

The pledge that Blair must be cursing

Commentary

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DOES the Labour Party believe in a parliament for Scotland? I mean really believe. There's no doubt about the formal commitment. That is a pledge written in the blood of Scottish Labour MPs who would be destroyed were the party to renege on it. But the promise is only the beginning.

Through Stephen Dorrell we get a glimpse of how fiercely the Tories will attack it. There will be times when Prime Minister Blair, unless he truly believes, will curse the day devotion was ever thought of. Maybe that time, in the watches of the night, has already come.

Whether the present cabinet is split is a minor question. Dorrell affirms that abolition of any parliament Labour set up would be an option for a later Tory government. Michael Forsyth said the opposite some time ago. So what? It's a choice about

campaigning tactics in a cause the entire cabinet agrees on, which is that Labour's devolution plans must be opposed without quarter both before and after the election. Especially after. We can be quite certain that when a Scotland Bill comes to the House, the Tory rump, however small, will oppose it with every weapon. They will harness passionate righteousness to their campaign. Will Labour's commitment to the Bill surpass the Conservative commitment against it?

Both parties talk about the need to save the Union. But in the Labour Party there is already no union of view between England and Scotland, no community of knowledge, no echoed sense of caring. This has been treated throughout as a Scottish not a British question, an approach that is about to be put severely to the test. For years it has been developed inside the Scottish political class, who not only debated it exhaustively but came up with a fully-fledged programme that Labour and the Liberal Democrats agreed on.

Middle Scotland knows what it thinks. For Labour as the party of Middle Scotland, devolution is its badge of racial respectability, its lifeline to progressive voters, the policy that saves its bacon among traditional supporters

who otherwise show such markedly smaller enthusiasm for the timidities of New Labour than do people south of the border.

But devolution is not rooted in a general idea that English Labour shows much sign of believing in. It is based on a demand of Scottish politics, not a philosophy of British politics. Labour's more general commitment to decentralising power away from London is thin. It is putting in place an education policy indistinguishable from the Tories' in sentimental mistrust of local authorities. Its pledges to increase the financial independence of local government are verbal mouth-wash. Its interest in regional government for the whole country is alluded to as a voluntary possibility, but has not been enriched by the leadership's manifest enthusiasm. The party as a whole has been given few ideological weapons with which to arm itself for the battle to save Scotland, in preparation for the legislative rigours to come.

These rigours will be severe, and will in some respects transcend cheap party point-scoring. Serious questions of good governance will arise, even if, by some ruthless subterfuge, the leadership rides a large majority into removing passage of the

Scotland Bill away from the filibuster-prone arena of the floor of the House. The West Lothian Question — which challenges the right of Scottish MPs to vote on English issues such as health and education that, in Scotland, will have been handed to the Scottish parliament — is not a naïf invention. The financial imbalances, which accord the Scots more tax-payer's money per capita than the English, are not the product of fake arithmetic. The handling of these and scores of other tough issues will be a matter of intense legitimate interest far beyond Scotland and far beyond the Labour Party, a truth which both Greater Britain and the Labour Party have, yet, I think, to fully understand.

For similar reasons of good governance, however, it is very important that devolution does come about. The expectations in Scotland are absolute. However painful it now appears, and beset by every kind of thorniness, the experiment in de-centralising has to happen, if it doesn't. Labour will be finished in Scotland, and the severing of the Union, a catastrophe for the entire United Kingdom, will rise to the top of the agenda.

LABOUR therefore has a responsibility not only to pass it but to make it work. That is not something that can happen quickly or without considerable magnanimity. The West Lothian Question is an example. While it can't be properly answered by anything short of federal government, the unfairness at the heart of it can be mitigated by drastically lowering the number of Scottish MPs. Already over-represented to the extent of 13 MPs, Scotland may have to lose more than that, as the

price of its exercise in self-government. It is not logical, it is not perfect, and nobody knows for sure which party it would hit hardest. But re-drawing the boundaries of Scottish parliamentary seats to make them fewer and bigger will be, in practice, a minimum requirement to satisfy the English, who have come late to the debate and judge the blueprint of Scotland's own reformers to be insufferable.

There are others. The Secretary of State for Scotland is a creature with a transitional life ahead of him. He should soon go. The financial settlement will need to be revised, at Scotland's cost. Perhaps none of this can be admitted now. None of it, in fact, has yet been decided by the collective Labour leadership. For the purposes of the election, Scotland has to be strong along in the belief that it can have the best of all worlds. But after that, when the British wake up, it will be a different story. One hopes that in the wiser heads, the concessions, rough-and-ready though they are, are already prepared.

Whatever happens, devolution is going to involve a mighty and messy parliamentary struggle. It will tax to the utmost Mr Blair's shining belief in constitutional reform. To make it stick, what Labour, with still greater magnanimity, should be trying to arrange is that the first Scottish parliament, elected after Blair's honeymoon is but a distant memory, turns out to have a large Tory representation. Then Mr Dorrell would have to recant. But what Labour needs, meanwhile, is for its conviction to move south. It would be worse than ironic to discover after the election that much of the party doesn't really believe in the most radical specific it is promising.