HOUSE OF LORDS

Constitution Committee

Corrected oral evidence: The future governance of the UK

Wednesday 23 June 2021

10.15 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Taylor of Bolton (The Chair); Baroness Corston; Baroness Doocey; Baroness Drake; Lord Faulks; Baroness Fookes; Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield; Lord Hope of Craighead; Lord Howarth of Newport; Lord Howell of Guildford; Lord Sherbourne of Didsbury; Baroness Suttie.

Evidence Session No. 2 Virtual Proceeding Questions 15 - 29

Witnesses

I: Alex Massie, Columnist, the *Times*, and Scotland Editor, the *Spectator*; Sam McBride, Political Editor, *News Letter*.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Alex Massie and Sam McBride.

Q15 **The Chair:** The Constitution Committee of the House of Lords is conducting an inquiry into the future governance of the UK. Our witnesses today are two journalists who have written extensively on this issue, Alex Massie and Sam McBride. Good morning to you both, and thank you for joining us.

As I said, you have both written extensively, and you have expressed some concerns about the future direction of the UK. Would you like to give us a brief summary view of where you think we are from your positions in Belfast and Edinburgh?

Sam McBride: I think it is pretty clear, and I am sure it is clear even from outside the UK, that unionism in Northern Ireland is in something of a mess at the moment. Even unionist leaders would not claim anything other than that. It is rudderless and it is almost literally leaderless at the moment—we are in between leaders of the DUP. I think unionists have a sense, across much of the various political elements of unionism in Northern Ireland, that everything is slipping away from them and falling apart.

This is the centenary year of Northern Ireland. It ought to have been a celebratory year for unionism. This was a part of the UK that was not expected to survive for 100 years when it was created, with partition of the island of Ireland in 1921. So in many ways it is a victory for unionism. It has endured.

The problems that have bedevilled Northern Ireland throughout its existence have not been sufficient to lead to a removal of the border or to end the union as it currently exists. Yet this has been a dreadful year for unionism. It is not just to do with the pandemic, which is obviously outside all our control; it is to do with Brexit, and it is to do with the Irish Sea border going up at the start of this year.

It is also to do with a sense that is very keenly felt in unionism that London does not really care about them; that they are, as one founding member of the DUP said to me last week, the unwanted children of the union. They want to stay, but they are not sure that people elsewhere in the UK really want them now.

There are unionists who are self-aware enough to realise that they have contributed to that sense—for instance, in how the DUP behaved when it had very significant power in Westminster. It swaggered, it had a sense of entitlement, and it did not really act in a way that sought to make friends. It tried to pressure people rather than persuade them. Be that as it may, from the perspective of the unionist in the street in Northern Ireland, there is a pretty gloomy sense of what is to come.

That is tempered by the fact that there is no sense that Irish unity is imminent. If a united Ireland was around the corner or on the horizon, in some ways things would be much more straightforward because, even

though unionists would not welcome that and they would be very concerned about it, they could at least reconcile themselves to it, and they could start to think about what the future would be. They could negotiate their place in a new Ireland. They could start to think about what the practicalities of that would mean for them.

We are not there. A significant poll was published just over a week ago, the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, run by the two universities in Northern Ireland. It said that, if there was a border poll in Northern Ireland tomorrow, only 30% of people would vote for Irish unity at this point. Even if that is not quite accurate, I do not think that it is 20 points inaccurate.

Therefore, there is a sense that we are in a vacuum and that everything is still there to be fought for. As we have seen this year, some people think that means literally fighting on the streets. I think that we are in quite a dangerous place and quite an unstable place, and a lot of that comes down to bad decisions that have been taken by the leaders of unionism.

The Chair: Alex Massie, are you any less depressing in your view of the state of the union?

Alex Massie: Well, it is quite a hard act to follow in those terms. Thank you very much for inviting me to come and try to answer some of your questions this morning.

Sam suggests that unionism in Northern Ireland exists in a vacuum of some sort. In Scotland, it is slightly different. Here, the situation is one of stalemate. That has been apparent for quite some time and was reinforced by the results of the recent Scottish parliamentary elections. Effectively, half the country now professes to believe in independence and half the country prefers the constitutional status quo. This cannot be considered in isolation from the referendum of 2014, which, although it delivered a clear result, with a 55-45 victory for the remain team, the no campaign or the Better Together campaign, was not a sufficiently decisive victory to put the matter to bed for ever.

I remember speaking to various nationalists in the run-up to 2014. They were quite clear that, even if they did not win, 40% of the vote would be sufficient to ensure that the national question—the Scottish question—remained profoundly unanswered and, lo and behold, that is what has happened.

Unionism finds itself in a curious situation in Scotland. I think that it lacks leadership, and it lacks convictions in certain respects. Above all, it finds itself constantly dragged into having a fight that it does not want to have. It does not actually want to spend all its time talking about the national question, but it faces the difficulty of having nothing to say on anything other than the national question.

The Conservative Party's election campaigns in Scotland are purely concerned with the independence question; it has absolutely nothing to say, really, on the governance of Scotland. It suits the Conservatives in Scotland from an electoral perspective, just as it suits the SNP from an

electoral perspective, to have the national question crowding out all other considerations, because it allows both parties to squeeze the Labour Party in the middle. Uniquely, Labour has to win votes from people who are opposed to independence and from some of those who actually quite like the idea of independence. That puts Labour in a very uncomfortable position in Scotland. Most Labour supporters in Scotland dislike being considered unionists. They do not like the label, partly because of spillover effects from Northern Ireland.

Unionism in Scotland would therefore dearly love the question to go away. It looks south of the border and it sees very little help and support from its notional co-religionists. There is a sense of isolation among Scottish unionists. They feel that they are let down by unionism south of the border, which does not understand or care to understand very much about Scotland, does not actually understand the realities of the United Kingdom as viewed from north Britain, and is uninterested in learning about any of these things.

A lot of tactical responses to the strategic problem posed by the rise and dominance of the SNP in Scotland are thoroughly inadequate, in my view—inadequate when they are not simply laughable. The situation could hardly have been better designed to further the interests of the Scottish National Party.

Ulster unionists are accustomed to feeling alone, I think, for some of the reasons that Sam outlined; it is a rather more novel experience for Scottish unionists to find themselves comparably isolated. That gives unionism a certain shrillness at the moment, a nervousness, and a sense that developments are likely to be even worse in the future. There is not a lot of optimism; there is not a lot of conviction in certain respects. It is a profoundly fretful time for unionism north of the border.

The Chair: Thank you for your answers, depressing though they are in many respects. We will want to follow up in detail on some of them, but let us move on to some recent events.

Q16 **Baroness Suttie:** Thank you both very much for appearing before us today at this extremely interesting time.

Will you say a little more about the specific impact of Brexit and Covid-19 on support for the union in Northern Ireland and Scotland? I should declare an interest as the Northern Ireland spokesperson for the Lib Dems in the House of Lords. As you can probably hear, I am a Scot who currently lives in England, so I have a specific view on these things myself, but I would love to hear your views on those two elements.

Sam McBride: I think that, in a Northern Irish sense, it is very easy—it is probably easy to answer this in a Scottish sense as well—to answer the Brexit part of that. It has unquestionably been deeply damaging for the union and for support for the union in Northern Ireland.

Before the vote for Brexit in 2016, polls were very consistent that Northern Ireland's constitutional position had never been more secure in the sense that not only had it widespread Protestant support and support

from people who, traditionally in Northern Ireland, have been unionist; it was also garnering very significant tacit support from Catholics—from people who had traditionally been nationalist and who had aspired to remove the border.

That was a remarkable feat in many ways. That was evidence that Northern Ireland, in an odd and peculiar way, with a limping form of governance at Stormont, was working. People were getting more prosperous. People on both sides of the aisle in Northern Ireland felt that they had a fair crack of the whip and that they were not being discriminated against. All the various issues that had led to problems in the past were going in the right direction.

Brexit transformed that. The polling is very clear. A chart in the *Economist* recently plotted lots of the various polls over the past seven or eight years, and there is a very clear trend. The polls go up and down slightly, but there is a very clear turning point in 2016.

When it comes to Covid, it is slightly more complicated. On the one hand, there was a message from Sinn Féin and from Irish nationalism in the early days of the Covid pandemic that, basically, London is killing people. It was almost as blunt as that: Boris Johnson is not locking down the country, he is acting recklessly, he is shaking hands with people, he is not a serious leader for serious times.

All those various criticisms were being made, and it had the added edge that there was now a constitutional alternative to this in Northern Ireland. It is not like somebody in Labour making those arguments—it does not mean breaking up the country. In Northern Ireland, it is a very different scenario. There was a sense that Leo Varadkar was a more serious leader. He was more impressive in how he handled the early stages of the Covid pandemic.

I think that has shifted somewhat as things have gone on. The vaccination programme has obviously been far more successful in the UK than in the EU. That means that Northern Ireland is far ahead of the Republic on that front.

People have very significantly found the NHS to be uniting force across the community. There are murals in support of the NHS on the Falls Road in west Belfast. That is remarkable in some ways, because the "national" in National Health Service stands for something that many people there do not feel is their nation.

I was struck by a comment last week or a couple of weeks ago by Professor Duncan Morrow at Ulster University. He said that, going into the future in Northern Ireland, the NHS is potentially more significant to the union than flags and the traditional things that have been seen as the symbols and the outworkings of what it means to be British in Northern Ireland. He based that on polling in the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey that I referenced, which showed overwhelming support—90-something per cent support, in the high 90s—from both sides of the divide in Northern Ireland, saying that, whatever their view

of the future of Northern Ireland constitutionally, what they liked about the union was the NHS.

On one level that is unsurprising, but it is also something of a threat for the union. The NHS is in a worse state in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK. There are hundreds of thousands of people on waiting lists in Northern Ireland, and reforms to the health service have not been taken through by Stormont. That might sound quite boring, technical and insignificant in a constitutional sense, but actually, in the circumstances of Northern Ireland, that could be far more important than some of the issues that you are perhaps thinking about in the bureaucratic make-up of devolution and how powers reside in the UK.

Alex Massie: Brexit is a disaster for unionism—a complete calamity—and there is no point avoiding that, just as there is no way of disputing the fact that Brexit was something that England wanted to do but it is something that is being done to Scotland. One can recognise that even while accepting that it was a pan-UK vote and that the result has to be honoured and put into practice.

It reopened the national question. If Brexit had not happened and had not been voted for, we would not be talking about the possibility of a second independence referendum. There would be no grounds for it. Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP would have had no alternative but to accept that there was no way you could realistically, plausibly, sensibly, compellingly reopen the national question just a handful of years after a referendum notionally decided it in 2014.

In the 2016 Scottish parliamentary elections, the SNP's line was that there would not really be a case for another referendum, except if there was, as it put it, a "material change in the circumstances" that justified it. Whatever one thinks of the merits of Brexit, it clearly creates that "material change" in circumstances. From that point of view, the political argument for a second referendum for independence is much simpler and, in certain respects, stronger, and I think it is foolish for unionists to try to pretend otherwise.

At the same time, it causes certain difficulties for the SNP and the pro-independence cause, because it requires them to rethink the meaning of independence. There is, as yet, no indication that the nationalist movement in Scotland has even begun that work on questions of currency, trade and all kinds of other international relations. They do not have answers to many of the practical, technical questions and problems that Brexit throws up.

However, if Brexit teaches us anything, it is that technical matters and economic concerns do not necessarily trump other factors. It is curious to hear ardent Brexiteers in London say that the technical difficulties imposed on independence by Brexit are so awful that nobody in their right mind would vote for independence, because why would you want to complicate trading relations and so on with your largest economic market? They are blind to the ironies in this approach.

It is quite clear. Professor John Curtice and every other expert worth their salt is quite clear that Brexit has been a slow-burning boon for the nationalists. That is partly because you have some people who voted no in 2014 and remain in 2016 beginning to rethink their order of priorities, but it is worse than that, I think. It suggests, or allows the nationalists to make the claim, that the United Kingdom does not work in the way it is supposed to. It allows them to argue that Scotland does not receive its fair share, does not receive a fair hearing and does not receive the respect that it merits as an equal member of the union. That is a message that plenty of people in Scotland are quite prepared to pay some credence to.

Again, it is about feelings, not about practicalities, really. It is the sense that what England wants, England must get. On a certain level, that is obviously fair enough, and failing to do that creates a number of English problems, which I dare say we might talk about a little bit in the future and you will hear about from other witnesses, but it changes the basis upon which the United Kingdom operates, at least in the ways in which that basis is understood in Scotland.

Above all, it has reopened a question that otherwise could have been ignored for some time.

Baroness Suttie: I will briefly come back to Alex Massie for a quick reply on the specific of Covid. You have not touched on that. The perception is that Nicola Sturgeon has had a good Covid campaign and has used it politically to her advantage. Would you agree with that?

Alex Massie: I am not sure I would, actually. I think that is the perception in England. In Scotland, the notion that Covid has been handled brilliantly is not quite as widely held. It is perhaps more a confirmation of trends that existed previously anyway, whereby, to a certain extent, the Scottish Government are graded more generously than the Westminster Government, and are graded more generously because they are the Scottish Government. Therefore, people in Scotland take a more charitable view of them.

Nicola Sturgeon's stature or relevance in England is higher post Covid, I think, than before it, because Covid has underlined the way in which the United Kingdom is a very strange country, being both a singular unit in itself but also a union comprising multiple nationalities. That is a significant difference, because to be Bavarian or Sicilian is a keenly held identity, but they are not national identities in the same way that to be Scottish or Welsh, or even Northern Irish, is a national identity.

I do not think that Covid has really changed how people in Scotland view the union. One thing that has been notable is how a lot of voters in Scotland are quite happy to credit the Scottish Government for things such as the furlough scheme. That demonstrates both the way in which good things are ascribed to the Scottish Government, regardless of who is responsible for those good things, and bad things are ascribed to the UK Government, regardless of who is actually responsible for those things. That is just a structural fact of life, which benefits whoever is in

power in Edinburgh, which is the SNP, obviously, for a long time now and a long time to come.

Covid has been hard learning for a lot of people in England because, even if they do not agree with it, there is a greater understanding of how the union is viewed from its smaller countries, which is that England and Britain are not the same, never have been and never can be—but there are a lot of people in England who do not really recognise that.

Q17 **Lord Howell of Guildford:** Alex Massie, you talked of people in the middle being squeezed—the Labour people—between the hard-line, breakaway separatists on one side and the solid unionists on the other, but surely it is more than Labour being squeezed. Is there not a whole middle section who are really the swing, decisive factor in all this story, who have been driven, as you have rightly been telling us, by Brexit, and apparently dislike of Boris Johnson and so on, and have swung in the direction of independence?

Will you analyse a bit more what this middle group think they are talking about when they talk about independence? They are the decisive ones, are they not? If they believe that they really want to see a real breakaway—constitutional separatism from England— that is one thing. If they are in doubt and can be swayed either way, then the whole issue of independence becomes more malleable and more open to persuasion and the offer of a better union from London.

You have written in your excellent articles that personal dislike of Boris Johnson is one of the factors driving independence. Is that really so? Surely hard-headed Scots who are thinking about the future of their country can think beyond personal dislike of one transient politician. That proposition seems to me to be slightly ridiculous. Would you comment on those two points, please?

Alex Massie: It may be slightly ridiculous, but I am not sure that we should expect people in Scotland to be any more hard-headed than people elsewhere—and people elsewhere are not necessarily hard-headed.

The Prime Minister's unpopularity in Scotland does not help, shall we say. The Conservative Party's unpopularity in Scotland, relatively speaking, does not help, either. It is quite obvious that, from a unionist point of view, this might just be a short-term tactical thing, but it would be a significant advantage if the next Westminster election was won by the Labour Party. There is just no doubt about that. If the SNP is constantly in power in Edinburgh and the Conservatives are constantly in power in London, that is a recipe for never settling this question.

You are right that the electorate in Scotland is, broadly speaking, in three parts—it is divided into three, like Gaul. You have a third who will always vote for independence and a third who will always vote for the union. In between that, you have the people who, as you rightly identify, will swing the matter one way or the other. What these people have in common, in general, is a nakedly transactional view of the union. They are not interested in flags or poetry or history. They want to know what

is in the union for them. What is in it cannot be measured purely in cash terms. What they dislike is a sense of being taken for granted or having their views ignored. If you have a Prime Minister who says that devolution is "a disaster", that is taken to be an attack not on the architecture or institutions of devolution but on the sensibilities of the people of Scotland, the vast majority of whom may have a low opinion of how the Scottish Parliament performs in practice but are keenly protective of it at the same time.

The Prime Minister is a problem. If he were to be replaced by a more congenial figure, that would not solve the long-term structural problems that unionism faces in Scotland, but it would not hurt, either. It is not just about him, just as the case for independence is not just about Nicola Sturgeon or, before her, Alex Salmond, but individuals do make a difference at the margin. When the country is effectively divided 50:50, the margin really matters. That extra 1% or 2% either way makes all the difference.

The challenge for unionism is not to combat Scottish nationalism but to co-opt it. In the past, unionism has always been very successful at doing that. In many ways, unionism's great achievement is that Scottish independence is a feasible, practical possibility, because the sense of Scotland as a distinct place, a distinct country of its own, has remained and has endured for 300 years, but it has done so because unionists have insisted on that. In a curious way, the SNP's ability to lead Scotland to independence or to persuade people in Scotland of independence is a tribute to the successes of Scottish unionism over the past 300 years.

I do not know whether that answers your question at all.

The Chair: Well, I have heard some interesting points there. However, we must move on. Baroness Fookes, do you want to take us a little more into the detail?

Q18 **Baroness Fookes:** Yes. May we now look at the role of the UK Government? We have just touched on the fringes, with reference to the Prime Minister. In your view, do the UK Government take the union and devolution seriously? In that context, how well are they managing relations with the devolved Administrations?

The Chair: I think, Alex, that follows on, to a certain extent, from what you have been talking about. We have heard in the past the phrase "devolve and forget".

Alex Massie: Yes. I suppose "devolve and forget" is not great, but it might be preferable to some of the alternatives, among which are what is sometimes termed a muscular unionism, which quickly becomes, or is perceived in Scotland to be, forcing people into a choice between Britishness and Scottishness, and that is a disastrous course for unionism in Scotland. If you were to insist on that kind of choice, Britain and unionism would lose every single time. The whole point of unionism, viewed from Scotland, is that it is a diverse and inclusive, multilayered proposition as a question of identity. If you try to simplify or flatten

these things, unionism has nothing left to say to people in Scotland, frankly, except on the basis of accountancy, and that is not enough.

There are people in Whitehall and so on who take devolution and the crisis of unionism seriously, but I am not sure that there are many members of the Cabinet at the moment who do.

We saw an example of that just a few days ago, with the suggestion that, if there were to be a referendum, the franchise should be changed so that Scots living in other parts of the UK, however you define this thing, which in itself is a problem, should be entitled to vote. That is a defensible proposition, obviously, but it is a tactical response to a strategic problem. Moreover, it is tactically inept. The whole point of unionism at the moment is to say, "Now is not the time for a second referendum", but if you start talking about the terms and conditions under which a second referendum might be held, you justify talk of a second referendum, and you bring forward the time when it might be appropriate. You are conceding the legitimacy of the demand, essentially, and that is how it is understood. That kind of thing strikes me as being immensely short-sighted and counterproductive, yet it is typical of what we see from government and Cabinet interventions.

Likewise the endless talk of micro-initiatives that will somehow help to save the union, such as sending Prince William and his family north of the border on some proconsular mission. It is fatuous, is laughable and is seen and understood as such in Scotland. It impresses and persuades nobody, but it betrays a unionism that, at least at Westminster, appears to have no idea what it is doing or who it is trying to talk to. It is not talking to the undecided third of Scottish voters who might go either way—the people whom Lord Howell was referring to. It is purely reinforcing the preferences of the people who will always be on your side anyway. That is not the audience.

Sam McBride: Going back to something that was touched on—the Prime Minister's personal involvement—in the Northern Irish context that is particularly significant. There is certainly a third of the population who do not support the union at all. There is another section, an increasing section, similar to the situation in Scotland, who are persuadable. They are the people who are voting not for unionist parties or for nationalist parties but for parties such as the Alliance Party and the Green Party. They are the smaller people in the centre, who do not define their politics based on the constitution.

For the first time in Northern Ireland's history, there is a significant cohort of constitutional swing voters: people whose constitutional view on things is not predetermined at birth. To those people in particular, the actions of somebody like Boris Johnson are very damaging to the union. They are people who are open to persuasion, but they want to be persuaded, and there is not very much in what he has done in regard to Northern Ireland that is persuading them.

We can overcomplicate these things. Sometimes, bureaucrats, when there has been a problem or a scandal, such as the cash for ash scandal in Northern Ireland, which I have written about a lot, come up with new

rules, new committees or new chains of command. They love to do this stuff. Actually, a lot of it is just about applying basic rules that either are written or ought to be understood by everybody—basic ethical concepts—and acting in ways that show that you know that there are consequences to bad behaviour.

For instance, when David Cameron responded to Bloody Sunday and the Saville report, where he gave a very eloquent defence of the British Army at the Dispatch Box while making absolutely no defence of what they did that day, saying that what they did was "unjustified and unjustifiable", he was cheered in Londonderry by people who would never be expected to cheer a British Conservative Prime Minister.

When Boris Johnson faced a similar situation a few months ago, with the Ballymurphy inquests, he said nothing—he was silent. That is completely deaf to how that is perceived in Northern Ireland, even by people who are not necessarily opposed to the union.

Therefore, as in Scotland, there is a sense that people here want to be respected. Respect does not necessarily mean giving Stormont and the political parties everything that they ask for. It means treating them as teenagers, perhaps, rather than as children: being tough with them at various points, pointing out where they are doing things that are unjustifiable or things that are negative in how public money, much of which comes from the rest of the UK, is spent here—it is not good for people in Northern Ireland if the money is misspent, and it is certainly not good for the people who are sending it here—while not interfering in policy.

Policy is something for which Stormont has an electoral mandate—that is not the role of Whitehall—but there is some positive evidence here. I suppose that lots of what we have said has been very negative about how the union is unfolding at present. Since the cash for ash scandal, there has been a sense that Whitehall is a little more interventionist. It has set up a fiscal council, and it has not come in with a big stick, but it has shown that there is some stick, and it is not all carrot. That, I think, is a positive thing. That shows people in Stormont that this is not a fiefdom, and that they cannot do what they like. There is a tension in the power structures here, but ultimately it works only if there is a sense that there is respect involved.

Q19 **Lord Hope of Craighead:** I am thinking of the day-to-day running of the country from Whitehall and decisions that have been taken there, such as we see in the decision to proceed with the United Kingdom Internal Market Act and the way in which the common framework system is being handled. Do you think that devolution is sufficiently understood at Whitehall? If not, what can be done to increase understanding?

Sam McBride: I think there is a difficulty at both ends of that issue. In Whitehall, there is sometimes a difficulty in understanding how these things are perceived in Northern Ireland. That ought to be the function of the Northern Ireland Office: it is Northern Ireland's voice in Whitehall

and Northern Ireland's voice at the Cabinet table, through the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

That department is now very small. It used to run Northern Ireland under direct rule. It was down to about 120 or 130 staff at one point, I think. It has now been beefed up somewhat, but it is still a pretty small department with a very large responsibility. I think that there is a role there for it.

There is also a difficulty in Stormont with the complexity of some of this. This is a problem that is perhaps more unique to Northern Ireland than it is to Scotland. It is a function of our size. We are a population of 1.9 million people, and there is a question that I think was exposed by the RHI scandal, where energy policy, for instance, is phenomenally complicated. Northern Ireland was being asked to come up with policy in an area that is devolved, in which there were several hundred people working on this policy in Whitehall; in Northern Ireland, it was about one and a half people, and they were not very good at it and did not know very much about it. Therefore, there is a question about how realistic it is for Northern Ireland's civil servants, let alone the politicians, to be across the detail of these extraordinarily complex things.

When it comes to some of the finer points of how Brexit and the repatriation of powers will be shared between London and the regions and how that plays out, I think that Northern Ireland is so fixated on things such as the Irish Sea border and the big constitutional questions here that they are not really being debated. I think, therefore, that those are problems, certainly when it comes to Northern Ireland.

The Chair: Alex Massie, do you want to add something from the Scottish perspective?

Alex Massie: The internal market Act and common frameworks are not matters that most voters are passionate about, and they are certainly not across the detail.

It is a question of presentation. We have seen, in terms of common frameworks, that Holyrood and Whitehall can actually work together perfectly reasonably on some of these matters, and that there is sometimes greater co-operation beneath the headlines than people might like to think, although obviously it always suits the Scottish Government to suggest that Scotland's voice is being ignored or unheard, or that Scotland is being treated badly or receiving the short end of the stick time and time again.

That then becomes a question of how the British Government and unionism more generally accommodate or placate Scottish concerns on some of these matters. It seems to me that, as a presentational matter, the British Government should always be demonstrating that they are open to hearing input from the Scottish Government and indeed the other devolved Governments, and that they take that input seriously, are willing to go the extra mile to accommodate concerns from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and are the bigger person. There is an opportunity to portray the nationalists in Scotland in particular as small

minded and obsessed with point scoring at the expense of opportunities that might be available for Scotland, and to say that the nationalists are not actually interested in making devolution work and that they are not interested in Britain working better.

This is a fundamental point: if Britain is not seen or understood to be working well in Scotland, support for independence increases. Support for independence invariably, in my view, goes up at moments of profound crisis for the British state. Therefore, the task for the British state is in some ways to work better and to be seen to be working better, but also to be doing so in a way that respects the prerogatives of the devolved Governments and takes them seriously, rather than dismissing them.

On the question of immigration, for instance, it is surely not beyond the wit of Whitehall man and woman to come up with a system that would allow a certain amount of Scotland-specific immigration working visas to operate in a post-Brexit future. It is the sort of thing that happens in other Commonwealth countries, so it could happen here, but that means taking account of and respecting individual circumstances in the different parts of the UK and saying that a one-size-fits-all policy approach is not necessarily the right one and that difference is a virtue, not a problem.

The Chair: Lord Sherbourne, I think that leads to the aspects that you want to raise.

Q20 **Lord Sherbourne of Didsbury:** Alex Massie said earlier that many people in Scotland ask themselves, "What is in the union for me?" I will ask a more practical question: what do you think the UK Government could do to promote the practical benefits of the union?

Alex Massie: Here, again, Brexit rather complicates matters, I am afraid. One obvious advantage of the union right now is trade. One difficulty for independence, obviously, is that if it is an act of folly for the United Kingdom, as the SNP would have us believe, to complicate trading relations with its largest and closest market, it must also be an act of folly for Scotland to do likewise vis-à-vis the UK. It is quite difficult for a UK Government hell-bent on pursuing and achieving Brexit to make that practical case against independence.

Fundamentally, the arguments for independence and for Brexit are strikingly similar. If you look at the rhetoric of the Brexit campaign in 2016 and compare it with the rhetoric of Scottish nationalists, you find striking overlaps and commonalities. In the end, it is a question of democracy, of taking back control. A pro-Brexit Government in London find it very difficult to make those arguments against independence.

Clearly, there is a role for greater communication of the advantages that accrue to Scotland from being part of the United Kingdom, but this has to be done delicately, because people react badly to the suggestion that independence would inevitably be a disaster. Whether it would or would not be a disaster is not the point; people dislike the idea that it would be—that Scotland would be incapable of making a decent fist of itself as an independent nation. Those arguments are familiar from the Brexit

referendum, which, in certain respects, was a big-budget remake, in 2016, of the 2014 referendum in Scotland.

"Show, don't tell" is the key thing. You cannot go around telling people in Scotland that they are better off as part of the union; you have to show them. That means a successful United Kingdom, a prosperous United Kingdom and a settled United Kingdom that is relaxed enough to accommodate difference. At the moment, we do not have that.

Lord Sherbourne of Didsbury: Do you think there are any practical things that the British Government could do, such as the shared prosperity fund, that could help to promote the union?

Alex Massie: I do not think that would have much of an impact one way or the other, to be honest, to the extent that sending money north is obviously a good thing. It happens already under the Barnett formula. Scotland has a better-than-deserved share of funds as a result of that. Wales, as we all know, is squeezed and punished by the Barnett formula, but Scotland has a very advantageous deal.

That does not really move the needle one way or the other. Things such as a shared prosperity fund are fine, but a lot of people would just say, "Well, that's money that we deserve anyway".

Sam McBride: As Alex said earlier about Brexit, one of the lessons of Brexit, for me, even during the campaign, when we did not know how it was going to go, was the number of people who, in vox pops and in some of the debates—in various settings—said, "I accept that we're going to be poorer if we vote for this, but I'm going to do it anyway". I had never seen that before in politics. There was a received wisdom that people vote with their wallets. You give them a tax break the year before an election and they will vote for your party—all that sort of stuff.

That shows that it is not simply about money. Northern Ireland gets a heck of a lot of money from Great Britain. It does not persuade Irish nationalists that that suits their interests. Increasingly, there is this group in the middle who do not feel that cultural attachment to Irishness but who are starting to ask, "Actually, does that balance up against all these other problems that we think come with being part of the union?"

Therefore, it is about respect, and it is about basic things—not to be flippant about this, but it is about basic things like the Prime Minister not just openly lying to people in Northern Ireland about what he is doing. When it comes to things like the Irish Sea border, if he makes a calculation and says, "This is for the greater good. I've done this, I've good reason for it", that is fine, but be frank with people. They are not stupid. They see that there is a border in the Irish Sea, so explain it to them, come to Northern Ireland and show that you are listening to their concerns. We have had a series of Cabinet Ministers often flying in and out, not doing media interviews, not really showing their faces very much.

Some of that comes back to another structural problem that Northern Ireland has that Scotland does not have: that there are no seats in Northern Ireland for the big British parties. Labour does not stand in

Northern Ireland, and the Lib Dems do not stand, although they have a relationship with the Alliance Party. The Tories get next to no votes in Northern Ireland. It takes a particularly committed politician to say, "This might not be in the interests of the people who elect me, but it's in the interests of the union and of Northern Ireland, so I'll do something that is in their interests".

Whatever the flaws of Theresa May—and there were many—she did seem to show that sort of concern for people in Northern Ireland. She knew that what she was doing was unpopular with her voters but might be helpful in Northern Ireland. Boris Johnson has not even pretended to be doing that.

Q21 **Lord Faulks:** Good morning to both of you. Alex, I was very interested in your article, "Johnson must resist this very English unionism", in the *Times* and, in particular, the conclusion: "The real challenge is persuading Scots that independence is unnecessary, not merely undesirable". I was a bit perplexed by that, but I think that I am rather wiser, having heard you speak today, about what is meant by "unnecessary". Do I understand it to mean the accumulation of careful and specific responses, while avoiding any sense of being patronising towards Scotland? This would also apply, I think, to Northern Ireland. Any further elaboration on the use of the word "unnecessary" would be helpful.

Alex Massie: If the point of Scottish nationalism is to advance the view of Scotland as a coherent and distinct political sensibility and to advance the Scottish interest, the question for unionism is: to what extent can that be done within the union? That has, after all, been the story of unionism, in many ways, for three centuries. The view has been that advancing the Scottish national interest is best done within the UK, because it affords a number of opportunities that would otherwise have been unavailable.

We have seen in the past couple of years—it has fallen back a little bit now—generally speaking, the advance of support for independence from 45% to 50% of the electorate, in large part on the back of what has been happening in London, not what has been happening in Edinburgh or Glasgow. That is to say—senior nationalists will admit this—that the case for independence has been more effectively made in London than in Scotland, and that increased support for independence is a reaction against London more than it is an enthusiasm for any prospectus offered by the SNP.

Nicola Sturgeon has more or less admitted that herself. She has not really been making a positive case for independence recently. It has been a reactive one—that we need independence to stop London being beastly to us, essentially. If London is not beastly and is seen to be being non-beastly, you draw some of the sting from that argument.

Again, it is about treating people and institutions with respect—that the fulfilment of Scottish ambitions can be achieved within the United Kingdom—and that means a quiet but prosperous life, in which

everybody is free to assert their identity as they see fit, so there is no grievance that is persuasive. The SNP are expert grievance miners—absolutely—but the thing is to stop giving them grievances. At the moment, unionism is pushing people away from the UK. It is difficult to pull people towards unionism, but you can at least stop pushing people away.

The Chair: You mentioned furlough, the British Government's credit for which has been bypassed in Scotland. It has just not registered. How do you overcome that?

Alex Massie: Sam has been talking about some of this stuff, too. You have to do it in a sensible way. You cannot present furlough as something that "you Scots should be jolly grateful for because, without us, you would have been ruined". Even if that were true, it is not the sort of thing that people like to hear, and it turns them off both the message and the messenger. The easy comeback is, "Oh, you mean that, uniquely in the western world, an independent Scotland would have had no scheme by which it would support its workforce during this pandemic". People will think, "Of course we would have". Perhaps it would not have been as generous or as effective. Yes, there obviously would have been difficulties with the currency, the central bank and so on, but those are intricate technical points that do not actually interest voters hugely, and they certainly do not make a big difference to how voters perceive these matters.

Sometimes, unionism just has to accept that it will not get the credit for the good things that it does or for the opportunities, but how you sell those good things also matters. You can undo a lot of good work by being seen to be patronising people, as Sam said earlier.

Q22 **Lord Howell of Guildford:** I go back to the central question that Lord Sherbourne was raising: the hard question of what the Westminster Government do to influence that centre that we were talking about—the swing factor, the people who are actually going to decide the existential issue of whether the United Kingdom breaks up. This is surely at the centre of it. What can be done?

At present, the deals put forward by Mr Gove, for instance, and by many other distinguished sources are that we should give more infrastructure aid directly to various local authorities in Scotland, perhaps even bypassing Edinburgh, and that we should put more civil servants in Scotland—a programme that I have been involved with over many years and have great scepticism about—and, rather coinciding with what you and Mr Massie were saying a little earlier, that you are not going to make much impact through all this shared prosperity and so on.

Therefore, what are the positive areas where the British Government could operate? If this is an emotional, nationalist issue, and if all these infrastructure things are not going to cut much ice, where should we be operating? Is there a case for reinforcing Scotland's foreign policy, say, in Britain's overall international policy? Are there positive areas where, somehow, the chord could be struck to switch this central swathe away

from hard-line separatism?

Alex Massie: Not really, I think. The thing to remember is that opinion in Scotland is all nationalist. It was John Buchan, Lord Tweedsmuir, who famously said that every Scot should be a nationalist. By that, he did not mean that everyone should support independence; he merely meant that the Scottish sentiment, the Scottish interest and so on should be a primary driver of Scotland.

Unionism is, in a Scottish context, also a form of Scottish nationalism. Sometimes you now hear people deploring cultural nationalism and so on. That means deploring or cancelling Sir Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson and John Buchan. It means wiping away the National Museum of Scotland and the National Galleries of Scotland. It means fundamentally destroying the concept of the union that has been built up in Scotland over the past 300 years.

That, I know, is somewhat different from what you are talking about, with the practical interventions that the UK Government can make, but this is the playing field upon which you are operating, and you have to understand the playing field and the rules of the game that you are playing if you are to have a chance of influencing its outcome, and I do not see much sign of that at the moment.

None of these micro-initiatives is likely to alter matters very much individually. What you are talking about is an overall approach, which takes Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales and the union more generally seriously. That is not all people want, but it is a significant part of what people want: the sense that they are being heard, listened to and respected.

Sam McBride: There is an argument in favour of moving civil servants out of London and into the regions, including Northern Ireland and Scotland, but it is not necessarily the argument that is being made for it at the moment.

I was very struck by something that one of the retired senior civil servants involved in Brexit—I think it was Philip Rycroft—said in his interview with the UK in a Changing Europe for its Brexit archive, or witness archive for Brexit, which it has set up. He basically said that Whitehall was very good at understanding big geopolitical threats—it understood the rise of China, major defence threats and so on—and yet it did not understand its own country. By putting civil servants further out from the centre—some of them obviously have to be there for good reason—and having more of a link to the regions is a positive thing. It is positive within England as much as it is for us.

It is not necessarily just about having a brass plaque, as we now have on a government building just round the corner from the *News Letter*'s offices in Belfast, which says "UK Government" on it. That is ultimately a PR or branding exercise. It will not change whether people here vote for the union or not. What it does do is give the Government a better understanding of their own country, and they can then use that to react to these various threats.

The Chair: I think that leads you, Lord Howarth, into the topics that you wanted to raise.

Q23 **Lord Howarth of Newport:** May I ask you both to reflect on the English view of the union? If devolution has perhaps led to a developing sense of English political identity, how important is that, and what impact may it have on the future of the union?

Sam McBride: The English have always been dominant within the union, I suppose, in a numerical sense, in a financial sense and in a military sense in a way that the Irish, the Scots and the Welsh have never been. From the perspective of somebody in Belfast, people here are used to that.

There is the complication here that, unlike in England, where the idea of breaking up the union is still a pretty niche pursuit, that is obviously not the situation in Northern Ireland. There is a constant battle for the union here. That, as in Scotland, as Alex said, makes it difficult for unionism in Northern Ireland to move beyond simply arguing about whether the country as it currently exists should exist and to start asking, "How can we run it better?" It complicates even basic things such as public services, because if you believe that the country will not exist in its current form in, say, 20 years' time, why would you build a hospital or a road in a certain location? It has a corrosive effect, I think, even on the basics of good government.

I suppose that those who support the union in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the UK, whether in England or anywhere else, believe that it delivers more than the sum of its parts. Therefore, we all benefit, from a unionist perspective, regardless of whether Northern Ireland is smaller or is having particular difficulties or benefits, or things are booming or declining or whatever it might be. That is not unique to Northern Ireland.

Something that has changed since the Belfast/Good Friday agreement is that there is very much a sense in Northern Ireland, as Alex suggested, that it is possible to be culturally Irish and openly express your Irishness in a very proud way and still be very clearly British in Northern Ireland. That was once not the case in Northern Ireland. I think that, if the union is going to survive in Northern Ireland, that will be at its heart.

Alex Massie: I often think of Pierre Trudeau's famous line about the relationship between Canada and the United States: that it is a bit like being in bed with an elephant. It is a novel arrangement, but it can be surprisingly satisfactory so long as the elephant remembers to behave himself. However, if the elephant starts thrashing around, things get uncomfortable pretty quickly. There is a sense in which Brexit is a great demonstration of an elephant thrashing around: it changes the arrangements for everybody else.

The English question is obviously a significant one. It is clear that there is increased suspicion of devolution in England—among the general public, not just among politicians—and a sense that the smaller countries of the United Kingdom get more than their fair share is quite widespread. In the north of England, there has long been a resentment of the

prerogatives enjoyed by Scotland on the basis of its national identity, which is a more significant thing than the north of England's regional identity.

We now clearly have increasing numbers of people in England who take the view that if the Northern Irish want to be part of a united Ireland, "On you go", and if the Scots want to be independent, then "Good riddance and good luck to them"—although the "good luck" tends to be expressed in a slightly sardonic fashion. That suggests a sort of impatience with the complex, interlocking, multilayered reality of the United Kingdom.

We have lots of polling evidence. The future of England project, run by academics at the Universities of Cardiff and Edinburgh, is excellent on a lot of this, showing that voters in England thought Brexit was more important than the survival of the United Kingdom. Even if that was contrasting the reality of Brexit—because that had been voted for—with the hypothetical destruction of the United Kingdom, it is still a striking set of findings, which has been noticed in Scotland, as well as in Wales and Northern Ireland. You have a problem, again, politically, that the Conservative Party's interests increasingly align with being the party of England. It is very difficult to be the party of England south of the border and the party of Britain north of the border simultaneously, because they are two different things.

The Conservative Party's interests clearly align with running an anti-SNP campaign at the next general election, flagging up the threat of an SNP-Labour Administration at Westminster—a reprise of what was, in England, a very successful campaign manoeuvre in 2015, when you had those posters of Ed Miliband in Alex Salmond's pocket. Those worked in England: they drove voters to the Conservative Party. However, it backfired in Scotland, where it drove voters to the SNP.

Again, it comes down to this thing: if you are forcing a choice between Scotland and Britain, Britain will lose. The whole point of unionism is to be radically both simultaneously. If you become the party of England, that is a problem elsewhere.

Q24 **Baroness Doocey:** I preface my question with a comment on something that Sam said earlier. He said that only 30% of people might be interested in a united Ireland, but everything I read suggests that there is an increasing desire for a united Ireland. I come from Dublin, so it is something that I feel strongly about. My entire family in Ireland do not recognise this at all. They say that this is a complete nonsense, and that it is just something that is being put about.

If that is so different from the general perception—that it is about to happen—that leads me to my question. I have read quite a lot about there being a developing sense of English political identity, partly in response to devolution. Do you agree that this is the case, and what impact would it have, if it is the case, on the future of the union?

Sam McBride: There has certainly been an increase in support for Irish unity since Brexit. Take the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey; this

is slightly complicated by Covid, because its methodology changed last year. It was done primarily online, and there is evidence that people say things to pollsters that they think the pollster might want to hear, which tends to suppress the numbers for people who would say that they want a united Ireland. I think that doing it online has increased that to a certain extent. Even before that, however, the numbers were increasing, I think from memory from about 16% in favour of Irish unity to 30% now. That is a very significant increase, even allowing for that methodological alteration. However, based on those numbers, it is clearly not about to happen.

What is quite dangerous is that, when you look at other polling and at other questions in that Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, there is a perception among both unionists, who do not want Irish unity, and nationalists, who do want it, that it is coming. That is quite dangerous, because that makes unionists very defensive. They think that everything is being lost, that they are on the cusp of defeat, and therefore they are manning the ramparts and going back to the "No surrender" attitude—"We are going to make one last stand here".

From the nationalists' perspective, it perhaps leads them to have unrealistic expectations about where they will be in 20 years' time. That is why I think there is a lot of instability ahead in Northern Ireland.

On nationalism in England, I think there is a major problem here. One of the issues that struck me when I covered the cash for ash scandal was how recklessly people such as Arlene Foster and those around her treated the concept of British taxpayers' money. They milked it like a cow, basically, and they had no great sense of the consequences of that, once people in England realised what was happening. At the point where the scheme was out of control, where they were committing hundreds of millions of pounds of overwhelmingly public money from England that was coming into Northern Ireland, from the rest of the UK, the sense of Arlene Foster's closest adviser was: "What's the problem? This is good for Northern Ireland", even when he was being told that people were heating empty sheds and things of that nature.

To me, that speaks to a certain Ulster nationalism among a section of unionism in Northern Ireland that is represented by some people in the DUP. That is very damaging. One of the threats to the union is not necessarily from Irish nationalism within Northern Ireland; it is from Ulster unionism doing things that provoke English nationalism and contributing to what Alex said was a sense of, "Get out, and good riddance".

Q25 **Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield:** I was very struck and pleased by the degree to which both of you stressed the human factors in the development of what Alex memorably called our "fretful" union.

Will you help me with the Cabinet? It was only half a political generation ago that the conventional wisdom among many in England, although not me, was that we had far too many Scots in the Cabinet—that they were wildly overrepresented. Now, for many in the Cabinet, it seems to be a

foreign country. With the Foreign Office telegrams they read, they know more about many other countries than they do about Scotland.

Can you imagine this for me? Help me here. Boris Johnson is not built for Scottish roads—he simply is not. He is a Mr Toad, who is built for English roads. Michael Gove, however, the Lord of the Isles, is built for Scottish roads. He lived on them for a very long time. What happens when he opens his brief and starts to present to the Cabinet the latest developments on Scottish questions, and their shoulders sag? It must be extraordinarily difficult to keep their attention. Do they have a sufficient basis of knowledge on which to make policy on this ultrasensitive matter, which could lead to the break-up of the kingdom? I think that we have a kingdom—Scotland, above all, and Northern Ireland, to a high degree always has been—but they are now strangers to Scotland in the British Cabinet in a way they have never been in my lifetime.

Alex Massie: I think that is demonstrably true, with the exception of Michael Gove, and obviously Alister Jack as the Secretary of State for Scotland. As Sam was saying, the Northern Ireland Office is not what it once was; nor, obviously, is the Scotland Office. There is very little knowledge of or interest in these questions in the Cabinet. Sometimes, there is clearly a direct hostility to the notion that, yet again, we are having to devote time and attention to the troublesome Scots or the troublesome Northern Irish or even, in truly dismal circumstances, the Welsh.

There is an impatience that is evident from aspects of the Cabinet, and you again have this sense of the Conservative Party's attitude that everyone else should shut up and count their blessings, and they should appreciate their good fortune to be part of this heroic enterprise and cease their carping and whinging.

In a curious way, one of the difficulties with the British Government's response to some of the challenges posed by Scottish nationalism is that they make the same mistake as the SNP does. That is to say, one can quite understand why the SNP conflates party with country, presenting themselves not just as the authentic voice but as the sole voice of the Scottish people—the political consciousness of the country made flesh. Increasingly, when it comes to combating the threat posed by the SNP, we see UK Ministers constantly making the same mistake in conflating the SNP with Scotland. Therefore, anything that dishes the nats, whatever it may be, has to be a good thing, even if that is interpreted in Scotland as being a slight on the country, not the party. You have to be very careful and insist upon disentangling these two things, because the SNP is not the same as Scotland.

The question for the UK Government should not be, "How do we defeat the SNP?" It should be, "How do we make the United Kingdom work better for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England, too?" That is a very different set of questions, and it leads you to very different places. That is a long-term view, whereas it seems to me that, a lot of the time, what we get from the UK Government is a series of improvised and

incoherent manoeuvres for the short term, with very little consideration for the longer term.

Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield: I live for part of the year in Scotland, and I am always struck by the difference in political coverage, obviously in the Scottish newspapers, but also in the Scottish editions of the national newspapers, and the degree to which we are not properly briefed, if we just read the London national newspapers, on what is going on in Scotland. That is true of Northern Ireland, too. It is not just that stuff does not get reported; it is the interpretation of it, the analysis of it and the salience of it, above all, which is not reflected in the London newspapers' news desks.

As an old journo, we all hate news editors, because they have a deeply depressing view of human nature and its possibility, and they are stuck with what interested them when they were young and promising at the age of 25. But, even allowing for that, there is terrible coverage. That is the word. There is truly lamentable coverage of the Scottish question in the London press every day. When I go back to Scotland, it is entirely different.

You have a column all the time in Scotland, and I am not sure you do all the time in London, do you?

Alex Massie: I sympathise with your view, Lord Hennessy, but I suspect that it might better be taken up with the editor of the newspaper. It would be imprudent of me to comment on it too much at this stage. Sam may also have a view on your view of news editors, of course.

Sam McBride: If I could perhaps comment on this where Alex cannot, I think there is a profound problem here. I guess that both Alex and I would probably declare an interest, in the sense that we would love to have more coverage of our areas in London papers. I suppose we have a vested interest in that.

As a citizen of Northern Ireland, as somebody who lives here and loves the place—and I am bringing up my family here—I want other people to be able to understand the issues here. They may or may not agree with my view of the world or the view of the world of all people in Northern Ireland, but I was really struck, after the confidence-and-supply agreement with the DUP in 2017, that the coverage in London was appalling. I say that as a journalist who is often very defensive when people criticise the media.

I understand how difficult it is and how resources are stretched, but when I started as a journalist in 2006, multiple national broadsheet newspapers had full-time Northern Ireland correspondents based in Belfast. They do not any more, overwhelmingly. The *Guardian* has a correspondent based in Dublin most of the time, who is very good, and I am in no way criticising the journalists here, but the *Times* and the *FT* likewise: all these papers, including the *Daily Telegraph*, had people in Belfast.

There was a sense that Northern Ireland was fixed—it was solved; it was a boring story—but that does not really matter. If you are a national

newspaper, this is part of the nation. People buy the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Times* and the *Guardian*—all these papers—in Northern Ireland, but even if they did not, even if they did not even circulate here, surely people in the rest of the UK ought to have some interest in what is happening here. I think that is a massive problem. Is it a problem that the Government can solve? Probably not, but it is a problem that we at least need to think about. I am delighted that you raised that question.

Alex Massie: You are absolutely right, Lord Hennessy. Speaking from personal experience, although this is mirrored by other people on Grub Street, when you are writing about Scotland for the London edition or the main edition—we prefer to call it the London edition—of a national newspaper, you are essentially made aware that you should be writing as though you are a foreign correspondent, explaining a strange and distant land to people who have not been keeping up with affairs and do not need to get into too much detail, but really want the general thrust of things.

It is quite remarkable, as Sam says, in what are national newspapers, to have in some senses the feeling that parts of the United Kingdom are essentially foreign territory already. That reflects the manner in which there is already a sort of federalism of the mind, if you like, in the UK, even if there is no formal federalism in constitutional architecture. Psychologically, we may share a roof and so on, but it is on the basis of being semi-detached, rather than a terraced house.

Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield: Walter Lippmann, the great American commentator, said that opinion is maps in the mind. You are suggesting, Alex, that the map is already fragmented in the minds of editors in London.

Alex Massie: Yes, very much so. Particularly in the Scottish case, with papers such as the *Times*, the *Telegraph* in particular and the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun*, because you have a Scottish edition, that is where all the Scottish stuff goes, so rather less Scottish stuff ends up in the main edition, the London edition, than if you did not have a Scottish edition. It leads to a sort of "report and forget", if you like.

The Chair: That is a very good comment. Lord Hope, shall we think about what might be in the future?

Q26 **Lord Hope of Craighead:** Yes. What Alex Massie was saying about federalism in the minds of the press leads very neatly to my question, which is about UK-wide constitutional reform. I am thinking, in particular, of the campaign that Gordon Brown has been mounting for quite some time, which is a kind of federalism. Do you think that, in Northern Ireland or in Scotland, there is any feeling of warmth for what he is saying? If so, would it help to strengthen the union?

Alex Massie: Federalism is one of those horses that refuses to die, or it is one of those horses that is always revived, despite having expired many times previously. It is one of those things that might well work in practice, but the obstacles on the road to getting there strike me as

being so formidable that there is very little chance of it actually happening.

One has to be practical sometimes and accept that the House of Lords would have a key role in a formal federal architecture, I suspect, but how you get there in the face of overwhelming indifference to this question in England, which comprises 85% of the UK population, just creates a barrier to it so that, however well-intentioned and however good the ideas might be, until such time as it is taken seriously south of the border, I see no prospect of it happening.

It is doubtless important that work continues. I know that Lord Cranborne has lots of ideas on this, and many of them strike me as being thoroughly well-intentioned and possibly useful, but they are so hypothetical in the face of political reality. I do not see it as a game-changing moment. If it were to happen, it would be a question of the constitutional architecture of the United Kingdom catching up with the reality of the United Kingdom as it is understood and felt in other parts of the UK.

Sam McBride: I think the reality is that, whether we call it federalism, quasi-federalism or extreme devolution—whatever it might be—that is where we have been going for some time. This was crystallised for me when Boris Johnson made that address to the nation last year, on 23 March or something, and said that we were going into lockdown. It was very solemn, and it was a declaration-of-war-type situation for people of my generation, who do not remember those sorts of very grave national situations before.

Yet we came to the end of it, and the BBC coverage in Northern Ireland, which I assume was the same as the national coverage, went to the Scottish First Minister and the Welsh First Minister, who made their own announcements, and did not go to Stormont. I am not entirely clear what the situation was there. It might just have been a cock-up on somebody's part in Stormont. I phoned a very senior person in Stormont and asked, "Does what the Prime Minister has announced apply to Northern Ireland?" This person said that they thought so, but they did not know.

It was pretty remarkable. Here I am, somebody who is paid to understand the differentiation between what happens in Whitehall and what happens that is devolved, and I was not sure, and he was not sure. It then transpired, several hours later, that Stormont had made its own decision largely to follow what the Prime Minister was doing.

What it really made me think was this. There was almost a public health argument for not broadcasting the Prime Minister's address in Northern Ireland, because it confused people. It did not apply to Northern Ireland. That is a really remarkable constitutional development—that there was a confusion by allowing the Prime Minister to address the nation. Perhaps this could have been dealt with more eloquently in how he framed it—I am not sure—but I think that speaks to how we are drifting apart, we are different and our laws are different.

Something else that has struck me over recent years is how unionist politicians in Northern Ireland are drawn to the idea of having more power, more devolution: "Corporation tax? Let's devolve it. Air passenger duty? Let's devolve it. Let's get more and more on to our remit". That is a natural function of being a politician. You see a problem, and you want to be able to solve it. There is also the natural human function of wanting more power, wanting more ability to influence things.

Is there any end point to that? Is there a grand plan here? I do not think so. Whether it is federalism or something else, is there a sense that somebody somewhere has a concept of what the UK will look like in 50 years' time?

Lord Hope of Craighead: Do we have a problem in that the UK Ministers for the devolved Administrations—I am thinking of Alister Jack as one example—have very little profile in the devolved nations? Alister Jack probably has the lowest profile of any UK Minister for Scotland I can think of. It may well be true for Wales, too. Is there a problem here? Do you think there is a lack of profile and a lack of understanding on their part of what devolution means?

Alex Massie: I think it is a structural problem, which has basically been caused by devolution and the establishment of a Parliament in Edinburgh. Prior to that, most of the time Secretaries of State for Scotland were Scotland's man in the Cabinet.

Lord Hope, you will recall a degree of controversy when it was suggested that Michael Forsyth was the Cabinet's man in Scotland, rather than Scotland's man in the Cabinet. It is clearly now the case that Alister Jack is the Cabinet's man in Scotland, much more than he is Scotland's man in the Cabinet—or, at least, that is the general understanding of the way things are now. Some of that simply reflects the reality of devolution and the fact that there is a Scottish Government. The role of Secretary of State is inevitably both diminished and altered by that.

I am not sure there is very much that can be done, at a practical level, to change that, save to the extent that it is probably incumbent upon the Secretary of State to assert his role as Scotland's man in the Cabinet, not the other way round. That, after all, has always been the traditional understanding of that role. That speaks again to the point that unionism contains within it a form of Scottish nationalism.

My central point, perhaps, is that the job of unionism in the future is to co-opt nationalism, rather than combat it.

Q27 **Lord Howell of Guildford:** I want to come back to the central question that we have been discussing. Is this a devolution issue, or is this a sovereignty issue? They are not particularly different. If the target, as it were, is the minds of those in the middle in Scotland, who, if they swing the way of Nicola Sturgeon, could lead to the demand for a referendum and even a successful referendum, can they be further influenced by any devolution measures of any kind—civil servants, infrastructure, more powers of various kinds, for taxation and so on—or are we really talking about sovereignty, which is quite a different issue?

I sympathise enormously with the point about the neglect of Northern Ireland and Scotland in London. When I was a Minister in Northern Ireland at the worst time of the Troubles, I used to fly back two or three times a week. I walked through the Lobbies and people would ask, "Where have you been?", or, "What have you been doing?", and then show not the slightest interest in the real horrors that were going on in Northern Ireland at the time. There is a basic disinterest.

However, how can this central area of Scottish opinion, which will decide everything, be met, and are there constitutional changes? In other words, is it nationalism and sovereignty that we are talking about, or is it more devolution, a more polite tone and more understanding than we have had in the past? This seems to me to be the central question. I would love to hear Alex Massie's comments.

Alex Massie: It is a bit of both, to be honest. Where there is a clear and compelling case for the devolution of greater responsibilities—I mentioned immigration earlier—I think it is sensible to take those considerations seriously. There are sometimes situations where Scotland has a particular problem that it cannot act on right now, and it might be useful if it had that ability to do so.

In general, the notion that you can buy off nationalist sentiment or pro-independence supporters in Scotland by the devolution of greater powers overall, in the big picture, is misguided. The Scottish Parliament has plenty of responsibilities at the moment, although it does not always use those responsibilities as effectively as it might. Simply devolving more, with a salami-slice approach to these things, is not necessarily an answer. It is more about tone and posture, and having a United Kingdom that is seen and understood to be working well for the benefit of all its peoples. That means embracing the paradoxes and ironies of Britishness.

To hop across the Irish Sea, Fermanagh may be just as British as Finchley in certain respects, but it is not British in precisely the same way. It is Irish-British, and Finchley is not. Scottish-British is not the same as Irish-British and not the same as Welsh-British. Again, they are not necessarily the same as Nigerian-British or Bangladeshi-British. This is a hyphenated polity and always has been, and the United Kingdom has to be relaxed about that and allow room for all these bifurcated, hyphenated identities. If it insists on a centralising, one-size-fits-all Britishness, it has no future.

Q28 **Lord Howell of Guildford:** Just a small supplementary. Would it help the union and preserve the union Parliament if we abandoned the English votes for English laws idea, which came out of the Cameron era, and began to reassert what the 1707 Act said—that the union Parliament shall last for ever?

Alex Massie: I do not think that English votes for English laws, with the unfortunate acronym EVEL, is something that many people in Scotland are actually all that concerned by. I do not think it helps, but I think what people disliked was the fact that the Prime Minister, David Cameron, pivoted to that within a few hours of the referendum result

being announced in 2014. It was the timing and the message that that sent: "We have dealt with the Jocks. Now we need to address England's legitimate concerns". The timing of that was off, and the tone in which it was said was also off. It created an unnecessary problem in Scotland without actually solving some of the problems that exist in England.

The Chair: Sam McBride, do you want the final words on this?

Sam McBride: All I would say is that I do not think that English votes for English laws registers at all in Northern Ireland. It is not going to decide how any of these swing voters in the middle cast their votes in a border poll, if that comes.

Something that Alex said has great truth in it. For unionism to be successful in Scotland, it needs to co-opt nationalism. I think that sense of being British and being Irish in a Northern Irish context is something that unionism in Northern Ireland has not just not been good at but has actively opposed in many instances, certainly over recent decades.

If you go back far enough, people were openly saying that they were Irish and they were proud members of the union. If the union succeeds in Northern Ireland, it will be saying to people who want to be Irish, "You can do that, but you can still keep all these other good things".

Q29 **The Chair:** It may seem a little unfair to ask you at the end but, with your crystal balls, where will we be in 10 years' time? Is there an inevitability about what will happen, or are there things that can stop the trends and the tensions that you have been talking about? Where do you think we will be in a decade?

Alex Massie: If you look at some of the demographic aspects of polling, it looks quite bleak for unionism in Scotland. You have two-thirds of Scottish voters under the age of 40 or 45 now saying that they back independence.

It is easier for the Scottish nationalists to win a referendum on independence than it is for them to win the right to have that referendum. The big battle for them is getting to the referendum. If there were to be a referendum at any point in the next 10 years, I would expect yes, or the pro-independence argument, to win it.

However, at the moment, and this may endure for much longer than people in the SNP like to think, there is no overwhelming demand for a referendum. It is not the Prime Minister who is vetoing a referendum at the moment; it is the people of Scotland, because they have not given it their consent.

Election results are, of course, important. I think you heard from Ciaran Martin at a previous session about the importance of them. So, too, is the principle of consent, a principle much better understood in Northern Ireland, perhaps, than it is in Scotland, but it does apply here, too. For as long as half the population in Scotland make it clear that they do not want a referendum in the next two, three, four or five years, it seems to me to be quite reasonable to refuse that demand.

However, if you got to a situation where, for the sake of argument, two-thirds of people made it clear that they wanted a referendum, it would be very difficult, I think, to refuse that referendum. In those circumstances, the only reason why two-thirds of people would want a referendum would be because they had already made up their minds how to vote in it. Any second Scottish independence referendum strikes me as being likely to confirm a view, rather than deciding what that view should be.

The challenge for unionism is how to avoid getting into that fight, how to avoid a referendum at all. That is why I say that it is easier for the nationalists to win a referendum than it is to get the referendum.

Sam McBride: I think it is objectively true that nothing is predetermined when it comes to politics. There are certainly very few things, anyway. Brexit shows that. We did not think that it was going to happen; it did happen. Covid shows that. It intervened from nowhere, and suddenly it has been the dominant issue in our politics for the last year and a half or so. Therefore, I do not think there is any inevitability to whether the union either survives or falls apart. It will be based on the consequences of the actions of the people who are involved.

I think the most significant element is making the union attractive to people. Part of that is about making it something that is prosperous and financially attractive, but it is not just about filthy lucre. People want more than that today. They care about individual issues, young people in particular. They care about things such as the environment; they care about looking after the countryside. Those sorts of things are often not terribly high up the Westminster agenda, or even the Stormont agenda in my local patch here, but they are the things that, when people come to think beyond their immediate circumstances and what makes sense for them financially, will be relevant.

What can the UK offer in those terms—stability and bettering their lives? Also, there are the consequences of politicians' actions. If you lie, if you act unethically and if you treat people openly with disrespect, there are consequences to that, and I think that is what we will see over coming years.

The Chair: Alex Massie and Sam McBride, thank you both very much indeed. You have given us a lot of food for thought. It was interesting reading your articles. It has been more interesting even than that to talk to you and to hear your approaches this morning. We are very grateful to you both for giving evidence, so thank you very much.