

Tales of hope are the foundation of reinvention

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I am heading to Scotland this morning. Not because of the referendum debate, because the debate I am taking part in is strictly neutral on the subject, although it is bound to come up. And I am most certainly not going because the party leaders are. I am going to discuss Reinventing the Economy, and that is something that is needed north and south of the border and irrespective of what happens next week and yet the referendum debate provides a context for that opinion which is important.

Whatever happens next week Scotland is going to reinvent itself, and so too is the rest of the UK (rUK) whatever happens. I say that in the context of a discussion I had at the ICAEW yesterday where Charham House rules applied so that comments cannot be attributed, but where quite a lot of quite influential people in UK tax (plus me) were gathered.

During that meeting it was said, that what business craves with regard to tax is certainty and that for all practical purposes what that really means is that however imperfect the existing model of taxation they want nothing to change.

This was a powerful and fascinating insight in a meeting where the tone of discussion was, I think, largely negative. It was problem focussed with very little insight on what solutions might be with a surprising willingness on view to pass the expectation of change to the one politician - Margaret Hodge - who was present, or to pin that expectation on remoter power, mainly in the form of the OECD, whose work was, however, seen as inevitably doomed in the light of opposition in the US Congress.

Rebecca Benyworth of the ICAEW tax faculty spoke powerfully and insightfully, but as I have now named her I can't say what she said.

And I offered hope that the thing that was needed was deliverable. I made clear that despite being told on many occasions over the last decade or so that what I wanted from the tax system was completely undeliverable many were now happening. I'm not saying they are all being delivered as I want but I've been told that country-by-country reporting, a general anti-avoidance principle, automatic information exchange, registers

of beneficial ownership of companies and more were technically and politically impossible to deliver and progress is being made on them all. Of course that's not all down to me; far from it, but I could argue (and am arguing) that of all the philosophies present in the room yesterday then tax justice was the most successful precisely because we laid out an apparently impossible aim, and have begun to deliver.

What has this to do with Scotland? Quite a lot, actually. The No campaign is based, as I see it on three things. The first is conservatism with a small c: a fear of change. The second is an establishment based desire to maintain power. And the third is a lack of vision of any alternative to what we have, which is precisely how with a week to go the No campaign can suddenly offer all sorts of imprecisely formed reforms with no obvious delivery mechanism or thought through integration processes.

That is, of course, a caricature, but these things matter. Life is not evidence based in the sense that we spend our time rationalising facts. Life is a narrative we weave for ourselves in which we mesh the stories we tell with those of others to seek an understanding that is plausible for the time being.

In that context the No campaign makes little sense. It is offering a story without hope. It is saying 'we're in a mess and you know you're paying the price for it, but stick with it anyway because it's the best mess we've got'. It is, to put it bluntly, not a great sell.

The Yes campaign, on the other hand, can tell a story of a hope for change. Some of those changes, like the SNP's corporate tax policy, seem to me to be both profoundly unwise and unhelpful, and an issue that will need to be fiercely debated over coming periods by those with a concern about the future of corporate taxation and a race to the bottom, but people have, I think, put such details aside. They are instead saying that there is a hope of change if there is an independent Scotland, and that is why they will take the risk of the unknown.

Precisely for the reason that big business is wedded to there being no real change in taxation - which is that what exists is obviously flawed but very clearly works for big business - people in Scotland (and very obviously, elsewhere too) want change because what we have is flawed and very clearly does not work for them.

I am not convinced that a vote for Yes in Scotland is a vote for the SNP. I would expect a vibrant and pluralistic democracy to emerge in Scotland after a Yes vote, if that were to happen, in which there is no guarantee that the SNP would win. Salmond would be wise to recall that Churchill won a war but lost an election and one of the main reasons for voting SNP may have gone once a referendum is won.

And this is precisely the point I am making, I hope. People are, of course, voting for a wide range of reasons in the Scottish referendum (and I will not be) but when it comes down to it there are, I believe, just two prevailing themes which are being lost in all the noise, and they are the 'keep the status quo, bad as it is' campaign and the 'I think we

can do better than this' campaign.

It's not a for or against the Union issue.

Or a for or against the SNP issue.

Although it is a for or against Westminster issue, because that is core to the argument.

It is about vision, passion, and a desire to change by rocking a rotten boat that is so comfortable for a few that they'd rather not reform its obvious flaws.

And shockingly, surprisingly, and sufficiently, people are sending a massive message, whatever happens, that they have had enough of 'some more of the same please'. In England they're doing this via UKIP with a resigned and rightfully heavy heart. In Scotland they have a better option and they are taking it.

There's a massive lesson to learn there, which is that people want change. What is more, unless they get it they might eventually impose it. Those seeking the status quo should take note.