK is going to require a step change in inter-governmental interaction and decision-making.

The formal structure of inter-governmental relations will have to change to handle those emerging pressures. How far that change should go will be contested. As a minimum, there will have to be a more concerted effort to achieve consensual decision-making in the policy areas where the so-called common frameworks will be required to protect the UK internal market. But who gets to decide when there is a disagreement? Should there at least be some form of process to expose the issue at hand to mediation, or even arbitration, even if, ultimately, the UK Government gets to assert its precedented right to decide?

The problem, of course, is that the UK Government acts also for England. This is the conundrum at the heart of inter-governmental relations within the UK. England is only represented at the table by the UK Government; the UK Government cannot therefore act as arbiter among or between the

different parts of the UK. The risk inherent in this, particularly as Brexit unfolds, is that disputes will always pit the devolved governments against the UK Government. More grist to a grievance mill.

A full structural answer to this problem would involve major constitutional surgery, the creation of an English Parliament combined with substantially greater consolidation of regional representation within England. Neither are likely on any visible horizon.

But, short of structural solutions, there is something the UK Government can do at its own hand, and that is to demonstrate by its actions the respect with which it treats inter-governmental relations. That's partly about the effort put in, but also about the outcomes. How powerful would it be if a UK Prime Minister emerged from a meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee to announce that, on the strength of representations from the devolved governments, the stated policy of the UK Government had materially changed. There's a litmus test for you. If the Union is so precious, the UK government will be seen to swallow its political pride from time to time and bow to pressure from those governments who represent the interests of the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

One temptation for an incoming government will be to use the power of the purse to assert the benefits of the Union. The city deals for the devolved parts of the UK, conceived in the heat of the Scottish referendum campaign to strengthen the case for the Union, redress a lacuna in the original devolution settlements; the power of the central state to spend money in support of devolved competences which is a feature of most federal systems. Spending alongside the devolved governments as in the city deals programme can be a visible manifestation of collaboration for the common good but will only be that if it is genuinely collaborative and does not become a way of the UK government operating over the heads of the devolved governments.

The power of the purse cuts two ways. It has not passed England by that Scotland and Northern Ireland do pretty well out of the Barnett formula, although there is almost certainly not much sympathy for a Wales for whom it works far less well. The Barnett formula, meant to be temporary, has proved to be enduring and has not delivered convergence either. Objectively, the financing of a Union through an algorithm with such in-built inequities ought to be seen to be unsustainable. In practice, reform of the Barnett formula will always be one of those things for next year; and the resentments little by little will continue to grow.

One thing almost wholly in the gift of an incoming government is how the Union is handled in Whitehall. This is a little personal; it was my job for seven years, through a Scottish referendum, through major changes to the devolution settlements and through the EU referendum and its aftermath, to try to get Whitehall to understand the changed nature of governance within the UK. It has long been my contention, a times a lonely one, that no policy pursued by any UK government department, whether in reserved or devolved space, can now be wholly successful unless it takes account of the interests of the devolved parts of the UK or learns from their experience.

You won't weep for me, but I suspect this audience will have some inkling that this sometimes felt like an uphill slog. There are of course many Whitehall officials, and there have been a number of Whitehall ministers, who really do understand the nature of the times and that devolution does not require less attention to be paid to what is going on in the devolved parts of the UK, as in devolve and forget, but more.

I think we did make progress over those seven years, not least through the commitment of the great team I worked with in the Constitution Group and in the territorial departments. But there is a way to go. For too many Whitehall officials, devolution is in the peripheral vision, both literally and

metaphorically. Too many still count in Whitehall miles, whereby the distance from London to Cardiff is greater than the distance from Cardiff to London.

The outgoing government commissioned Andrew Dunlop to unpack these issues and make recommendations on how Whitehall can improve its devolution act. There is no one better placed than Andrew to push this agenda up to the next level. It is important and it is urgent. Many of us will watch closely to see how an incoming government responds to his recommendations.

So there's my starter for ten, as to how an incoming government might put some heft into a Union strategy. In summary:

- commit to remove the final anomalies in the devolution settlements;
- accelerate the process of devolution within England;
- show respect for the process of inter-governmental relations;
- concede on some policy outcomes specifically to acknowledge the interests of the devolved parts of the UK;
- use the power of the purse to construct collaborative projects that show how the UK Government works for all parts of the UK;
- reform processes in Whitehall to make UK governance issues foremost and central to all it does.

This is, I hope you will agree, quite a modest list. No need to wait for a constitutional convention to report, no need to create a federal structure, no need even to reform the House of Lords, long overdue though that is. But I live more in hope than expectation. The manifestos of the two main parties are not exactly encouraging; neither betrays much evidence of a recognition that holding the UK together might actually be the biggest challenge the next government faces, bar none. Brexit, and the pressing social and economic agenda, will be excuse enough to put constitutional issues on the backburner. But under-delivery on any part of that wider agenda and the risk is that separatist tendencies will be further strengthened.

I have one final point. I have no doubt that any government will swear obeisance to the continuation of the Union; it could do no other. But how deep will that commitment run? Ultimately, the future of this Union will be deeply influenced by opinions and attitudes in England. Blithe indifference or blank incomprehension can be as corrosive as active separatism.

This is the really tough territory. Governments can make the law, change the constitution, spend the money and devise the policies. But shifting attitudes, even understanding how the cumulative impact of their own actions are perceived, is far harder.

Most of what you might call the British establishment, political and beyond, pays allegiance to the Union of the United Kingdom. But I detect something of nostalgia in that affection, a lightly worn assumption that the Union is a good thing because it has always been there, combined with something bordering on incomprehension that anyone would want to break it up. There is a hint in this of the background radiation of the big bang of empire, the last faint echoes of the conceit that rule from London was benign and a good in and of itself.

It is hard at times to see in this the recognition that this is a Union of four sovereign parts, all needed persuaded to continue to pool their sovereignty if this union is to persist. This is not about condescension and subsidies; this is about the hard, gritty reality of understanding the needs and aspirations of all parts of the UK, of negotiations to achieve outcomes for the common good, seeking

compromise with political opponents and subsuming short term political gain in the interests of the whole.

At the same time, are we seeing the slow draining of sentiment for the Union at the level of the English street? We have seen the polling, of leavers in general and Conservative party members in particular, who would prioritise Brexit over keeping Scotland or Northern Ireland in the Union. Really? Even taking a discount for frustrations over Brexit, this is an extraordinary state of affairs, that the members of the Conservative party, the party ostensibly most committed to preserving the constitutional status quo, in their majority would rather see us leave a 45 year old union mainly economic in its intent and purpose than preserve a Union, the ties of which are so much more ancient and run so much deeper?

That is perhaps where the greatest challenge of all lies for the incoming government. Sustaining this union will require the commitment of scarce political resource and time. It will require collaboration and compromise. How will this resonate with a voter base that is disengaging emotionally from the Union? Will the political will be there, not just to ride the criticism of things done to show respect for the interests of the people of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, but also to seek to turn back the tide of indifference among the people of England?

On the answer to that question will hinge the future of the United Kingdom.

Thank you.