

SCOTLAND AND WALES BILL

Proposed reply to Government request for a Timetable agreement

The Government has this week proposed that an agreement should be reached both as to the total amount of Parliamentary time to be devoted to the Scotland and Wales Bill, and as to the amount of time to be spent on the various parts of the Bill. No previous approach has been made, nor has this major constitutional Bill been preceded by any attempt to achieve any kind of broad political agreement or understanding.

The purpose of such an agreement would be to ensure that there is adequate discussion of all the main features of the Bill and an opportunity for the House to come to a considered decision on them. We of course agree that it is essential that there should be adequate time to discuss all the issues raised in the Bill, but we would also point out that many of those issues raise fundamental and novel issues of constitutional principle on which widely differing views are strongly held, not just on a Party basis but by many individual Members of Parliament. On a Bill of this kind it is, therefore, quite impossible for any Party to commit its supporters to a timetable. This was the lesson of the Parliament (No.2) Bill.

As far as we know, no such request has been made by a Government before. To try and curtail debates on major issues in advance would be an entirely new Parliamentary innovation that itself has major constitutional implications.

Nonetheless, the purpose of the official Opposition amendments will be to seek to bring the scheme of the Bill as far as possible into line with the Conservative Party's own proposals and to alter those features of the Bill which appear

to make it unworkable and are likely to lead to a wholly unacceptable and dangerous degree of conflict between the United Kingdom Government and Parliament, and the Scottish and Welsh Assemblies.

The Shadow Cabinet will not prolong the debates on the Bill beyond the time needed for a proper consideration of the amendments and the major issues raised by them.

22nd December, 1976.