

Devolution, the EU and the future of the UK

At the end of the last century I wrote a book entitled *The Death of Britain?* I argued that Tony Blair's constitutional revolution would damage our democracy and undermine the UK.

I said "Labour's constitutional blueprint is nothing more than a plan for the destruction of UK democracy. It threatens splits within the Kingdom. It threatens transferring far too much out of democratic control. (to independent quangos as well as to the EU) It gives far too much ground to the federal plans on the continent. "

I always thought if we lost the pound, our independent currency, then there would be no point in pretending there was an easy rescue. If we could save the pound, which I set about campaigning to achieve, we could rescue the rest in due course.

The endless delays over Brexit have shown how Labour's devolution settlement can be used to disunite our response to the policy and seek to overturn it. The impact of devolution on our exit teems with ironies and contradictions. The Republic of Ireland and the EU are seeking to force a compromise that keeps Northern Ireland partially in the EU's orbit of their single market, worrying Unionists in Ulster about creeping EU control. Meanwhile Scotland with the SNP in a majority at Edinburgh say they want the Northern Irish arrangements for themselves. The EU must privately worry about the strength of the SNP, as the EU sides with Spain in seeking to resist an independence movement in Catalonia when there is read across from the one to the other.

The Conservative party opposed devolution in Scotland and Wales, and was on the losing side in the referendums that created it. The party has always accepted the result, did not try to delay or derail devolution going through and has faithfully pursued it ever since. If we revisit the arguments that underlay the referendum it is unfortunate that the Conservatives were right about one fundamental issue. Labour always claimed if they granted Scotland a bit of devolution and it would end the nationalist movement. Instead it ended Labour's dominance as a political force in Scotland. Conservatives argued it would give the nationalists a platform, and they would use the politics of grievance to seek to increase devolved powers, always circling the true objective of independence.

This week devolution has been yet again the subject of SNP interventions, seeking to claim that despite the transfer of more powers to the Scottish Parliament from the ones we repatriate from the EU, Scotland does not get enough power over single market matters in the UK as of course trade policy for example is a reserved matter for the Union.

Brexit has made even more obvious the unfairness of lopsided devolution to England. England voted decisively to leave but has had no voice at the table

when the devolved administrations meet Union Ministers to decide how to proceed. We need to look again at the issue of voice for England. Meanwhile both major parties in the Commons have to get better at countering the politics of grievance from the SNP, who seek to turn every debate about our future into recriminations over what Scotland is allowed to do.

I am proud of the decision of the UK Parliament to grant Scotland a referendum to settle the issue of Scottish attachment to the UK for another generation. It contrasts well with the anti democratic approach of Spain and the EU to the demands for a referendum on Catalan independence. It would be good if MPs meant what they said when they say they will implement the results of a referendum on such important matters.