

Get off; Scots Free?

DAVID MCKENZIE ON DEVOLUTION

Recently there has been much discussion about the prospect of power being devolved from the Westminster Government to the member countries of the U.K. Nowhere has this discussion been more intense than in Scotland which, if legislation is passed, is to have its own Assembly.

Indeed, in the columns of Brig the subject of devolution has been discussed on several occasions. Regrettably however in issue number two of this volume, devolution was not so much discussed as debased by Colin Campbell. His nad the IS's complete disregard for anyone's views other than their own was again forcefully highlighted. He spoke of the "hyserical chorus" when describing the discussion of devolution, and stated that it was "little more than an administrative change in the structure of local government". Not unexpectedly, Sir Hugh Fraser was brought into the article as leading "the vehicle of Financial Capital which the S.N.P. has become".

Mr. Campbell's article was not so much on devolution as on trying to build up myths and lies around the S.N.P. - an attempt to put fear into people's minds which is usually the tactic of those who have no sound arguments to put forward in their own favour.

Coin à Fraser

With particular regard to Sir Hugh Fraser, I would have thought that he would be more interested in the present time in sorting out the troubles in his companies than in leading Campbell's imaginary vehicle of Financial capital within the S.N.P.

Returning to the more important issue of devolution, and leaving Colin Campbell to sink in his dogmatic ideology; we can examine the present proposals put forward by the Government, and see where these proposals fall short.

Basically, the Government is proposing a directly-elected Assembly which will be responsible for: Health and Social Services; Education (excluding the Universities); Housing; Physical Planning and the Environment; Transport; the Legal system; Tourism; the Scottish Development Agency; and some other lesser functions. The proposals are certainly not simply a change in the structure of local government - they are in fact a step in re-structuring the whole political set-up in Scotland.

Keep ra heid

However, let's not be too enthusiastic about the Devolution proposals. Let's not kid ourselves - these proposals have only come about because of the electoral successes of the S.N.P. during the last decade. The Unionist parties (both Labour and Tory) will fiercely denounce such accusations by saying that they have been in favour of Devolution for many years now and long before

the S.N.P. started winning parliamentary seats in convincing numbers, - but they don't go on to explain why Devolution proposals were not introduced 20 or 30 years ago. The Unionist parties' attitudes towards Devolution can be traced over the last decade in the following manner.

As a result of the S.N.P. electoral wins of 1967-8, the Unionist parties instituted inquiries into the Devolution question. The Conservative Party in Scotland set up a study group, which reported in favour of a Scottish Assembly at their conference in 1968. This led to the Report on Scottish Government (March 1970) which recommended a directly elected "Convention", to take on the work of the Scottish Committees of the House of Commons. In May 1970, the recommendations became official Conservative Party policy. However, when the S.N.P. support declined shortly afterwards, the Tories reneged on their former proposals at their May 1973 conference. Later, at the May 1974 conference, after the S.N.P. had increased their representation in Parliament, from 2 to 7, and took 21.9% of votes cast in Scotland, the Tories decided to opt for and indirectly-elected Assembly of local councillors. Then,

This is particularly important with regard to Scotland, whose economy is expanding at a faster rate than the rest of the U.K. In the past, economic policy decisions applied to the U.K. in general, have not always been the best decisions for the Scottish economy in particular. Only a Scottish Government will be able to identify correctly those sectors of the economy which require immediate action and will institute the appropriate measures. It is not enough for the Labour Government to propose that the financing of Assembly activities could be supplemented by local authority taxation surcharges. This would impose an unbearable burden on local authorities and ratepayers. The money for economic power must come through direct taxation and the central government.

The Set-up

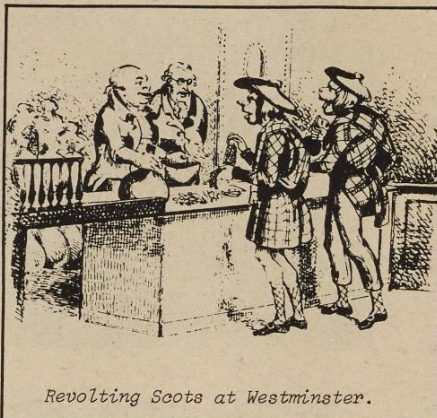
The whole set-up of local government in Scotland will have to be re-examined by the Assembly with a view to scrapping the Regions which are proving in many cases to be too bureaucratic and too expensive. If the Assembly is to operate meaningfully, there should be only one tier of local government, otherwise Scotland will become one of the most over-governed countries in the world.

With regard to Education, it will be unfortunate if the Universities do not come under the control of the Assembly. A country's educational system should be regarded as a whole and not something which can be broken down into sectors to be controlled by different governments at the same point in time.

Nonsense

The arguments put forward for keeping the Scottish Universities under the control of the Westminster Government have often been shallow and bigoted. One such example is the argument that the Universities would become parochial if they were to come under Assembly control. This is sheer nonsense as by including the Universities with the rest of the educational structure in Scotland, the system could be adapted to be more inter-related than segregated as it is at the present. This might help in reducing the excessive failure rate of first-year students. Much more experimentation and innovation could be carried out, whereas at the moment the the goals are all of uniformity and productivity. All this and more could be done without any loss to the Universities' international outlook.

These are only a few reasons which can be explored in much greater depth; reasons for having a powerful Assembly which can only help in decentralising Government, and democratising it by bringing it closer to the people.



Revolting Scots at Westminster.

after the October 1974 general election, when the S.N.P. increased their number of seats from 7 to 11, and took 30.4% of votes cast in Scotland, the Tory leadership in Scotland came out in support of the Labour Government's proposals for a directly-elected Assembly.

While this was the position of the Labour Party after August 1974, it was in marked contrast to their earlier pronouncements. The Labour Party spokesmen in Scotland denounced nationalism and Devolution as "shabby" and "irrelevant" and proposed no significant alteration to the government of Scotland. But after S.N.P.'s electoral successes and pressure from trade union leaders and a few Labour M.P.s, the Labour Party in Scotland and later in the U.K. came out in favour of a directly-elected Scottish Assembly.

Turning to some specific items in relation to Devolution, - with particular respect to economic power, we must pressurise the Government to make sure that the Assembly is given sufficient economic powers to defeat unemployment and promote investment in new industries.