

# Who is trying to divide the UK?

One of the worst features of the hopeless 2017 Parliament was the way the government with no majority seemed to think it needed to reach out for the Union to the SNP in Scotland and to the Republic of Ireland. In both the Brexit talks and on wider issues the government revealed a fear that the Union was in some way in danger, and then thought it could strike a deal with political forces pledged to break up the Union or following a policy of trying to split it for their own advantage.

It was first strange to think the Union was in danger. After all, as good democrats the Union Parliament had recently provided a once in a generation referendum on Scottish independence to the forces in Scotland that did want to break up the Union. After a long and lively debate the Scottish people decided by a healthy majority to stay in the UK. The SNP themselves confirmed this was something you only did once in 20 or 30 years.

The UK always made clear to the Republic of Ireland that they could keep the Common travel area with us when we left the EU, so they would have a special relationship with the UK. The UK always offered tariff free trade to the whole EU, so Ireland could work with her partners to secure that prize she wanted. All the time the government kept the goodwill of most Northern Ireland MPs – and its own backbenchers – it had a majority. Many of us wanted a more robust approach to the EU's attempt to force us to a bad settlement by unsettling the Union.

The more the Prime Minister genuflected to the Republic of Ireland and to the SNP the more the EU reckoned the UK was nervous and weak, so the more they held out for unreasonable terms in the withdrawal talks. The EU saw Scotland and Ireland as ways to keep the UK under EU laws., making concessions on fish, budgets and much else. They worked well with those who wanted to break up the UK.

The more the agenda was settled by the EU and the anti Brexit forces, the more the government's natural unionist allies in all parts of the UK felt sidelined.

The EU of course had much form in trying to damage the Union. It always wanted to play up differences between Scotland and the UK. It promoted lop sided devolved government. It tried to deny the existence of England, seeking to split our country into regions and even experimenting with a region which put Kent and parts of Northern France together.

One of the EU's biggest mistakes which led to the historic vote to leave was its refusal to recognise England in the way it promoted Scotland. One of the previous governments biggest mistakes was to panic in public about the Union and then deny England a proper place at the table over the EU. As I regularly asked when the UK government rushed to consult Scotland about the negotiations, who spoke for England? A successful union depends on the goodwill of all parts of the Union including England. The more that is

devolved, the more England needs her own voice in government to keep the balance.