

Devolution: Conservative PolicyA Proposal for an all Party Convention on Devolution1. Background

- i) Parliament: During the last 5 weeks the weaknesses of the Bill have been exposed in Parliament, with the Government regularly losing the argument. Although the Government has felt unable to introduce the guillotine so far, it has been applying massive pressure at the highest level. The effects of this should not be underestimated. With Nationalist support, the Government may well be able to win the guillotine, especially if there is no alternative on offer.
- ii) The Country: Partly due to the attitude of the media, especially in Scotland, there is little evidence that the Parliamentary view of the Bill has yet come to prevail in the country at large, although there is beginning to be a growing awareness of the defects of this Bill.
- iii) The Party: At present, the divisions within our Party have receded temporarily into the background. However, they are still very real. In the event of a guillotine, failure of the guillotine or the Bill, an early election, or a referendum campaign, they would rapidly come to the fore once again, a situation I would like to avoid. There are still those who wish to believe that if the Bill is defeated, devolution will go away, but I am convinced that it will not do so.

2. Tactical Considerations

In Scotland, I do not believe the status quo is a possible option. In any case the Party is committed to 'introduce legislation' for a directly elected Assembly on the Douglas-Home lines. These proposals remain controversial within our Party and we have not been advocating them actively in the recent debates. Meanwhile the Government's own Bill is in difficulties in the Commons.

The time therefore seems ripe for a new initiative. My personal view has long been that an attempt should be made to try to achieve some measure of agreement on devolution among all Parties at Westminster.

I believe there is another opportunity now to propose a Convention on Devolution. If the Party preferred it could be limited to Scotland on the ground that with regard to Scotland all Parties are agreed on the need for an Assembly of some sort, whereas for Wales we oppose any Assembly.

3. A Convention on Devolution for Scotland or Scotland and Wales.

The purpose of such a convention would be to agree on the possible options and, if possible, a preferred scheme, for devolution within the UK. Independence would not be an option and the Nationalists would be invited to participate on that basis.

It would be free to recommend, or reject, the establishment of an Assembly in Scotland (and Wales). It would then consider the implications of its proposals for England and for the House of Commons.

The reports of the Royal Commission might well prove a suitable basis for the discussion.

4. Structure and Timetable of the Convention

- i) The Convention should be representative of all Parties in Parliament. It should be chaired by the Speaker, an ex Speaker or a Law Lord.
- ii) The Convention could consider the following, in principle, in respect of any possible Assembly: the legislative role and relationship to Parliament; revenue raising powers; and the details of its elections.
- iii) Separate committees or sub-committees could be formed of members from Scotland and Wales, who need not all be from the Convention but should be representative of the Parties in the country concerned. They would need to consider the powers, structure and operation of any Assembly and its relationship to the UK Government and Parliament. Even if only Scotland is to be considered I would advocate a committee of Scots so that the main Convention could consider their findings in a UK context.
- iv) The committees or sub-committees should report within 6 months of their appointment. The Convention should then consider their reports in the following respects: their proposals in their own right; the relationship of each proposal to the other; their implications for England; their implications for the number and role of Scots and Welsh MPs; and the relationship between the UK Government and Parliament and any Assemblies.

5. Timing

I believe that now is the moment when such an initiative would make political sense. It could embarrass the Government by making the guillotine harder both to justify and obtain. It could also fill the vacuum which will arise in the event of the guillotine or the Bill failing and which at the moment would only be to the advantage of the SNP.

If the guillotine had been announced it would still be feasible if proposed immediately, although it would look more like a political gimmick. The guillotine might then succeed where it could have failed, in part because this proposal was not believed to be the serious political initiative I wish it to be.

If the guillotine had been passed the time for such a proposal would also have passed. It would then seem unrealistic and we would have to fall back in the referendum on our alternative proposals.

If the guillotine had failed then the proposal would lack the credibility and conviction it could have now, and could be overtaken by a Government initiative on similar lines in which the Conservatives could appear as being dragged to talks under protest.

Conclusion

By advancing such a proposal now we might delay, or avert the introduction of, or defeat, the guillotine and hence the Bill. And we could seize the initiative which the Government has lost. By delaying we could miss an opportunity of not only destroying the Bill but also of getting ourselves off our present hook upon which we shall otherwise have to remain with all its discomforts.

A Paper by Rt. Hon Francis Pym, MP.