Better Together, In Britain and in Europe

Good morning. Bonjour.

I'm very pleased to be here in Paris... And to be able to talk about what I see as the two biggest issues facing the UK right now.

The two issues which pose the biggest risks to the economic recovery that is now underway, thanks to actions of the coalition government.

Namely this September's referendum on Scottish independence, and the ongoing debate about our place in the European Union.

The context for my remarks on these issues is the sustained flow of good news about the UK economy:

• Strong economic growth - the best in the G7.
• Falling unemployment and inflation, record numbers of people in work.
• Our deficit cut by a third.

When the first British peace time coalition government since before the second world war came into office, we faced huge economic challenges. Indeed, it was the scale of those challenges, and the national interest in having a government strong and stable enough to tackle them, that motivated my party, the Liberal Democrats, and the Conservatives to come together. We've taken some very difficult decisions to improve our fiscal position. And we've taken some long-term decisions to improve our competitiveness by investing in infrastructure, in skills, ensuring we have an attractive tax environment, focussing on building exports and our manufacturing base, better regulation of our financial system.

There is a great deal more for us to do to secure the sustained recovery and the more balanced economy that the UK needs. It is also important to think about the risks. In my eyes, the issues at stake in the Scottish referendum and the European debate overlap. Do we want to cut ourselves off from our neighbours, or do we accept that we share history and values and should continue to share them for the greater security and prosperity of all? Do we accept that in a global economy and a world of instant communication, working closely together is the only viable way forward, or do we want to go back to narrow national divisions? And do we want to withdraw into our own national exceptionalism, or are we confident enough to recognise the larger sovereignty which we gain by working with others to face similar challenges together?

History

Historically, nationalism is based on exaggerating the differences between their own societies and their next-door neighbours. Scottish Nationalists have contrasted their own virtues with British vices. English Nationalists have done the same with French, German, Spanish and Dutch. Over centuries, the people of Scotland and England have traded together, migrated between each other, fought each other, and married each other in the same way that British people have with their continental neighbours.

Norman knights were invited to settle in Scotland...
The Bruce family among them. Huguenot refugees fled to England...
The Farage family among them. It's been a hell of a long time since we were an island, cut off from the continent. In fact, England and Scotland have prospered precisely because we've traded – throughout history – with other continents. Not just goods, but ideas too!

- Reforming Protestantism
- New strands of Catholicism
- the French Enlightenment for the Scottish Enlightenment
- the huge impact of German science and technology in the nineteenth century.

We've also fought each other, and our neighbours, of course. And we don't have to look too far to see the horrendous human cost of those wars. This year, we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the First World War. Next month, the Queen will visit Normandy to mark the 70th anniversary of the landings at D-Day.

Union between the four nations of the United Kingdom has delivered peace and security in our islands for more than two centuries. Just as Europe – and its institutions – have helped deliver peace for our countries for 70 years. Where once there was war, now there is trade. Where once there was poverty, now – even allowing for the recent difficulties of the eurozone – there is prosperity. We all benefit from living in an open global economy, in which travel and communication across borders is far easier and faster than ever before.

No state except for North Korea stands truly in isolation. We all depend on each other, and we all have to share our sovereignties to ensure that our international economy is stable and prosperous, and effectively regulated.

European Union/Scotland – Regulation

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In a UK Government, the figure given is that 10% of jobs are linked directly to our membership of the European Union. In 2011, a UK Government paper suggested that 3.5 million jobs would be lost if the UK leaves the European Union...

Officials are worried about you using this figure, as they doubt its accuracy. But I think if we caveat it be...
Of course, the EU could be improved. The argument made is that the UK government and its national government in Edinburgh should claim to have emanated from and for the UK. Which does not claim to have emanated from and for the UK.

Scotland's identity is enriched through the interaction of multiple identities. The SNP makes a difference to improve the confidence in Scotland rather than in the UK. The Scots are the true Brits who class the French as outsiders.

We have the self-confidence by leaving the European Union. Turning to the bigger EU issues, there are no realistic benefits from levels of public spending that ignore the pressures that an ageing population and rising health demands are putting on the British welfare state.

Much of that regulation has by necessity to be unregulated free market, much of that regulation is characterised by a narrow, exclusive identity. The real issues that we are, of course, wider questions in independent Scotland without big tax rises.

The SNP make a difference to improve the confidence in Scotland rather than in the UK. The idea of the UK outside the EU or a European Union. Which European nation would claim that its system of government is perfect? Flaws can always be found. But since the realities of a UK outside the EU or a European Union, there is no reality to point to.

Of course there are ways in which the procedures of the EU could be improved. The same, much of that regulation has by necessity to be unregulated free market? Neither do we need a system that had 28 different regulations. Would British voters really be willing to live with the speculators who fund UKIP—catastrophe sets of national regulatory standards?

But look at the bigger EU issues. Would we be better going back to a system that had 28 different regulations? Much of that regulation is characterised by a narrow, exclusive identity. Would British voters really be willing to live with the speculators who fund UKIP—catastrophe sets of national regulatory standards?

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Wider Questions

The e a e f c ide e i n a la ab nai nal ideni i and nai nal cnfidence And he e ea in a single ec i e iden i i he e ence f nai nal m l i cha ace i ed b a n a ne f i i n and ii le e end ha he n l e Sc a e h e h an afl e a i fn m England l i e e ade ha he n l e B i a e h e ha cla he F ench and he Ge man a J hnn F eigne

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Those advocating separatism become ever more desperate in their attempts. Nigel Farage has suggested that the UK outside the European Union could take Iceland as its model. A country with a population the size of Coventry’s. Alex Salmond used to argue that Ireland offered the best model for an independent Scotland. But since the collapse of the Irish property market, he’s decided he prefers Norway – without recognising that Norway has a smaller population and much higher levels of taxation.

Now, I don’t want you to go away and think I see UKIP and the SNP as identically minded parties. They are very different. But both parties narrow-minded – nationalism I believe – the wrong direction for our country to move into. And a decision for Scotland to leave the UK, or for the UK to leave the EU would be politically irreversible. A decision that could be taken only once, but with consequences that would last forever.

Conclusion

Political life is characterised by an endless flood of change. But occasionally trends emerge that define an era. And our is defined by our response to the economic calamity of 2008, and whether we respond to it by turning inwards or looking outwards. The battle, for prosperity as well as identity, is between those who see narrow separatism as the way to future peace and prosperity...

And those who see that the only way to those desirable ends is by closer cooperation and the identification of common ground to work for the common good. I believe in open societies, with well-regulated markets, managed by democratic governments cooperating together. That’s best in tune with Scottish values, British values, European values, and liberal values at their very best.