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David Mundell has accused Nicola Sturgeon of 'exploiting' Northern Ireland's troubled history in an attempt to increase support for independence.

Discussing the Brexit deal at a Scottish Conservatives gathering in Falkirk, he said:

"We have a deal on the table. The Prime Minister's judgement is that, other than in the margins, there is no better Withdrawal deal available.

"What is certainly the case is the EU will not accept an agreement that does not contain the so-called Northern Ireland backstop.

"That covers what would happen, on the island of Ireland if a future trading relationship between the the UK and EU is not agreed by the end of 2020. And, most importantly, it's an insurance policy which both we and the EU hope never comes into operation

"A lot of the discussion this week, and indeed in the Cabinet consideration of the deal, focussed on that backstop.

"Clearly, there are concerns that it should not become permanent and also that the status of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom is not fundamentally changed.

"Ensuring that there was not a Northern Ireland-only backstop creating a customs border down the Irish Sea has been a significant achievement by our negotiators, but we do have to be satisfied that here is nothing in the small print of the 150 pages of the Northern Ireland protocol which leads to material change from how things work now on the island of Ireland."

On Nicola Sturgeon's demand for arrangements in Northern Ireland to be copied Scotland, he added:

"We've all grown accustomed to Nicola Sturgeon politicising and exploiting any issue for her political ends and furthering her agenda of having another independence referendum.

"We'd seen it already with Brexit – out of the traps on 24 June 2016 demanding another independence referendum, but this week she reached a new low with her crass demands for Scotland to be equated with Northern Ireland.

"It confirmed that nothing is off limits now for Nicola Sturgeon – the sensitivities and unique circumstances of Northern Ireland, its geography, history and culture can be cast aside, if there is some opportunistic political point to be made.

"The immediate need to generate some divisive grievance is prioritised, the subject matter secondary to the independence cause and the repercussions ignored.

"Scotland's circumstances are nothing like those of Northern Ireland.

"Even the SNP used to acknowledge that, speaking out to have the Belfast Agreement upheld, but now none of that seems to matter anymore, compared to the opportunity for tomorrow's headline, one more seed of division, one more step however achieved on the road to independence.

"We, and Scotland need to be on notice – Scottish politics just got a whole lot uglier. There is nowhere Nicola Sturgeon won't go."

On the Prime Minister's efforts to secure a Brexit deal Mr Mundell also said:

"What she has demonstrated this week is fortitude, resolve, strength of character, determination, desire to do the right thing in the national interest, her sense of duty and public service and her sheer decency in the face of an unprecedented onslaught by detractors and the media, for which she deserves our admiration.

"She is tackling an issue of epic proportions, on which she can never please everyone, and she is doing her very best to find a way through. And let me be quite clear, if it comes to a confidence vote, she will have mine."

Mr Mundell said the deal was "not perfect" and there were "conditions to ongoing support" including the reassurance that the UK would leave the Common Fisheries Policy in December 2020 to become an independent coastal state able to negotiate fishing quotas and access to UK waters.

But on the need to secure a deal he added:

"The choice in Parliament's Meaningful Vote is going to boil down to a choice between this deal or alternatives that are even more unpalatable.

"While I have reservations about this deal, I believe that no deal would a much worse outcome for Scotland, seriously damaging our economy and threatening jobs. Just ask Scottish business.

"And there are even worse outcomes. A general election and a Corbyn Government – worse for the UK economy than any Brexit and handing the SNP a second independence referendum as the price of the keys to 10 Downing Street.

“And as for the so called, People’s Vote – another EU Referendum – don’t underestimate how divisive such a referendum would be or how much it would undermine the trust of those who voted to leave in the democratic process.”

On a “time of hard choices” ahead he concluded:

“What guides me in making those choices is keeping our United Kingdom together, keeping Jeremy Corbyn out of Downing Street and delivering the best outcomes for people in Scotland. That’s why I will continue to support our Prime Minister in delivering a Brexit deal.”