

# **“If big brother England votes to leave the EU ... we will be treated like upstart children”: Irony and a United Kingdom family of nations metaphor in Scottish nationalist discourse**

Abstract: This study explores the inter-play between metaphor and irony in the communication of contrasting UK “family of nations” (UK-FON) metaphor variants by Conservative and Scottish National Party members of the UK Parliament. The study proposes: first, that debates surrounding the intertwined issues of Scottish independence and Brexit triggered an increase in the deployment of the UK-FON metaphor, particularly by Scottish nationalist speakers; second, that competition for control over the metaphor’s meaning has produced two competing variants (i.e. an initial Conservative *aspirational/positive* one framing the UK-FON as unified, equal, beneficent, expansive, and historically-rooted, followed by an ironic SNP *hypocritical/abusive* variant framing it as unequal, coercive, and disrespectful); and; lastly, that the SNP communication of the ironically reinterpreted *hypocritical/abusive* variant contributes rhetorical weight to the expression of Scottish nationalist grievances, objectives, and perspectives on belonging in the UK and Europe.

Keywords: Conceptual metaphor; ironic metaphors; United Kingdom family of nations; British politics; UK Parliament; Scottish nationalism; English nationalism

Declarations of interest: None

## 1. Introduction

In 2014, as the Scottish people considered how to vote in that year's independence referendum, Conservative Party politicians, including Prime Minister David Cameron, made emotional appeals that framed the UK as a cherished "family of nations" with a positive shared history on the verge of an unnecessary and "painful divorce". As Cameron pleaded shortly before referendum day:

(1) We are a family of nations. Why should the next generation of that family be forced to choose whether to identify only with Edinburgh or only with London?  
... A family is not a compromise, or a second best, it is a magical identity, that makes us more together than we can ever be apart so please – do not break this family apart (Dearden 2014; Dominiczak and Johnson 2014).

The metaphorical depiction of the UK as a "very powerful and very precious" family (Cameron 2014) contributed to a "Stronger Together" narrative (Hague 2013) that also importantly included stark warnings that a vote for independence would result in Scotland finding itself as a newly-independent, but former member, of the European Union (EU) [BBC News 2012].

In the months following the referendum – in which Scottish voters returned a convincing vote against independence (55.3% no, 44.7% yes) – Scottish National Party (SNP) MPs responded to what they described as the Conservative government's hypocritical plan to hold a national referendum on the UK's membership in the EU by communicating an ironic variant of the UK family of nations (UK-FON) metaphor. While Conservatives continued to depict the metaphorical family in positive and aspirational terms, Scottish nationalists co-opted and reinterpreted the metaphor as a means of protesting the possibility of Scotland being forced to leave the EU against the will of the majority of its citizens.

This paper summarizes the results of a study examining the inter-play between metaphor, irony, and nationalist discourses in the communication of competing UK-FON metaphor variants in the UK Parliament from 2015 to 2018. Taking its point of departure from research by Musolff (2017) examining the ironic inversion of a "Britain at the heart of Europe" metaphorical slogan, the author has reached three main conclusions. First, political crises in British politics, and specifically those related to Scottish independence and Brexit, triggered a dramatic increase in the tendency of political communicators to metaphorically relate the UK to a family of nations. Second, following

the Conservative government's decision in late May 2015 to hold an EU membership referendum, a rhetorical competition unfolded between Conservative and Scottish nationalist speakers which resulted in the metaphor's bifurcation into two contrasting variants (i.e. an initial *aspirational/positive* one framing the UK-FON as unified, equal, beneficent, expansive, and historically-rooted, followed by an ironic *hypocritical/abusive* variant framing it as unequal, coercive, and disrespectful). Finally, the reinterpreted ironic *hypocritical/abusive* metaphor became an influential rhetorical device used to express Scottish nationalist grievances and perspectives on belonging in the UK and Europe. When used by Scottish nationalist speakers, this metaphor served to situate Scotland, its interests and identity, in opposition with the UK as a political union and in alignment with Europe. This study illustrates, therefore, how the inversion of the meaning of the UK-FON metaphor by Scottish nationalist speakers diverges from the typical use of family-based metaphors in the depiction of positive and harmonious relationships, and instead how they can be marshalled to denounce the negative treatment national minorities claim to experience in multi-national political unions.

## **2. Metaphor and Irony in Political Dialogue**

Studies rooted in a range of disciplines have explored the role of metaphor in domestic politics, including in the realms of decision-making and the shaping of public opinion (Edelman 1971; Chilton 1996). One of the most influential scholars of metaphor, George Lakoff, has argued that because political discourse is structured metaphorically, so too then is political consciousness (Billig and Macmillan 2005, 459). Inspired by these findings, scholars of international politics have examined how metaphor may contribute to the construction of collective identities (Hülse 2006; Hülse and Spencer 2008; Milliken 1999). Hülse (2006), for example, has argued that metaphor provides “a means of imagining” and “constructing social reality”, and that metaphors of EU enlargement (including relating the process to a family reunion) contribute to the formation of a European identity (396).

Lakoff (1996) has further shown how family-based metaphors and language frame peoples' moral priorities, including encouraging individuals and groups to reason about the nation and its relationship with outside groups “on the basis of what we know about a family” (154-55). Family metaphors connote “feelings of security and homeliness” as well as remind of “imminent threats to in-group cohesion” (Hellström 2009, 46), and can thus trigger impulses to defend those closest to us. Yet, while “nation as family” metaphors have been the subject of extensive study and rigorous

analysis in various national contexts (Lakoff 1996; Hayden 2003; Garcia 2015), the same is not true of the metaphorical multinational UK families of nations.

As this study demonstrates, their ambiguous (Bailin 2008) and malleable nature allows speakers to bend metaphors into shapes that serve their specific political and/or ideological aims. Research by linguists and other scholars of language reveals how opponents engaged in political dialogues often co-opt, reinterpret, and re-communicate each other's influential metaphorical slogans. Lakoff (1996), for example, has shown how the same metaphor can be communicated by multiple actors "with different – almost opposite – priorities" (11-12), while for Charteris-Black (2011) the reinterpretation of an opponent's metaphor is a common strategy among political communicators. Of particular relevance for this study is research examining the intentional reversal of meanings and sentiments attached to existing metaphorical slogans, and particularly the works of Grice (1991), Partington (2007, 2011), and most crucially Musolff (2011, 2017). In his study of the "discourse career" of a *Britain at the heart of Europe* metaphorical slogan, Musolff (2017) demonstrates how individual or groups of speakers often "counter" previously introduced metaphors through "ironical and/or sarcastic allusions or quotations" with the intention of "denouncing the preceding version and/or deriving a new contrarian conclusion from it" (95). Partington (2007), in earlier work on "phrasal irony", concluded that irony in discourse "always has a strategic argumentative point" and that "explicitly marked irony can be employed to accuse a person or group of people of having contradicted themselves, either wilfully or otherwise" (1547, 1552). This process can take the form of what Musolff (2017) and Culpeper (2011) call "sarcastic denunciation", which is directed towards a political opponent's "public 'face'", attacking something they may have done, said, or promised as "hypocritical, dangerous or irrelevant". As the following sections demonstrate, Scottish nationalist speakers have engaged in explicit and persistent denunciations of Conservative expressions of UK familial harmony, communicating the metaphor under study as a means of protesting Scotland's treatment in the English-dominated union, as well as in the promotion of preserving close ties to Europe.

### **3. Materials and Methods**

Once identified, all speeches containing one or more UK-FON references were imported into NVivo 12 (including meta-data associated with each speaker), after which each reference to the UK as a "family of nations" was coded as belonging to either the *aspirational/positive* or the *ironic hypocritical/abusive* variant group, or a third category of "neutral" utterances. This approach made it

possible to explore relationships between the characteristics of the speakers and the content of their speeches, including whether political affiliation and nationality of speakers had any bearing on the frequency of the UK-FON metaphor's use, and also, whether any relationship existed between the political affiliation of speakers and the portrayal of the metaphorical "family of nations". Finally, word frequency tests were performed on the corpus, enabling explorations of the distinctive language used by political adversaries in their communication of this metaphorical slogan. The results of these explorations confirmed the UK-FON variants' thematic structures as initially interpreted using a qualitative close-reading approach.

The study's corpus consists of UK parliamentary speeches delivered in the period 27 May 2010 to 31 October 2018, and was assembled through a rigorous search of Hansard Online using the following keyword search terms: "family of nations", "United Kingdom family", "UK family", and "British family". It includes 137 individual speeches containing 175 UK-FON references uttered by 72 different speakers. The political affiliations of the speakers breaks down as follows: Conservative Party (31), Scottish National Party (17), Labour Party (14), Liberal Democrat (5), Plaid Cymru (3), crossbencher (1), and Lord Spiritual (1). A detailed appendix lists the names of the speakers, their political affiliations, as well as the date and location of their speeches.

The corpus was divided into two parts, the first containing speeches given between 27 May 2010 to 27 May 2015, and the second between 28 May 2015 to 31 October 2018. The starting date of the second period (28 May 2015) was chosen because it was on this date that the newly-elected majority Conservative government tabled European Union Referendum Act legislation in the House of Commons, an act which triggered a dramatic increase in references to the UK as a "family of nations". To illustrate, in the first period parliamentarians made a total of 69 UK-FON references (eq. to 1 per 20,9 sessions), compared with 106 references (eq. to 1 per 9,3 sessions) in the latter period.

British parliamentarians from the major political parties, as well as crossbenchers, non-affiliates and lords spiritual, have shown a penchant for referring to different metaphorical multi-national family groupings (see **Table 1**). Between 28 May 2015 and 31 October 2018, for example, 272 individual "family of nations" metaphorical references have been identified, with the most common being to the constituent parts of the UK (106 ref. or 39%), the Commonwealth (96 ref. or 35%), and the EU (52 ref. or 19%). There is also a clear relationship between political affiliation

Table 1 – Family of nations references in the UK Parliament (28 May 2015-31 October 2018)

	CON	LAB	LD	SNP	PC	DUP	CB	NON-AFF	LS	Total
UK-FON	43	10	4	39	9	0	0	0	1	106
CW-FON	59	4	10	2	0	2	9	10	0	96
EU-FON	11	21	2	10	1	1	5	1	0	52
INT-FON	2	3	1	4	1	0	0	0	2	13
UN-FON	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	4
E-A-FON	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	117	39	18	55	11	4	14	11	3	<b>272</b>

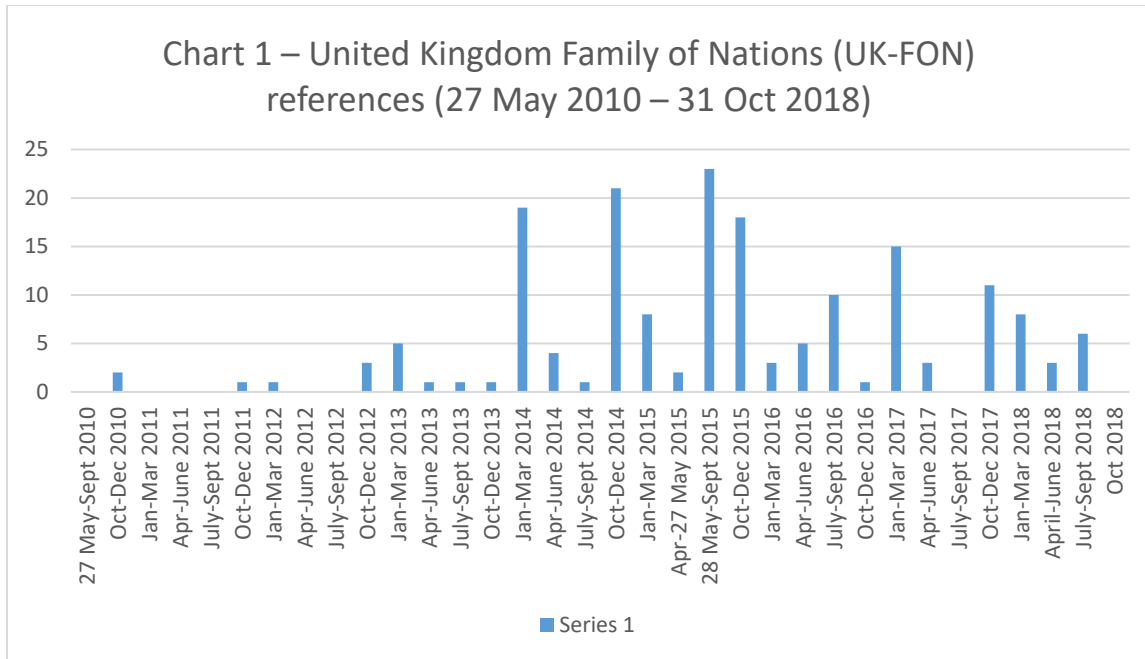
(CON [Conservative Party]; LAB [Labour Party]; LD [Liberal Democrat]; SNP [Scottish National Party]; PC [Plaid Cymru]; DUP [Democratic Unionist Party]; CB [Crossbencher]; NAFL [non-affiliated]; LS [Lord Spiritual])

(CW-FON [Commonwealth]; UK-FON [United Kingdom]; EU-FON [European Union]; INT-FON [International]; UN-FON [United Nations]; E-A-FON [Euro-Atlantic])

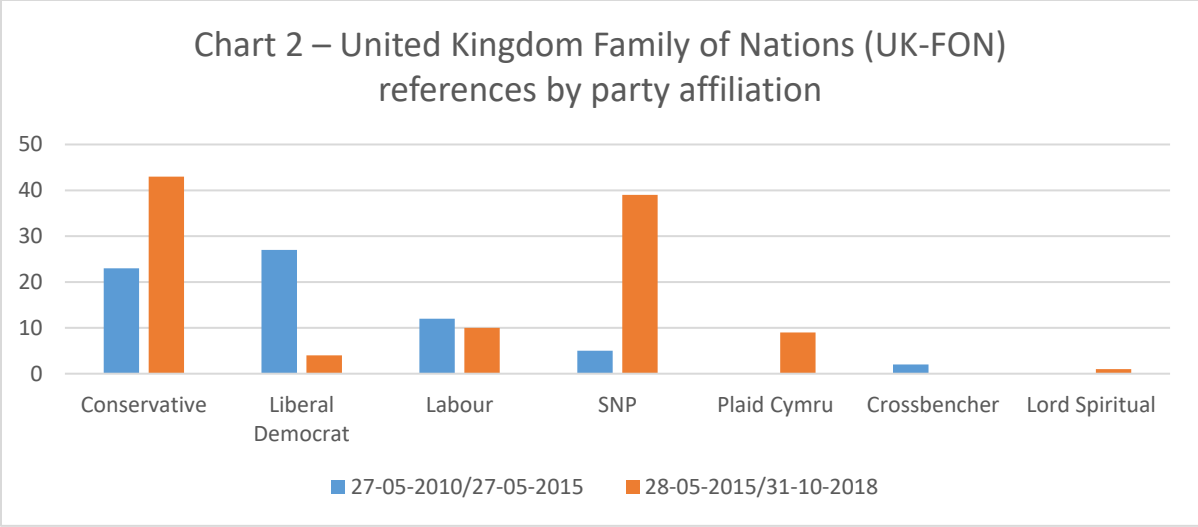
and the type of metaphorical multi-national family invoked. Conservative speakers were more likely to refer to the UK and the Commonwealth as metaphorical families (40% and 61% respectively), while Labour speakers were most likely to refer to the EU in such terms (40%). Interestingly, among the various FON metaphor types, SNP speakers made the most references to the UK-FON (71% of the party’s overall FON references), only four fewer times than their Conservative counterparts. Conservative speakers, on the other hand, only refer to the EU as a “family of nations” 11 times (21% of the total), arguably a reflection of the Conservative Party’s historically sceptical position on European integration and EU membership (see Bale 2018, Dorey 2017 and Gifford 2010).

There were clear spikes in UK-FON metaphor references in periods coinciding with debates on topics related to Scottish independence and the EU referendum (see **Chart 1**). One such spike occurred in the period January-March 2014, coinciding with debates on Scotland’s place in the UK in the Commons and Lords (1 avg. ref. per 5,0 sessions). Similar spikes occurred in October-December 2014 coinciding with the holding of the Scottish independence referendum (1 avg. ref.

per 4,0 sessions) and from 28 May-31 December 2015 following the introduction of EU referendum legislation (1 avg. ref. per 4,1 sessions). Furthermore, it is clear that the introduction of EU referendum legislation by the Conservative government on 28 May 2015



triggered a dramatic increase in UK-FON references by Scottish nationalists specifically (see **Chart 2**). For example, in the period before 28 May 2015, Conservative speakers made 23 UK-FON metaphor references to the SNP’s 5, while after that date the number of references rose and narrowed to 43 and 39 respectively. One possible explanation for the increase in SNP references is because there were many more SNP MPs with seats in the UK Parliament following the May 2015 General Election (6 before the election; 56 after election). However, the dramatic increase in SNP utterances is nevertheless significant, since it seems to point to a deliberate and strategic decision on the part of the SNP to co-opt, reinterpret and persistently communicate an influential and easily relatable metaphor to serve the party’s distinct interests.



Finally, speakers representing two of the UK’s four constituent national groups made the vast majority of UK-FON references. English and Scottish speakers accounted for 92% (or 161 of 175) of all UK-FON metaphor utterances over the entire 2010-2018 period, and 90% (or 95 of 106) in the latter segment (28 May 2015 to 31 October 2018). While Conservative speakers made the most references to the UK-FON metaphor overall, the majority of utterances by nationality came from Scottish speakers, distributed between SNP (44), Liberal Democrat (27), Conservative (16), and Labour (13) party members. This is not surprising given that Scottish Conservative speakers would have recognized the potential usefulness of communicating a positive image of the UK family of nations as an element of the Unionist message in the earlier period (coinciding in particular with the September 2014 Scottish independence referendum campaign), while SNP speakers recognized potential strategic benefits from communicating a contrastingly negative image of UK family relations in the context of EU referendum debates.

**4. Thematic Analysis of a Bifurcated Family of Nations Metaphor**

4.1 Preserving the “family of nations”

A prominent linguistic element of the SNP’s anti-Brexit discourse has been the ironic reversal of Conservative characterizations of the UK as a unified, equal, beneficent, expansive and historically rooted family of nations (identified as the *aspirational/positive* variant). In parliamentary debates, SNP speakers consistently frame the metaphorical UK-FON as unequal, coercive, and disrespectful (identified as the ironic *hypocritical/abusive* variant), and particularly when referring to the relationship between England and Scotland. Rather than communicate this metaphorical slogan in support of



preserving the political union, Scottish nationalists employed it as a means of denouncing the hypocrisy they perceived in positive and harmonious characterizations of relations between the UK’s constituent nations, as well as the abuse they argued Scotland and the Scottish people endure within the context of intra-UK relations. In the process, the UK-FON metaphor adds rhetorical weight to the SNP’s message that only with independent statehood and membership in the EU would the interests of the Scottish people be adequately served.

In the process of interpreting UK-FON references, very few were categorized as neutral in sentiment. All but three of the Conservative references were interpreted as *aspirational/positive*, while all but one of the SNP references communicated an ironic *hypocritical/abusive* vision of the UK-FON (see **Table 2**). That so few of the references were interpreted as “neutral” means that this particular

Table 2 – Variants of the UK-FON metaphor (28 May 2015-31 October 2018)

	aspirational/positive variant	ironic hypocritical/abusive variant	neutral
CON	40	1	2
LAB	5	0	5
LD	2	0	2
SNP	0	37	2
PC	0	8	1
LS	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	47	46	13

(CON [Conservative Party]; LAB [Labour Party]; LD [Liberal Democrat]; SNP [Scottish National Party]; PC [Plaid Cymru]; LS [Lords Spiritual])

metaphorical slogan was not uttered in casual passing. Such references communicate emotional, value-laden and judgemental messages that serve strategic argumentative purposes. For example, as the following select speech extracts illustrate, Conservative articulations of the UK-FON are infused with the *aspirational/positive* qualities of unity, equality, beneficence, and expansiveness:

(2) UNITY: I am a Unionist by conviction. I have an English mother and a Scottish father; two of my children have married people from Northern Ireland; and three of my four children now live in England. I am also a proud Scot. For me, as for many Scots, the Union is personal; it is social; and it speaks to the heart. It is about family; we are literally a family of nations (Stephen Kerr, Scottish Conservative, 20-06-2018).

(3) EQUALITY: Independence is the SNP's *raison d'être*. I respect that position; it is a perfectly laudable and respectable position to hold. But we have had a referendum, we had what was supposed to be a once-in-a-lifetime referendum, and the Scottish people voted to remain equal partners in our family of nations (Andrew Bowie, Scottish Conservative, 13-11-2017).

(4) BENEFICIENT: The Union is best maintained by giving the different nations of the UK the ability to pursue their own domestic policies while protecting and preserving the benefits of being part of that bigger UK family of nations (Chloe Smith, English Conservative, 23-07-2018; see also Lord Dunlop, Scottish Conservative, 01-06-2015 and Lord Faulks, English Conservative, 24-05-2016, for virtually identical statements).

(5) EXPANSIVE: Winston Churchill said that we shall defend our island, but it is not just one island that we need to defend, or local islands. Parts of the British family all around the world look to us for their defence. Many of them are islands, but all of them are connected to the sea. I am talking, of course, of our overseas territories—places such as Anguilla, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, Montserrat, the Pitcairn Islands and Gibraltar (Sheryll Murray, English Conservative, 21-11-2017)

The importance placed on the continued unity of the UK reflects a core element in Conservative political thought (Brady 1957, 135; White 2015), while the description of the UK as “bigger” than its component parts relates to a Conservative tendency to warn that an independent Scotland would become a much smaller, less prosperous, less influential, and more insecure country upon leaving the UK (Cameron 2014; Dearden 2014; McAlpine 2011).

The *aspirational/positive* variant is also related to an expansive conceptualization of British identity or Britishness (Colley 1992; Gamble and Wright 2009), with numerous allusions to positive shared historical experiences in Britain's imperial past and its residual legacies. This broad articulation of the UK-FON relates to a “historical interpretation of British nationality” (Wellings and Baxendale 2015, 123) which orients Britain away from Europe, or, in other words, a “politics of disengagement” from Europe and of “re-engagement” with the country's former colonies (Ibid.; see

also Wellings 2016, Bell and Vucetic 2019). While scholars have shown how metaphor can contribute to the social construction of collective identities, even inter-state transnational ones (Brysk et al. 2002), the same has been said of politicized uses of the past. As Berger (2007, 2015), László (2014), Hobsbawm and Ranger (1984), Anderson (1983), and others have argued, modern societies have long relied on historical narratives “to help create a sense of belonging to the national community and a collective identity to overwrite ethnic, linguistic, religious or social cleavages” (Berger 2015, 3-4). Conservative speakers in particular make numerous references to historical topics in close proximity to their UK-FON metaphor references, further contributing to the communication of an expansive multi-national familial identity which has deep roots in the past, and which arguably seeks to bind, in the minds of hearers, the diverse peoples of the UK, in the British Isles and beyond.

Numerous examples in the corpus exhibit an inter-play between the use of metaphor and the historical knowledge of Conservative speakers. While introducing a bill that would establish a public holiday to mark Queen Elizabeth II’s Sapphire Jubilee, for example, Andrew Rosindell (English Conservative) stated that this “truly remarkable milestone” would not only be celebrated by “our proud nation and peoples” but also “throughout Her Majesty’s overseas territories and Crown dependencies, her other realms and across the Commonwealth of nations”. The event, he continued, reminded people in the UK and around the world (whether “English, Scottish, Ulstermen, Irish, Welsh, Manx, Jerseymen, Guernseymen, Gibraltian, Falkland Islanders, Bermudian, Montserratian, Caymanian”) of their “rich heritage and cultural identity as part of a Great British family, sharing a union of the Crowns unbroken since 1603” (Commons debate, 07-03-2017). During a debate on the possible negative implications of Brexit on Gibraltar, Craig Mackinlay (English Conservative) pointed to the long history of close ties between the UK and this British Overseas Territory, and the loyalty of the people of the latter to the former:

(6) For over 300 years, Gibraltar and its people have played their part in support of Britain’s history as a global leader in commerce and an international player of influence. ... Gibraltar has been and continues to be an unwavering supporter of the UK. Its outstanding support during times of conflict has been continuous, and we have a close relationship built on trust and reciprocal loyalty (Commons debate, 19-06-2018).

This tendency to reach into the past in depictions of the UK-FON may be explained by the long-standing Conservative emphasis on tradition (Hickson 2005) and also a recent and well-documented nostalgia for the imperial era, manifested in positive (and often sanitized) portrayals of Britain's colonial and post-colonial relationships. These portrayals have been used by Conservatives in the articulation of prescriptions for a more prosperous global future for the UK post-Brexit (Bell and Vucetic 2019; Olusogo 2017; Wellings and Baxendale 2015).

#### 4.2 Scotland and the abusive “family of nations”

Beginning in late May 2015, Scottish nationalist MPs at Westminster began campaigning against the Conservative government's decision to hold a referendum on the UK's membership in the EU. As mentioned, a crucial aspect of this campaign involved the ironic reversal of the original Conservative *aspirational/positive* UK-FON metaphor variant. In order to successfully “follow-up” (Musolff 2017, 98) and counter the Conservative variant in strategically meaningful ways, Scottish nationalists first had to actively keep its memory alive. As Musolff (2017) explains, for speakers to be able to achieve an ironical effect it is essential that the meaning of the initial metaphorical slogan being targeted is retained “as a reference point in discourse memory” (95). Scottish nationalists did this by repeatedly, over extended periods, referring back to earlier Conservative utterances of the metaphor, as seen in the following examples:

(7) The UK is a family of nations, not a nation, as was mentioned earlier and as we were of course told before our independence referendum (Angus MacNeil, SNP, 20-07-2016)

(8) In Scotland, we were told in no uncertain terms in 2014 that we are a family of nations, and that we must keep this family together” (Richard Arkless, SNP, 31-01-2017). See also Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, SNP, 16-06-2015 and John Nicolson, SNP, 01-02-2017.

Another way that Scottish nationalists ensured that the initial variant of the UK-FON metaphor remained alive in the discourse memory was by not actively trying to speak it out of existence. Very few examples were found of SNP members flatly denying the existence of the UK family, such as:

(9) The EU is a club for independent countries, which Westminster certainly is not; it is a family of nations, which this is not [Angus MacNeil, SNP, 15-06-2016]).

This is understandable, as doing so would diminish the usefulness of an influential metaphorical slogan as a means of ironically denouncing the Conservative Party's EU referendum policies.

With the memory of the original variant intact – and responding to the perception that the UK government was behaving in hypocritical and abusive ways in light of earlier emotional declarations of harmonious family ties, accompanied by warnings that independence would mean not just leaving the UK, but the EU as well – Scottish nationalists began to “follow-up” and counter the Conservative characterization of the family of nations. This ironic *hypocritical/abusive* variant signalled the SNP view that the original family vision was dishonest, instead portraying intra-UK relations as unequal, coercive, and disrespectful. Whereas Conservative speakers depicted the UK-FON as a cooperative and productive partnership of equals with deep roots in the past, SNP speakers responded with a vision of hierarchical and harmful family relations between members.

A persistent theme among SNP speakers was that Scotland lacks an equal voice in the Union, and as a result, its concerns are not heard or are ignored. During a debate on the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill, for example, Richard Arkless (Scottish SNP) declared:

(10) In this so-called family – one of equal partners, as we were told – the UK must do more than merely talk with the nations within it and say, as it repeatedly asserts, that it is taking their views on board. The UK must go beyond such discussions and act on those views (Commons debate, 31-01-2017).

Others were even more explicit on the issue of Scotland lacking an equal voice in the UK's affairs, as the following example illustrates:

(11) In the days before Scotland's independence referendum last year, the Prime Minister called the UK a family of nations. If he means what he says, and if the Government back him, surely all members of the family should have a voice of their own (Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, SNP, Commons debate, 16-06-2015)

Still others pointed to the unequal needs of the different family members, and how these are often disregarded. As in any family “with very grown up kids”, one speaker noted, the differences between the constituent parts of the UK need to be taken into account:

(12) Family members “do not buy shoes of the same size, and they certainly do not apply the same rules or follow the same path – but ultimately, if they listen and respect such differences, they can remain a family” (Richard Arkless, SNP, Commons debate, 31-01-2017).

This example illustrates well how commonly-understood topics and concepts from one domain (family life) can be marshalled to simplify, and in the process make more comprehensible, less well-understood and more abstract ones (in this case, the triggering of Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty).

Another prominent theme associated with the ironic *hypocritical/abusive* variant of the UK-FON metaphor is coercion. SNP speakers frequently emphasized the family’s hierarchical and unequal nature, which enables (from their perspective) the abuse of the smaller and weaker family members by the largest and strongest one. One speaker illustrated this point by assigning hierarchical familial positions to the constituent nations:

(13) May we have a debate on the impact of the Tory obsession with leaving Europe on the family of nations throughout the United Kingdom? If big brother England votes to leave the EU but the smaller members of the family vote to stay, we will be treated like upstart children, told what is good for us and dragged out of Europe against our will (Pete Wishart, Commons, 06 November 2014)

Even more explicitly, the speeches in the corpus reflect the SNP’s outlook that Scotland is “being governed against its will” and “forced into unsupported and opposed policy” (Thompson 2019, 142). As John Mackenzie (2016) has argued, a “psychological element” in Scots to “not take kindly to being ordered around by the English” has potentially made a “Yes” vote in any future independence referendum more likely: “The Scots are inevitably troubled that, given their undoubted status as a separate nation, now enjoying well-developed devolution, they should be forced into a departure of which they do not approve and which they consider will be highly damaging to their economy and society” (579). In a similar vein, Jackson (2014) has posited that nationalism in Scotland has been less a response to perceived threats to Scottish culture than to threats posed to Scotland’s social democratic traditions from neo-liberal economic restructuring imposed from London. This motivation driving nationalist calls for greater autonomy in the Union, or ultimately independence from it, was reflected, for example, in one SNP MP’s criticism of the UK government’s closure of dozens of Revenue and Customs offices around the country, which she described as

(14) part of their continued drive to rain down a regime of austerity cuts on our family of nations (Hannah Bardell, SNP, Commons debate, 24-11-2015).

Not surprisingly, speakers most often described the UK-FON as coercive towards its smaller members during debates concerning relations with Europe in general, and specifically Brexit. While debating European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill in early 2017, and after recalling Prime Minister Cameron's declarations that the UK family was a partnership of equals, John Nicolson (SNP) asked sarcastically:

(15) What kind of equality is it when England, 10 times our size, attempts to compel us against our will? (Commons debate, 01-02-2017).

If the UK was in fact a harmonious and mutually beneficial "family of nations", how was it, another speaker asked, that despite a significant majority of the Scottish people voting against leaving the EU, one member (England) could "for the first time ever" take another nation (Scotland) out of Europe "against its will"? (Pete Wishart, SNP, Commons debate, 17-12-2015). Others contrasted the UK with the EU in an effort to highlight the un-family-like nature of the former. As Angus MacNeil declared while debating the possible effects of Brexit on Gibraltar:

(16) The UK is a family of nations, not a nation, as was mentioned earlier and as we were of course told before our independence referendum. In the European Union, unlike in the UK, one member's will is not imposed on other members. That would never be tolerated in Europe, where members are sovereign, but it is tolerated in the United Kingdom, where some members imposed on others exactly what their constitutional future will be. The UK perhaps has a lot to learn from the European Union model (SNP, Commons debate, 20-07-2016).

In this passage, not only is Scotland described as being forced to leave the EU against its will, it is being forced to leave what is depicted as a comparatively caring and respectful relationship and remain in one in which the Scottish feel abused and disrespected. This sentiment is communicated in numerous other speeches (see, for example, Angus Robertson, SNP, Commons debate, 23-11-2015; Angus MacNeil, SNP, Commons debate, 22-02-2016; Richard Arkless, SNP, Commons debate, 31-01-2017; Marion Fellows, SNP, Commons debate, 29-03-2017).

### 4.3 Quantifying the language of the UK-FON metaphor

The close reading of speeches containing UK-FON metaphor references, which produced the thematic variant structures outlined above, was supplemented with software-assisted qualitative analyses. The speeches were divided into two separate groups – one each for those containing the *aspirational/positive* and the ironic *hypocritical/abusive* variants. Word frequency tests were performed on both groups to determine whether the language used by the speakers reflects the thematic structures as interpreted in the initial close reading qualitative analysis.

The word frequency tests returned 500 of the most frequently-used words in each group of speeches, and 20 of the most relevant words were selected and cross-referenced against their frequency in all of the speeches in both groups. All 20 words were located among the 150 most frequently spoken words. The results are summarized in **Table 3** (in both the raw number of utterances and the weighted percentage of each word in each group of speeches). Several of the most frequently uttered words in the *aspirational/positive* variant group relate to the theme of unity (U/united; Kingdom; British; together) and the expansive nature of the vision of the UK-FON communicated by Conservative speakers (Gibraltar; British; overseas; dependencies). On the other hand, speakers in the ironic *hypocritical/abusive* variant group were much more likely to use language relating to the concept of the “nation”. For example, SNP speakers refer to

Table 3 - Word frequency comparison between speeches containing UK-FON metaphor variants  
(28 May 2015-31 October 2018)

	aspirational/positive variant (# of utterances and weighted %)	ironic hypocritical/abusive variant (# of utterances and weighted %)
Gibraltar	<b>168 (1,39)</b>	33 (0,23)
U/united	<b>71 (0,59)</b>	48 (0,32)
Kingdom	<b>65 (0,54)</b>	45 (0,31)
British	<b>60 (0,50)</b>	12 (0,08)
devolution	<b>44 (0,37)</b>	33 (0,23)
together	<b>26 (0,22)</b>	14 (0,10)



overseas	<b>22 (0,18)</b>	5 (0,03)
dependencies	<b>11 (0,09)</b>	0 (0,00)
Scotland	66 (0,55)	<b>219 (1,52)</b>
Scottish	42 (0,35)	<b>96 (0,66)</b>
nations	31 (0,26)	<b>83 (0,57)</b>
family	46 (0,38)	<b>82 (0,57)</b>
Wales	42 (0,35)	<b>75 (0,52)</b>
referendum	30 (0,25)	<b>51 (0,35)</b>
European	32 (0,27)	<b>39 (0,27)</b>
nation	14 (0,12)	<b>34 (0,24)</b>
England	21 (0,17)	<b>33 (0,23)</b>
respect	15 (0,12)	<b>33 (0,23)</b>
independence	10 (0,08)	<b>20 (0,14)</b>
English	15 (0,12)	<b>18 (0,12)</b>

the concept of “nation” and to “nations”, as well as to the specific component national groups of the UK (Scotland, Wales, England), and the peoples belonging to these national groups, to a much higher degree than their mainly Conservative counterparts (with the exception of “English”, which both groups used in equal proportion).

This indicates that Scottish speakers prioritize the concerns and interests of the Scottish nation, and those of nations broadly speaking, over the importance of the multi-national unity of the United Kingdom as expressed by Conservative speakers in their articulations of the UK-FON. In addition, the more frequent use of the word “respect” by ironic *hypocritical/abusive* variant speakers supports the conclusion, derived from the qualitative analysis, that SNP members feel that Scotland is disrespected in the Union, particularly in relations with England. Finally, Scottish nationalist

speakers utter the word “family” to a considerably higher degree than their Conservative counterparts, in numerous cases several times surrounding the core UK-FON reference in a speech, indicating efforts to remind listeners of earlier Conservative declarations and in this way to contribute to a more emphatic denunciation of the positive vision of familial relations.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

The landslide victory of Boris Johnson’s Conservative Party and the impressive gains made by the SNP (winning 47 of 59 Scottish seats in the Commons) in the 12 December 2019 UK General Election will have significant implications for the inter-related issues of Brexit and the Scottish independence movement. Already in the early post-election days, Scotland’s First Minister and SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon claimed that the results vindicated her party’s opposition to Brexit and provided an “unarguable” mandate for a second independence referendum, the latter of which the emboldened Johnson, Michael Gove and other Conservatives flatly rejected (Woodcock and Buchan 2019; O’Sullivan 2019). Sturgeon and other SNP members responded with a wide range of metaphorical and other figurative features of language characterizing the Conservative position as further evidence of the abuse Scottish nationalists argue the Scottish people endure in the UK. Johnson’s refusal to transfer the powers necessary for the devolved Scottish government to organize a new referendum meant, according to Sturgeon, that Scotland was “imprisoned” against “its will”, or locked away “in a cupboard” (Malik 2019). On the matter of Scottish independence, Johnson was “acting almost like a dictator” (Ferguson 2019) trying to “bludgeon” (Keyden 2019) the Scottish people into viewing the world through his eyes. As time passes and as the reality of the post-Brexit world continues to unfold, researchers will have more and more data at their fingertips gathered from formal political debates and broader informal political dialogues, the analysis of which can lead to further insights into the linguistic and rhetorical resources and strategies employed by national minorities in the communication of grievances and ambitions.

In this respect, this study has aimed to show how Scottish nationalist politicians portray the abuse they view as inherent to intra-UK relations through their communication of an ironically re-interpreted vision of the metaphorical UK family of nations. In response to the perception that Scotland was being forced to leave the EU, the original metaphorical slogan introduced by Conservative speakers was countered and denounced, with Scotland instead depicted as a marginalized, dominated, and disrespected family member. This metaphor, its cross-party

communication, and competition over its meanings and sentiments, offers a promising resource for the study of conflicting perspectives on the UK as a political union, but also, contrasting Conservative and Scottish nationalist discourses and understandings of belonging in the UK and Europe. Conservatives use the metaphor in rhetorical efforts to preserve the union, while Scottish nationalists use it to protest (in their view) Scotland's treatment in the English-dominated union and to promote the preservation of close ties to Europe.

The ironic characterization of the UK-FON as unequal, coercive, and disrespectful, thus reflects the view among Scottish nationalists that their country is mistreated and does not properly belong in the UK (Cockburn 2017). As Mackenzie (2016) has noted, Scotland and the Scottish have historically had a different (and in some respects more positive) relationship with Europe, long viewing the continent as a “makeweight to the dangers of the English” (578). From this perspective, Europe provides balance and support in Scotland's relations with England. Others have alluded to more explicit links between Scottish national identity and Europe. In his influential sociological study *The Nations of Britain*, Bryant (2006) identified seven different constructions or understandings of the Scottish nation, deeply rooted in history, including: ‘Independent Scotland’ (with both ‘Celtic Scotland’ and ‘Scotland the Brave’), ‘Little Scotland’, ‘Scotland in the Empire’, ‘Civil Scotland’, ‘Civic and Self-Governing Scotland’, and finally, ‘Scotland in Europe’. As a result, what the Scottish people think about and how they identify with Scotland both divides them but also changes ‘according to circumstances’ (65). The originality of the Scottish nationalist usage of the UK-FON metaphor, as well as its explicit, purposeful, and repeated use in response to dramatic changes taking place in UK-EU relations largely out of their control, can be viewed as a linguistic manifestation of the ‘Scotland in Europe’ construction of Scottish national identity. As Bryant (2006) writes, this form of identification is the most ‘outward-looking, confident, and expansive’ of his seven constructions, providing advocates of Scottish independence with ‘an alternative to looking to Britain and ... opens Scottish life and culture to diversification’ (66). Ironically inverting the Conservative vision of the UK as a harmonious family of nations thus gives Scottish nationalists an emotive and potentially useful linguistic resource to promote this perspective.

On the other hand, Europe for England has been historically perceived as a source of many threats, which to guard against the English-dominated Union has been forced in the past to appeal for support from far afield. This latter point may help to explain the English Conservative propensity to communicate a more expansive and even global “British family” vision.

Communicating this broader collectivity of belonging serves numerous functions in contemporary Conservative discourse, including creating symbolic distance between the UK and Europe (that history makes them different), and that this “family” provides Britain with an alternative set of relationships to nurture and develop that will facilitate its pivot away from Europe.

Given the central role played by Conservatives in ongoing negotiations and debates surrounding Brexit, it is worth considering the extent to which there exist inter-connections between contemporary English Conservatism and English nationalism. As Jeremy Black (2018) has recently noted, “history, rather than ethnicity”, has been “crucial to English nationalism”, influenced by a “narrative of success and an exceptionalism” inspired by Britain’s great empire and economic strength (102). The high incidence of references to an expansive “family of nations” which links Britain to its historical “kith and kin” and reorients the country away from Europe, lends support to the position that English Conservative thought, and one may even cautiously propose, as Wellings (2019) recently has, English (Conservative) nationalism, exhibits a tendency to reach into Britain’s highly internationalist and global past for explanations and meaning about the current Brexit-related political, economic, and constitutional crises facing the country. Thus, although the primary aim of this study has been to explore how a UK family of nations metaphorical slogan has been strategically reinterpreted and recommunicated as an influential feature of language in Scottish nationalist discourse, its further study may also produce insights into the linguistic features of an emergent, Conservative-driven, English nationalism in contemporary British politics, society and culture.

Appendix – List of UK-FON metaphor references

27 May 2010 – 27 May 2015 (total days in session – Commons [733] and Lords [707] – **1440** [avg. 1 utterance every 20,9 days]; word count: 35,044)

<u>Date</u>	<u>Speaker</u>	<u>Party</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u># UK-FON refs</u>
09-11-2010	Sir Henry Bellingham	Conservative	Commons	1
03-12-2010	James Duddridge	Conservative	Commons	1
13-12-2011	Andrew Rosindell	Conservative	Commons	1
07-03-2012	David Cameron	Conservative	Commons	1
02-11-2012	Andrew Rosindell	Conservative	Commons	1
07-11-2012	Nick Clegg	Liberal Democrat	Commons	1
12-12-2012	Andrew Rosindell	Conservative	Commons	1
15-01-2013	Michael Moore	Liberal Democrat	Commons	1
15-01-2013	Fiona O'Donnell	Labour	Commons	2
15-01-2013	Margaret Curran	Labour	Commons	1
16-01-2013	Lord Wallace of Tankerness	Liberal Democrat	Lords	1
24-04-2013	David Mundell	Conservative	Commons	1
09-07-2013	Nick Clegg	Liberal Democrat	Commons	1
08-11-2013	Andrew Rosindell	Conservative	Commons	1
06-01-2014	Michael Gove	Conservative	Commons	1
16-01-2014	Andrew Rosindell	Conservative	Commons	1
29-01-2014	Lord Wallace of Tankerness	Liberal Democrat	Lords	1
30-01-2014	Baroness Goldie	Conservative	Lords	1
30-01-2014	Baroness Liddell	Labour	Lords	2

30-01-2014	Lord Crickhowell	Conservative	Lords	2
06-02-2014	Michael Moore	Liberal Democrat	Commons	4
06-02-2014	Fiona O'Donnell	Labour	Commons	1
06-02-2014	Anas Sarwar	Labour	Commons	1
06-02-2014	Alistair Carmichael	Liberal Democrat	Commons	3
06-02-2014	William Bain	Labour	Commons	1
07-05-2014	Alistair Carmichael	Liberal Democrat	Commons	1
13-05-2014	Nick Clegg	Liberal Democrat	Commons	1
24-06-2014	Lord Crickhowell	Conservative	Lords	1
24-06-2014	Lord Wallace of Tankerness	Liberal Democrat	Lords	1
12-09-2014	Michael Moore	Liberal Democrat	Commons	1
13-10-2014	Lord Wallace of Tankerness	Liberal Democrat	Lords	1
13-10-2014	Alistair Carmichael	Liberal Democrat	Commons	2
13-10-2014	Fiona O'Donnell	Labour	Commons	1
14-10-2014	William Hague	Conservative	Commons	1
16-10-2014	Alistair Carmichael	Liberal Democrat	Commons	1
29-10-2014	Lord Hope of Craighead	Crossbencher	Lords	2
29-10-2014	Lord Wallace of Tankerness	Liberal Democrat	Lords	1
29-10-2014	Baroness Stowell of Beeston	Conservative	Lords	1
06-11-2014	Pete Wishart	SNP	Commons	1
20-11-2014	Angus Robertson	SNP	Commons	1
20-11-2014	Graham Allen	Labour	Commons	3
25-11-2014	Andrew Rosindell	Conservative	Commons	3
27-11-2014	Alistair Carmichael	Liberal Democrat	Commons	1
27-11-2014	Lord Wallace of Tankerness	Liberal Democrat	Lords	1

02-12-2014	Andrew Rosindell	Conservative	Commons	1
08-01-2015	Andrew Rosindell	Conservative	Commons	1
08-01-2015	Jack Lopresti	Conservative	Commons	1
22-01-2015	David Mundell	Conservative	Commons	1
22-01-2015	Lord Wallace of Tankerness	Liberal Democrat	Lords	1
02-02-2015	Alistair Carmichael	Liberal Democrat	Commons	1
04-02-2015	Alistair Carmichael	Liberal Democrat	Commons	1
25-02-2015	Alistair Carmichael	Liberal Democrat	Commons	1
23-03-2015	Pete Wishart	SNP	Commons	1
27-05-2015	Angus Robertson	SNP	Commons	2
<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>69</b>

2. 28 May 2015 – 31 October 2018 (total days in session – Commons [498] and Lords [488] – **986** [avg. 1 utterance every 9.3 days]; word count: 55.296 words)

<u>Date</u>	<u>Speaker</u>	<u>Party</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u># CW-FON refs</u>
01-06-2015	Lord Faulks	Conservative	Lords	1
01-06-2015	Lord Dunlop	Conservative	Lords	1
08-06-2015	Ian Murray	Labour	Commons	1
08-06-2015	Margaret Ferrier	SNP	Commons	1
08-06-2015	Alistair Carmichael	Liberal Democrat	Commons	1
08-06-2015	Nick Thomas	Labour	Commons	1
09-06-2015	Drew Hendry	SNP	Commons	1
11-06-2015	George Kerevan	SNP	Commons	2

15-06-2015	Alistair Carmichael	Liberal Democrat	Commons	1
16-06-2015	Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh	SNP	Commons	1
18-06-2015	Baroness Morgan of Ely	Labour	Lords	1
18-06-2015	Lord Dunlop	Conservative	Lords	1
29-06-2015	David Mundell	Conservative	Commons	1
30-06-2015	Sir Edward Leigh	Conservative	Commons	1
07-07-2015	Alistair Carmichael	Liberal Democrat	Commons	1
15-07-2015	Peter Wishart	SNP	Commons	1
15-07-2015	Patricia Gibson	SNP	Commons	1
15-07-2015	Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh	SNP	Commons	1
07-09-2015	Patrick Grady	SNP	Commons	2
09-09-2015	Tim Farron	Liberal Democrat	Commons	1
14-09-2015	Hannah Bardell	SNP	Commons	1
14-10-2015	Liz Saville Roberts	Plaid Cymru	Commons	2
19-10-2015	David Cameron	Conservative	Commons	1
04-11-2015	Lord Forsyth	Conservative	Lords	2
04-11-2015	Lord Wigley	Plaid Cymru	Lords	6
09-11-2015	Ian Murray	Labour	Commons	1
23-11-2015	Angus Robertson	SNP	Commons	1
24-11-2015	Chris Law	SNP	Commons	1
24-11-2015	Hannah Bardell	SNP	Commons	1
03-12-2015	Peter Wishart	SNP	Commons	1
07-12-2015	Graham Allen	Labour	Commons	1
17-12-2015	Peter Wishart	SNP	Commons	1
13-01-2016	Hannah Bardell	SNP	Commons	1



04-02-2016	Callum McCaig	SNP	Commons	1
22-02-2016	Angus MacNeil	SNP	Commons	1
11-04-2016	David Cameron	Conservative	Commons	1
14-04-2016	Angus MacNeil	SNP	Commons	1
21-04-2016	Lord Bishop of Chelmsford	Lord Spiritual	Lords	1
24-05-2016	Lord Faulks	Conservative	Lords	1
15-06-2016	Angus MacNeil	SNP	Commons	1
04-07-2016	Hannah Bardell	SNP	Commons	1
20-07-2016	Jack Lopresti	Conservative	Commons	2
20-07-2016	Angus MacNeil	SNP	Commons	1
20-07-2016	Robert Neill	Conservative	Commons	1
20-07-2016	Andrew Rosindell	Conservative	Commons	4
05-09-2016	Ian Blackford	SNP	Commons	1
10-10-2016	Lord Elis-Thomas	Plaid Cymru	Lords	1
31-01-2017	Ian Blackford	SNP	Commons	3
31-01-2017	Richard Arkless	SNP	Commons	5
01-02-2017	Hannah Bardell	SNP	Commons	1
01-02-2017	John Nicolson	SNP	Commons	1
23-02-2017	Alison McGovern	Labour	Commons	1
07-03-2017	Andrew Rosindell	Conservative	Commons	2
21-03-2017	Lord Suri	Conservative	Commons	1
29-03-2017	Marion Fellows	SNP	Commons	1
03-04-2017	Baroness Anelay	Conservative	Lords	1
25-04-2017	Baroness Williams of Trafford	Conservative	Lords	1
26-04-2017	Lord Lexden	Conservative	Lords	1

12-10-2017	Matt Hancock	Conservative	Commons	1
12-10-2017	Robert Neill	Conservative	Commons	2
13-11-2017	Andrew Bowie	Conservative	Commons	1
13-11-2017	Hugh Gaffney	Labour	Commons	1
21-11-2017	Sheryll Murray	Conservative	Commons	1
29-11-2017	Stephen Kerr	Conservative	Commons	1
04-12-2017	Stephen Kerr	Conservative	Commons	1
04-12-2017	Ronnie Cowen	SNP	Commons	1
04-12-2017	Ian Blackford	SNP	Commons	1
14-12-2017	Lord Bates	Conservative	Lords	1
16-01-2018	Mike Gapes	Labour	Commons	1
17-01-2018	Lord Collins	Labour	Lords	1
30-01-2018	Drew Hendry	SNP	Commons	1
23-02-2018	Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown	Conservative	Commons	1
14-03-2018	Chris Law	SNP	Commons	1
26-03-2018	Baroness Evans	Conservative	Lords	1
26-03-2018	Lord Callanan	Conservative	Lords	1
28-03-2018	Andrew Bowie	Conservative	Commons	1
01-05-2018	Sir Henry Bellington	Conservative	Commons	1
19-06-2018	Craig Mackinley	Conservative	Commons	1
20-06-2018	Stephen Kerr	Conservative	Commons	1
02-07-2018	Theresa May	Conservative	Commons	1
23-07-2018	Leslie Laird	Labour	Commons	1
23-07-2018	Stephen Kerr	Conservative	Commons	3
23-07-2018	Chloe Smith	Conservative	Commons	1

<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>106</b>
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