

Who is the greater threat to the continuation of the union – David Cameron or Alex Salmond?

As Cameron leads what used to be known as the Conservative and Unionist Party you would have thought that the answer ought to be obvious. Ask the old hands around Westminster these days, however, and they will tell you that it is the Prime Minister's agenda that risks putting the greatest strain on the union.

This was laid bare in the House of Commons this week when I led an emergency debate on the government's plans to change the rules by which the Commons is run to allow for English Votes on English Laws (or EVEL as it has become known).

Effectively the government wants to create an English Parliament within the House of Commons by banning Scottish MPs from taking part in votes on subjects where responsibility is devolved to the Scottish Parliament.

In theory you can see why that might be fair. In practice it creates more problems than it solves.

Decisions on what you do with health and education in England, for example, have a direct impact on the amount of money that is spent on them. That in turn has a direct impact on the money that is available for the Scottish Government.

It was pretty obvious as soon as Chris Grayling announced the government's plans that they had not been thought through and that they were determined to rush them through before anyone noticed how dangerous they were.

I was fortunate to be able to persuade the Speaker that this required urgent debate and, using a rarely used part of Commons' procedure, led a three hour debate on them on Tuesday.

After three hours of debate the holes were there for everyone to see and by yesterday the government was in full retreat.

Why does this put the union at risk?

By creating two classes of MP and excluding Scottish MPs from votes that can still have a very direct impact on the finances of the Scottish Government, Cameron risks stoking the fires of Scottish grievance. That is never far from the surface in the politics of Scottish Nationalism and this time they would be right!

I do not doubt that David Cameron is sincere when he says that he is passionately committed to the union. The problem is that by seeking easy answers to complex problems he risks putting an intolerable strain on it.

The people of England deserve to benefit from devolution in the same way that we in Scotland have done. That, however, means giving them their own parliament (or regional assemblies) – not by turning the UK House of Commons into a part-time English Parliament.

Liberals have long believed in a federal structure for the UK's government. Why not? It is a model that has worked well enough for some of the most successful countries in the world. America and Germany, to name but two.

The government's plans put the union at risk and don't even offer the people of England what they need. Even if they got their way government would still be run from Whitehall and would still not represent how people voted.

Back in the 1990s the political parties, churches, unions and other civic groups in Scotland came together to set up the Scottish Constitutional Convention. This agreed the blueprint for the Scottish Parliament. It was not easy but it worked and even the SNP now say it was the way to do it – even though they wanted none of it at the time!

Now is the time for us to establish a new constitutional convention – this time to modernise the constitution of the whole of the UK.

It is time to get rid of our outdated and unrepresentative electoral system, to end the scandal of an unelected House of Lords and to offer devolution to the different parts of England.

A new constitutional convention could give the whole country the modern government that works so well in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. David Cameron could take the lead and in this way deliver proper English Votes for English Laws - not the half-baked insult from which he is now trying to run.

Do that, Mr Cameron, and the union can be saved.

Will you be better off or worse off after George Osborne's budget on Wednesday? I suspect that for most people the answer will still be "Don't know".

Media types always talk about the Chancellor "pulling a rabbit out of the hat" as if he were a conjurer. This time the rabbit was government plans to raise the minimum wage to £9 per hour by 2020. This was welcome but unfortunately at the same time he has introduced a whole range of cuts and restrictions to tax credits which go to the same low paid workers.

Someone working in a job earning say £9.35 per hour (about £19,000 per year) will actually be between £850 and £1,000 a year worse off according to the think tank, The Resolution Foundation.

So if the chancellor is a conjurer then I am afraid he is more like one of these conjurers that work the streets of the big cities. Approaching unwary tourists they can apparently magic a bunch of flowers out of thin air with their left hand. Only later does the unwitting tourist realise that the magic being worked by the left hand allowed the conjurer to pick their pocket with his right one.

Ask any islander what the most important issue is for them and most will pretty quickly reply – transport. Get that right and just about everything else - education, employment, healthcare, sport and leisure – will fall into place.

That is why we have been getting a bit worked up about Flybe and Loganair in the Northern Isles of late. A Facebook group "Islanders Against Flybe and Loganair's Excessive Prices" recruited thousands of "likes" in just its first weekend.

The airline, to their credit, met local campaigners and me a couple of weeks ago. They were willing to listen and are off to work out a scheme to help people who miss out on cheaper fares because they have to travel at short notice, eg for a family funeral.

I wish I could have been at the whole meeting but unfortunately I was late. Yep – you guessed it – my flight home was delayed. Cheaper fares are one thing. They still have work to do on reliability!

