

DEVOLUTION - THE WAY AHEAD

A Paper by Mr. Taylor

Some arguments against the Party taking an initiative to propose an all-Party Convention

Although I am entirely in agreement with the tactics on the Devolution Bill to date, I do not support the proposal in the paper LGC/77/155 that we should take the initiative in proposing all Party talks on a Speaker's Conference.

1. IT WOULD RENEW CONTROVERSY WITHIN THE PARTY ON DEVOLUTION

I believe that the proposal would be regarded with grave suspicion by our "anti-devolutionists". There would also be complaints about a proposal to consider devolution for Scotland when one of the main arguments expressed in the debates is that it is impossible to consider the Scottish scene in isolation. The proposal might be acceptable if a proposal for all party talks without any policy commitment by the Party were to be substituted for our present general commitment to the establishment of a directly elected Assembly, but such a change would no doubt be resented by the small and declining, but nevertheless important group of "pro-devolutionists".

2. IT WOULD BE ATTACKED BY THE SCOTTISH MEDIA

"Tories propose another time consuming device" would be the general reaction. Having had a Royal Commission on the Constitution, a Constitutional Committee of our own and many Party Committees, I am sure that the proposal would cut no ice with the Scottish Press or electorate. It might well be approved by the London Times, but this journal is not widely read in Scotland.

3. IT WOULD SIMPLY POSTPONE THE DEVOLUTION DECISION TO A MORE EMBARRASSING TIME

A Speaker's Conference would, almost certainly, produce a new devolution proposal and its recommendations would no doubt be made when a Conservative Government was in power. In view of the "gut feeling" of the Party, I very much doubt if a Conservative Government could ever enact a Devolution Bill.

4. IT ASSUMES THAT THERE IS A STRONG AND DEEP ROOTED ENTHUSIASM FOR DEVOLUTION

There is ample evidence that Scottish opinion is in a very fluid state and that opinion is swinging against devolution. For example, the Glasgow Herald Poll indicated that 32 per cent of Scots now wanted "No devolution", 38 per cent supported a Devolution Bill and 18 per cent wanted independence. More significantly, Tory voters were 52 per cent opposed to any devolution at all. The fact that the Scotsman Poll published the following week showed a smaller swing against devolution indicates my contention that opinion is rather confused and volatile.

5. IT ASSUMES THAT THE "VOID" AFTER A GUILLOTINE DEFEAT WOULD BE MORE EMBARRASSING TO CONSERVATIVES THAN TO THE LABOUR PARTY

It is the Labour Party which stands to lose most to the SNP and they have produced the Bill in an endeavour to stop their slide. I believe that it would maximise their embarrassment if we simply left them to pick up the pieces. Apart from this, to propose a "lifeline" compromise would assist the SNP by giving the impression that they were alone in fighting two giant unionist and "anti-Scottish" Parties.

6. IT WOULD RESTRICT THE PARTY'S FREEDOM TO SLIDE AWAY FROM THE DEVOLUTION COMMITMENT

In a constantly changing situation, I feel that we must retain the maximum freedom of manoeuvre. If, as is possible, Scottish opinion hardens against devolution (and the powerful and well financed "Scotland is British" movement is just beginning its campaign), we may find it appropriate to review our commitment. Once we argue for a Speaker's Conference, our freedom of action disappears.

7. IT WOULD BIND US FURTHER TO A POLICY WHICH WILL NOT IMPROVE GOVERNMENT

The most interesting aspect of the debates in Parliament and within the Party is that few, if any, have argued that a devolution scheme will make for better Government. All the arguments have been about Nationalist votes, about credibility and about our "commitment". I wonder if it is wise for us to get more deeply committed to a policy which most regard as a constitutional nonsense.

8. IT WOULD FURTHER UNDERMINE THE PARTY'S CREDIBILITY

I do not think that our devolution commitment carries any credibility in Scotland in any event. Voters point out that even when we were in Government between 1970 and 1974 with a clear commitment and with proposals pledged in the 1970 Queens Speech, we did nothing about devolution and "downgraded" the commitment to an indirectly elected Assembly in the 1974 election.

9. THERE ARE ALTERNATIVES

I would favour a new emphasis in comments on devolution which would centre round:-

(a) The importance of sorting out local government before we consider a legislative Assembly - I took an initiative last week in setting up a committee to look at one tier local government - and it has been well received.

(b) In times of mass unemployment and expenditure cuts, it is difficult to justify an expensive devolution plan when welfare services are being cut.

(c) The desirability of bringing Government closer to the people while local government is being reviewed by, for example, transferring the Scottish Grand Committee to Edinburgh.

(d) The importance of reviewing devolution in light of the indication that SNP would seek to use an Assembly to be a vehicle for breaking up the United Kingdom.

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