

Highland games

The contest over devolution will be an odd mix of calculation and idealism

HERE'S a curiosity: the two leaders of Britain's major parties are arguing passionately for policies that appear to run totally against their party's long-term electoral interests. On December 30th, John Major appeared on BBC radio's "Today" programme to attack Labour's plan for devolution to Scotland and Wales as "dangerous". Not at all, retorted Tony Blair, Labour's leader, the next day: devolution, bringing a measure of home rule to Scotland and Wales, will make their people more, not less, willing to stay inside the United Kingdom. Mr Blair is so keen on the idea that he promises that Labour will legislate for a Scottish parliament and a Welsh assembly in the party's first year in office.

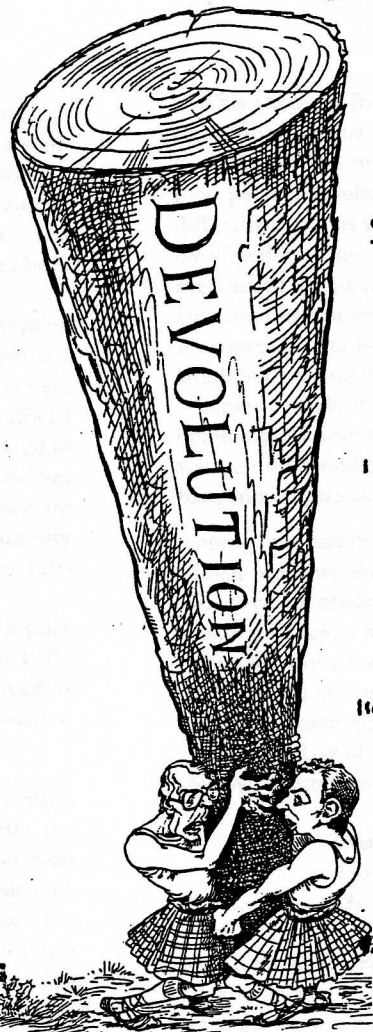
What on earth is Mr Major worried about? Scotland returned only 11 Tory MPs at the last general election, compared with 49 Labour and 12 others. Wales was not a lot better: six Tories against 27 Labour and five others. Suppose Scotland broke away from the United Kingdom. Then the Tories would be able to win a general election with 25 fewer seats in England. And suppose (less likely) that the Welsh followed suit. Then the Tories could take 38 fewer seats in the rump kingdom, and still win. That would make it unlikely that there would ever again be a Labour government at Westminster—which would, after all, still rule 87% of Britain's present population.

Even devolution short of independence poses a threat to Labour. At present, Scotland is over-represented at Westminster. The 72 Scottish MPs look after fewer than 55,000 voters each, compared with 59,000 for the average Welsh MP and 69,000 for the average English MP. But if power over domestic legislation passed from Westminster to assemblies in Edinburgh and Cardiff, the over-representation of Scotland and Wales would be indefensible.

If each Scottish MP represented the same number of electors as each English MP, there would be 15 fewer Scots; if each Welsh MP represented the same as each English, seven fewer Welsh. How much worse off that would leave Labour would depend on individual constituency boundaries, but the net loss could amount to 10-15 seats. So why aren't the Tories pressing for devolution, and Labour opposing it?

Part of the answer is that short-term political considerations are not the same as those which seem in either party's long-term political interest. Mr Major's calculation is threefold. First, patriotism unites his party. Its full name is, after all, the Conservative and Unionist Party. With the polls reporting that three-quarters of voters think that the Tories are divided, unity is the party's top priority.

Second, and paradoxically, opposing devolution may be neat niche-marketing for the Tories in Scotland. Roughly one Scottish voter in five opposes devolution, according to the polls (see box on next page). But only 12% of Scots intend to vote Tory. So getting the whole of the anti-devolution vote would sharply improve the party's dismal prospects. This worked well for the Tories in the 1992 general election, when they surprised everyone by hanging on to 11 Scottish seats.



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Third, and more speculatively, opposing devolution may be good business for the Tories in England too. The party believes that any threat to the nation scares voters, especially in the South. In 1992 Mr Major focused on the unity of the kingdom at the end of his campaign. Tory canvassers reported that many electors who were contemplating voting Liberal Democrat swung back to the Tories as a result.

Similarly Mr Blair thinks that support for devolution will help Labour at the next general election. In part, this is because it is only one component of a package of constitutional reforms, which also includes reform of the Lords, a bill of rights, regional government for England and a referendum on proportional representation. Labour believes such reforms will appeal to progressive middle-class opinion. They also provide Labour with a positive agenda, which it has been lacking since its nostrums of planning, public ownership and higher public spending had to be abandoned after four election defeats.

Equally important, many Scottish Labour MPs believe that Labour's devolution pledge is a political imperative. The Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) is currently running second to Labour in Scotland, with 25% of the vote compared with Labour's 55%, according to System 3, a polling firm. The SNP aims to break through in Labour's inner-city seats in Glasgow and Edinburgh. By promising devolution, Labour is holding them off. But if it dropped devolution, working-class Scottish voters, fed up with English rule, might desert to the SNP, endangering Labour's hegemony.

Such are the two men's calculations. But devolution is an issue too deep, too emotive, to be decided by political calculation alone. And there is no gainsaying the messianic fervour of the two leaders towards it.

Mr Major, usually so bland, sounds genuinely alarmed at Labour's devolution plans, labelling them as "a

folly" and even "teenage madness". Why, he asks, should Scots alone decide on Scottish education, whereas Scottish MPs as well as English will have a say on education in England? What happens if and when there is a conflict between an Edinburgh parliament and the parliament at Westminster? What if the Scots eventually decide to ask for independence?

Mr Blair is more measured, but also passionate. How can the prime minister argue in the European Union for subsidiarity, yet argue against devolution to a proud and independent nation like the Scots? How can he defend the anomaly that English MPs can now vote on legislation, which affects only Scotland, while baulking at the anomaly that Scottish MPs, post-devolution, will vote on purely English matters?

The present exchange marks only the opening of hostilities. They will become fiercer when Labour presents its detailed plan to the party's Scottish conference in March. With the gap on other issues between the parties narrow, they are certain to rage right up to the next general election—and, probably, beyond.