Ms Joan McAlpine MSP
Convener
Culture, Tourism, Europe and
External Relations Committee
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

4 November 2016

Dear Jan,

I wrote to you, as Convener of the then European and External Relations Committee, on 28 September to alert members to the impending Plenary Session of the Joint Ministerial Committee, which — as you know — was subsequently held on 24 October. I am now writing to report on the Scottish Government’s actions at that meeting and to furnish members with a copy of the Joint Communique.

In addition the Minister for UK Negotiations on Scotland’s Place in Europe gave a statement to Parliament on 26 October 2016 in which he reported on the outcome of the meeting.

The meeting had three substantive items on the agenda — progress on the review of intergovernmental machinery, the UK decision to leave the EU and the role of devolved governments and the economy and the UK Government’s proposed industrial strategy.

Ministers agreed to remit further work on the review of intergovernmental machinery to the Joint Secretariat to reflect the changing circumstances brought about by the EU negotiation process. I am aware that members are particularly keen to gain a better understanding of the work that has already been undertaken in this area and that there will be some disappointment at this delay.

I do not see this exercise as a quick or simple fix. The review, from my perspective, must aim to encourage a cultural shift in attitudes, at all levels of government, towards engagement between our Administrations. Scotland holds a distinct voice within the UK that must be heard and acknowledged. The Scottish Government will do all we can to ensure that distinct voice is given maximum influence and to protect Scotland’s interests, including in discussion on negotiations with the European Union.
With regard to the discussion on the UK Government’s plan for the UK to leave the European Union members will be aware that I have expressed frustration at the lack of substance and new information provided by the Prime Minister on her plans for developing objectives for negotiations. In line with the wishes of Parliament, as expressed during recent debates, I set out Scotland’s key interests in protecting our place in the single market, securing continued freedom of movement and protecting environmental, social and employment rights. I also pressed, along with colleagues, for information on the high level negotiating stance of the UK Government and some indication of how it would take forward engagement with the 27 remaining EU Members. However, as I have made clear, we know no more now about the UK Government’s approach than we did when we went into the meeting.

What we did secure was agreement that the Plenary Session of the JMC will meet more frequently with another meeting promised for the New Year, before the triggering of Article 50.

It was also agreed that a sub-committee be established to discuss the issues raised by Brexit. That sub-committee – the JMC (EU Negotiations) – will meet for the first time early in November and at my suggestion, it was agreed that a detailed work programme, linked to the UK Government’s discussions of the Brexit process must be established ahead of that meeting.

The impact of the EU referendum was also a significant part of the discussion on the Economy. In discussing the industrial strategy I raised key issues for Scotland’s economy such as the renewables industry and the decisions made by the UK government around subsidies and the need to ensure that industry can remain competitive in the face of Brexit.

I am writing in similar terms to the Convenor of the Finance and Constitution Committee.

NICOLA STURGEON