

Nicola Sturgeon's timing is a cynical ploy to take advantage of Brexit uncertainty



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Nicola Sturgeon has called for a second Scottish independence referendum CREDIT: SG

The risk that Scotland would leave the UK was one of the main reasons I voted Remain last June, despite my lack of enthusiasm for many aspects of the European Union. Entirely predictably, in both Scotland and Northern Ireland, [an attempt to pull the UK apart as we negotiate our exit from the EU has now begun](#).

There can be no going back on the decision nevertheless taken by the British people as a whole to leave. But the Government will now have to fight a war on two fronts, with each making an impact on the other. Every time EU negotiators warn there might be no deal or complain of British intransigence, they will be adding grist to the mill of the Scottish nationalists. And with each demand for special treatment

for Scotland, those nationalists will weaken the ability of UK ministers to maintain tough positions that will lead to the best deal for the whole of the United Kingdom. Nicola Sturgeon's speech on Monday morning showed that she has identified the seizing of this moment of extreme pressure on the Westminster government as the one best hope of destroying the UK. It also demonstrated that she will use any argument to achieve her ends – even complaining that Scotland faces “the prospect of a centralisation of power at Westminster” when the Scottish parliament has in fact acquired major additional powers, some of which it has not even used.

Her argument that Scots need a referendum in late 2018 or early 2019 to “have a real choice” is completely specious. Whatever has been negotiated by that time is highly likely to apply to all parts of the UK, including Scotland. If we are leaving the EU in early 2019 then Scotland will be leaving with us, and a referendum north of the border will not be able to change that. By the time Scottish independence had occurred, presumably many months after a referendum, the UK would in all probability have departed the EU and Scottish ministers would have to begin a new negotiation from outside it. Any idea of opening talks between Brussels and Edinburgh earlier than that will come up against the deep hostility of capitals such as Madrid, determined to give no succour to the hopes of breakaway regions.

So a referendum on the Sturgeon timetable is no more likely to give Scots a “real choice” than one held at a later date. The attraction of this timing to her is simply that it would be the period of maximum controversy and concern for media, Parliament and voters. As the exit negotiations come to an end, the airwaves will be full of attacks on all the compromises made to achieve any reasonable outcome. The Prime Minister might well be locked in a struggle with Parliament to win approval for it. It will be too early to say if Britain will do well out of the exit terms, and therefore will be a time of more heat than light, and quite possibly more fear than hope.

This is the real purpose behind Sturgeon's timetable: to bid for independence at a time of maximum confusion in the minds of voters, when it is easy to believe the worst rather than be reassured, and when those in the rest of the UK who criticise the outcome of the withdrawal talks will unwittingly play into nationalist hands. While saying she wants “clarity about Brexit and its implications for us” she actually wants to take advantage of a new moment of division across the UK, when voters will find that fierce debates mean they experience anything but clarity about what the future holds.

Real clarity for the people of Scotland would come from holding a referendum once the actual consequences of leaving the EU were clearer, and could be judged by experience. Having left the EU and its single market, Scots would be able to weigh calmly the dangers of also leaving a single market that matters even more to them – the one with England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. They would be better able to judge how jobs and businesses were being affected by the exit terms, and how well any new arrangements for customs and immigration were working out. They would be informed by real events, rather than the frenzied speculation of late 2018, and they would be in no worse position to leave the UK and open talks with the EU if they decided to do so.

The fact that the SNP do not want their voters to wait for that calmer and clearer time is deeply revealing about their own calculations. For it indicates they believe Brexit has given them a sudden opportunity that might not recur; that time is not on their side. Considered rationally away from the heated acrimony of the EU debates, the case for Scotland to leave the UK is weakening, not strengthening. The SNP's own performance in government is part of that weakening, for it is unimpressive in producing economic growth or better public services. That will only become more apparent to the average Scot as the years go by.

The price of oil has fallen by roughly half since the last Scottish referendum, and with it any probability of an independent Scotland being able to balance its books. Furthermore, the expected costs of decommissioning old oil fields, which will be largely met by the taxpayer, have escalated.

As security threats grow, from terrorism to cyber attacks to renewed tension between Nato and Russia, the case for striking out as a small independent state becomes more fragile, and there is every sign that the world a decade from now will be more dangerous rather than less so.

Given all these factors, it is natural to expect that in the life cycles that are an inescapable part of politics, Scottish nationalism is at or near its peak.

The Sturgeon speech, therefore, is not an attempt to give Scotland a real choice at a time of clarity as it purports to be. It is an attempt to obscure the real choice at a time of uncertainty, when the voters will be bombarded with contradictions, worries and emotions. It is a text written in the language of principle, but with a sub-text of cynicism, calculation and opportunism. Exposing it for what it is requires the same ruthlessness in return. For holding the United Kingdom together before the bankruptcy of nationalism is revealed is now going to be a very close run thing.

