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AsktheFM and Cabinet - EU Nationals event

First Minister
Edinburgh
17 August 2016

Thank you very much and a very warm welcome to all of you.

I know the subject of our discussion matters a great deal - and in a very real and direct way - to all of you and to your families.

Although the circumstance that has led us to organise this event today - the UK wide vote to leave the EU - is one that I wish hadn't arisen, it is nevertheless good to see such a varied audience here. There are more than 450 people from almost every single one of the member states of the European Union.

Amongst other things, I hope that today's event underlines to all of you just how important it is to me and to the Scottish Government to do everything we can to protect Scotland's relationship with Europe not as an article of faith but because key interests of Scotland depend on that relationship with Europe, and that's why we need to protect it. Also, our commitment to protecting your place and your future here in Scotland.

You have done us the privilege of making Scotland your home and you make a significant contribution to our economy, our society, our culture - to our every sense of who we are. More than 20,000 of you study at our universities and you make up around 5% of our NHS workforce. We would be poorer without you - not just economically, but in many different ways.

So at the very outset, let me reiterate just how welcome you are here in our country - it is your home.

Scotland is and has long been an outward-looking nation.

And while I would never suggest that Scotland is immune from racism and xenophobia - we are not - I do believe that there is a widespread appreciation that diversity makes us richer and stronger and, I believe, happier and healthier as well.

And, in a very practical sense, we understand the tangible benefits - in terms of jobs, trade and investment - that flow from membership of a single market of more than 500 million people.

So, while there was never any room for complacency, I was not overly surprised that a clear majority of people in Scotland who voted in the referendum, voted to remain in the EU. I am very proud that we did so.

The result UK wide was, of course, a disappointment. Like many others, I felt - and still feel - a mix of anger, upset, concern and frustration.

But if that's how I felt, I can only imagine the impact on those of you who are living here but who come from other European countries.

Suddenly, having been denied any say in the matter, you and your families are facing uncertainty about the future.

That's why as I sat down in the early hours of 24 June to write the speech that I would later give in Bute House, I knew that one of the things I had to do - that I had a duty to do - was speak for and to the community of EU nationals living here in Scotland and to make clear that you are welcome here.

In the days that followed, we tried to turn that sentiment into more practical action and part of the purpose of today is to hear from you the things that we can do as the Scottish Government to allay the sense of uncertainty that there is.

For example, we worked with Universities Scotland to guarantee that any student already here or starting their first degree this year would retain the right to free tuition throughout their course.

I met with the EU Consuls in Edinburgh to make sure we were actively discussing any other practical steps that we might be able to take.

And we have organised this event today to give you an opportunity to raise views, concerns and make suggestions directly to us.

Of course - and let me be frank with you about this - because immigration law and policy is not the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament I cannot at this stage do the one thing that I really want to do - and that is give you a cast iron guarantee that your right to stay here will be unaffected by the outcome of the referendum.

However, I can and I will continue to argue strongly that such a guarantee should be given, without further delay, by the UK government - and that other EU countries should do likewise for UK citizens living there.

I think it is disgraceful that such a guarantee hasn't already been given. You are not bargaining chips - you are human beings with families, jobs, friends and lives here.

You have a right to certainty and to peace of mind.

So you have my assurance today that in all the discussions that the Scottish Government will have with the U.K. Government in the period ahead, standing up for your rights and your status will be a priority.

Of course, there are wider interests at stake that we need to protect as well - so let me briefly turn to what those interests are, why they matter and how we are seeking to protect them.

I set out a few weeks ago what I consider our key interests to be in the wake of the referendum outcome.

Firstly, there is our democratic interest - making sure our voice as a country is not simply ignored.

Secondly, our economic interest - for a country that sends almost half of its international exports to EU countries, our membership of the single market matters. And for a country that needs to grow its population to fill skills gaps and deal with an ageing population and protect our cultural diversity, free movement matters to us and our prosperity.

We also have an interest in social protection. The EU guarantees core rights and protections for workers - like paid holidays, maternity leave, limits to working hours and the right not to be discriminated against. These protections matter to workers across the country and I'm not confident that they will be protected by a UK government, outside the single market, that may see de-regulation and a race to the bottom as the route to economic competitiveness.

We have an interest too in solidarity - in independent countries working together to tackle global issues like climate change and terrorism.

And lastly, it is in our interests to have influence in the decisions that shape the continent we live in. To find ourselves having to abide by the rules of the single market and paying to access it, but having no say in shaping the rules that govern it, would not be taking back control - it would be giving up control.

These interests - democracy, economic prosperity, social protection, solidarity and influence - are not abstract. They are real and they matter to jobs, trade and investment, to our shared security, to our universities, to the environment and to almost every aspect of our lives.

That is why it is so important that we explore all options to protect these interests - that is what I said we would do on the morning after the referendum and it is what we continue to do. As I have said before, considering afresh the question of independence, in what is now a very different context, is one of those options - but it is not the only one.

The Scottish Government, advised by members of our Standing Council of Experts, is working already to develop what the different options might be.

We are also in discussion with the U.K. Government about our involvement in the development of the U.K negotiating position ahead of the triggering of Article 50.

We have been given a very welcome commitment by the Prime Minister that there full and meaningful engagement in that process and, assuming that promise is honoured, we intend to be active participants.

And that is important - because while we continue to engage directly with EU institutions and member states (I was in Germany just last week) it is in the first instance through the UK process, especially in the period before Article 50 is triggered, that we must have the opportunity to ensure that all options to protect Scotland's interests and our relationship with Europe are properly considered, analysed and assessed.

I hope to be able to say more about our approach to protecting Scotland's interests next week and will provide an update to parliament on the work we are doing.

Of course, our work to develop the different options for Scotland will continue to be constrained until we have greater clarity - or indeed any clarity - about what the UK government means by Brexit.

Do they intend to stay in the single market or just seek access to it? If it is the latter, what will be the terms of that access? What will the implications be for freedom of movement and payments to the EU?

What will the future arrangements be for science and research, farm payments, financial services, security and intelligence and, of course, EU nationals who live here and UK citizens who live in other EU countries?

There are endless questions about our future relationship to the EU and the answers really matter to the lives, livelihoods, jobs and living standards of people across the country.

And yet, 7 weeks on, it beggars belief that we have absolutely no answers. We don't even know what the UK government *wants* to achieve, let alone what it might be *possible* to achieve in negotiation with EU partners. All we have right now is uncertainty and risk - and increasing speculation that the triggering of Article 50, which would give at least some idea of the U.K. government's objectives, may still be a long way off.

The impact of that uncertainty on our economy is already being felt and is likely to get worse. Of course, this is at the time as the unemployment statistics published this morning demonstrate our economy was starting to show signs of sustained recovery. That is now at risk and is why last week, I set out the initial phase of an economic stimulus plan and the Scottish Government will continue to take what action we can to boost the economy and protect jobs.

However, if as things do start to become clearer, it appears that the UK is heading for a hard Brexit - life outside the single market as well as outside the EU - then the impact will be even more severe and long-lasting.

So that is the situation we face. It is not of our choosing and there is no easy path ahead. None of the options that may be possible for Scotland are without difficulties and complexities.

But out of such uncertainty and turmoil and in the circumstances we find ourselves, the job of the Scottish Government is to find the best arrangements and the optimal conditions for Scotland to prosper.

That is what we are determined to do in the weeks and months ahead. And I want to end on this point as we do so - my commitment to you today is that the interests of all of you, all of you who already play such a big part in the success of our country, will be centre stage.

Thank you for listening.

For more information contact:

SG Communications

Email: SGCommunications@scot.gov.uk