Moving Forward – A discussion paper for Cowdenbeath CLP meeting

31st October

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Much has and will be written about the referendum that took place on 18th September and no doubt much more will be written in the months and years ahead as the ramifications continue to influence the future direction of the British State. But for now I think it would be fair to say that the outcome in terms of the numbers of people who participated was a triumph for democracy.

With regards to the outcome of the vote, I don’t like to think of it in terms of winners and losers. There was always going to be one side of this impassioned and at times heated debate that was going to be very disappointed but if we accept that the outcome of the actual numbers voting was a triumph for democracy then I believe the campaigners on each side of the debate are winners.

It is also important to keep in mind that whilst the outcome of the vote was 45% Yes – 55% No, it was 83% of the people of Scotland voting 100% for change. Not only did the three Leaders of the largest Westminster parties promise change but they gave the following timetable;

October 2014: A command paper published by the present Westminster Government setting out all the proposals for change, and no later than the end of October.

November 2014: Following a period of discussion and consultation with civic society the Heads of Agreement in the form of a white paper or equivalent document.

January 2015: Draft clauses for legislation as the new Scotland Bill.

Whilst the timetable is tight and does not allow for a great deal of public consultation and debate, it does mean that the temptation for party leaders to kick this into the long grass is not an option. This, it seems to me, can only be a good thing in meeting people’s expectations that more powers would be devolved to the Scottish Parliament regardless of the result of the vote.

The late Donald Dewar said that devolution was a journey that Scotland was on and I have no doubt that journey will not simply stop when the latest stage of new powers being devolved is agreed in the next Parliament of Westminster. As the party of home rule Scottish Labour should always be open to going further with devolution where there is clearly a case that it is in Scotland’s interest to do so.

Whilst I do not believe there will be much opposition in Scotland to the principle that Scottish MPs would not be able to vote in Westminster on matters that in Scotland are the responsibility of Scotland’s Parliament, the debate around this and devolution for England should not be linked to further devolution in Scotland. After all devolution in Scotland has been high on the agenda of Scots for decades and the people of England should be free to have their own debate in their own timescale. The most obvious answer to the ‘West Lothian’ question it has always seemed to me is a federal system of government across the United Kingdom, but that would have to be something that all parts of the UK wanted.

The principle of English MPs voting on English matters may seem simple but if this then excluded Scottish MPs from voting on the levels of funding for the NHS or education and this had a knock on impact through the Barnett formula for spending being allocated to Scotland then clearly Scottish MPs would have a right to vote. This right cannot be removed by Tories trying to get a political advantage in England. The issue of who votes on what in Westminster therefore has wider ramifications and will require a more fundamental review not possible within the timeline set out for more powers being devolved to the Scottish Parliament.

It was therefore in my view an act of opportunism and sabotage when David Cameron on the morning of the 19th announced that the process for further Scottish devolution would be linked to Scottish MPs voting on matters for England that in Scotland are devolved to the Scottish Parliament. That is why I and 120,000 others have signed the 38 Degrees petition calling on all leaders to deliver on their promises. Party members have also been out on the streets with this petition and we have had a very good response with people queuing on Cowdenbeath High Street to sign it.

As members will know Lord Smith of Kelvin has been appointed to lead cross party talks to produce by the 30th November Heads of Agreement with recommendations of further devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament.

In terms of the actual additional powers to be devolved it is worth noting that each of the three parties had different proposals on the table and have now made submissions to Lord Smith based on these proposals. The SNP have also made a submission which does seem to ignore the result of the referendum given that key areas of concern for people discussed during the campaign were pensions and other elements of welfare where the pooling and sharing of resources across the UK were seen as a positive reason for voting no.

The nationalists also seem determined to sign up to the Tory trap of devolution of all income tax and in doing so supporting breaking the principle of sharing resources where there is greater need in any part of the UK.

That said, I am of the view that Labour’s submission does not go far enough on tax and in other areas such as VAT income coming direct to the Parliament. Our submission demonstrates for me the conflict that we have had within the Scottish Labour Party when it comes to the journey of devolution that the Scottish people are on. Whilst I do not believe we should get bogged down in an internal debate that becomes a diversion from the fundamental root and branch review of policy direction that I believe is required within Scottish Labour, we equally cannot remain in a position where constitutional matters and indeed that much needed policy review, are dominated by a group of Labour MPs in Westminster, a National Executive Committee for whom Scotland makes up 8.4% of the UK population and a UK leadership that has no remit over a wide range of social and economic policy in Scotland. It could almost be described as the West Lothian question in reverse and it is now very clear that the groups outlined above were very out of touch with Scottish opinion on the direction of devolution given the timid devolution proposals that were eventually agreed and brought forward pre-referendum.

After the resounding defeat of Scottish Labour in 2011 a review was carried out that examined how the Scottish Party was organised and operated. This is perhaps the starting point for a more fundamental review. During the referendum campaign Scottish Labour was found by too many to be guilty by association of being a ‘Unionist’ party and is now perceived as such. In my 30 and more years as a member of the Labour Party I have never considered my self to be a ‘Unionist’ and have never considered Labour as being a ‘Unionist’ party.

I have always been of the view that I was a member of a party in Scotland that recognised it was in Scotland’s best interest to be part of the United Kingdom with a strong commitment to devolution and home rule, and that is why it was the Labour Party that saw devolution in John Smith’s words as unfinished business, the Labour Party that drove the constitutional convention whilst the nationalists refused to participate and the Labour Government that brought forward the legislation for a referendum that created the Scottish Parliament. We, the party of Scottish devolution and Scottish home rule, delivered on these commitments and we now, post referendum need to set out very clearly what we stand for, who we are and what defines us as a political party in Scotland.

It is the failure of our party to do this that has allowed others to define who and what we are and has left us continually on the back foot, on the defensive creating the opportunity for nationalism to portray itself as a radical alternative to the status quo.

Despite the fact that the SNP in power in the Scottish Parliament have failed to make any inroads into tackling the big issues Scotland currently faces and have failed to bring forward any radical policy aimed at addressing the deep rooted causes of poverty and inequality in Scotland, they were able to present themselves and, more worryingly, nationalism as offering the only route out of poverty and inequality in Scotland. This is why we must address the question of what we stand for, who we are and what defines us.

On the question of further devolution we must go much further than our submission goes and I would suggest that the recent paper circulated by Gordon Brown outlining 14 areas for further devolution would give the Parliament the powers to address the big issues in Scotland and is a good starting point for our discussion.

1. New powers for investing in the social and economic fabric of Scotland.
2. New powers for job creation.
3. New powers in areas of transport.
4. New powers over land use.
5. New powers over welfare – attendance allowance and social care.
6. New powers over housing benefit.
7. New powers over employment rights.
8. New powers over health and safety enforcement.
9. New powers to promote greater equality.
10. New powers for management of democratic elections.
11. Majority of income tax raised in Scotland by the Scottish Parliament.
12. Ability to reform and introduce more progressive taxation.
13. Assignment of share of VAT revenues direct to Scottish Parliament.
14. Scottish Parliament to be entrenched in constitution.

The process and timetable the Smith Commission is following will continue through into next year and we, as party members, should be making our views known to the leadership of the party and participating through discussions like here in the Cowdenbeath CLP, but we also need to be clear that devolution is not an end in itself. The powers of the Scottish Parliament and the additional powers we are seeking for the Scottish Parliament must be for a purpose. Scotland like the rest of the UK and across Europe faces major social and economic challenges and this is why we must be able to move beyond the debate on devolution to focus on the objective that power is power for a purpose. The eradication of inequality and poverty must be that purpose and the political parties in Scotland must set out a policy agenda on how they intend to create a more fair, a more just and a more prosperous Scotland tackling the issues our communities are facing right now.

And on that note I would suggest that the Scottish Labour Party has operated in Scotland in a bit of a policy vacuum for much of the last decade and this is perhaps one explanation for its poor showing and defeat in 2007, the massive defeat in 2011 and its current position in the polls with regards to voting intentions for Holyrood. If we are to be in a position to offer a serious challenge to the SNP in 2016 and a serious alternative to nationalism we must avoid the conventional thinking that in opposition we simply oppose for the best part of the next 20 months producing a manifesto in early 2016 and hoping for the best.

The message of change is one that we must endorse and should reflect this through holding the current Scottish Government to account and by setting out an alternative way forward for social and economic change in Scotland.

At the heart of Scottish Labour’s equality agenda must be the ‘Right to Work’ and the right of every person in Scotland to have access to education and training to get the skills to support them into the labour market. Throughout history the Jarrow marchers, the UCSW sit in, the 84/85 miners’ strike and the labour and trade union movements have marched and fought not for benefits but for jobs and today must be no different.

The challenge Labour faces today in Scotland is the gap between people’s skills, the skills needs in the jobs market and the over reliance on benefits that this has created. The current welfare reforms fail to take account of people’s ability to access the labour market and are pushing many thousands into absolute poverty by the punitive measures taken against them as evidenced by the massive rise in food banks across the country.

Yet the current SNP government has slashed the levels of funding going into further education with a preference to resource what they see as the more popular rejection of tuition fees. There is a need for a more progressive approach to education and skills that recognises the need for a fairer distribution of investment between vocational and academic education and much closer links between colleges, schools and employers. Too many young people are being denied a college place, too many young people are being let down by a college system creaking under cuts and too many young people are being denied opportunity and being denied a positive future.

In-work poverty is also a contributor to the unacceptable levels of inequality in Scotland with over half the working population living in relative poverty and living in a household where at least one person works. We have seen across the public sector the introduction of the ‘Living Wage’ however for the 100,000 who are on the minimum wage or below and the 400,000 that would benefit from a living wage, we need change. In the coming months Labour must develop and bring forward a clear policy agenda in this area driven by a vision for change and economic prosperity for all. We have a real opportunity here in Scotland to lead the UK and Europe making clear that low pay is not acceptable in a modern social democracy.

Equality for all in Scotland also means the ‘Right to Health and Social Care’ with every person in Scotland being able to access the highest quality of care and support at the point of need regardless of ability to pay. Both in our hospitals and in the community there is great pressure on both staff and budgets and the approach to date of the SNP government has been to stick their heads in the sand, deny there is a problem and where they can’t deny the obvious they blame Westminster or the local authorities. Labour created the NHS and has committed to increase the levels of spending significantly over the coming years but also in Scotland, Scottish Labour are proposing a major review based on the real experiences of staff and patients.

This review must also consider how social care is being provided and funded in local communities and how we put communities at the heart of any further change building the NHS to meet the needs of the 21st century.

Here in Fife we have undergone, in the last decade, a major reorganisation of hospital services that has resulted in the main acute hospital bounce from one crisis to the next. We have over 40 consultant posts not filled, nursing shortages, last minute cancellations becoming common, unacceptable levels of boarding of patients, large waiting lists for care in the community and a committed workforce under immense pressure. There is a serious question over the ability of NHS Fife to meet the health needs of the people of Fife and that is why I am continuing to call for an independent review of health and social care services and their current ability to meet growing demand being placed on them. Labour in Scotland is committed to increasing NHS funding and also to a major review of how we continue to develop the NHS making sure it can meet the needs of the people of Scotland whilst maintaining the principle of a public service free at the point of need.

Scottish Labour is also at the front end of delivering public services, tackling inequality, creating opportunity and building strong communities in local councils across Scotland. Here in Fife it is a Labour council that is targeting resources at family and early years centres, driving up attainment by targeting support at those areas of most need, creating apprenticeships in partnership with business and industry giving young people hope for the future, building council houses and ensuring the safety and wellbeing of young and old alike.

The nationalists centralisation of power in Scotland and the undermining of local government must be challenged, not simply through an attack on the SNP but by presenting an alternative, a Scottish Labour agenda for local government that empowers councils to deliver on the big challenges in our communities and empowers people at a local level putting communities back in charge of their affairs.

Fife Council has demonstrated that tackling youth unemployment is best achieved through local partnerships and that is why in calling for the work programme to be devolved to the Scottish Parliament we should be clear it will then be devolved to local level. A national house building programme is a necessity but it should be overseen and managed at the local level.

Community ownership of renewable energy must be a new priority for the Scottish Government but must be developed and delivered at the local level. Indeed a national strategy for tackling poverty and tackling the causes of poverty will not be achieved unless it can be developed and delivered at the local level.

Over the coming months we will be campaigning for a Labour government to be elected at Westminster. As Labour Party members we can go on the doorsteps with pride demonstrating the policy agenda being set out by the Labour leadership for governing the UK. We also need to see an agenda for change from the Scottish Labour Party that recognises the Scottish Parliament is Scotland’s powerhouse; where the majority of political, economic and social issues that impact on Scotland are decided. As a Party we must therefore refocus our efforts on our Scottish message, policy and political strategy with the aim of connecting with every community in Scotland and returning a Labour government to Holyrood in 2016.

So for me, we must address the internal issues, ensuring that all the necessary powers that are required for a political party operating in a devolved Scotland of home rule sit with the Scottish Labour Party, its Executive and its leadership. We need a clear policy focus that is about creating and maintaining the jobs of the future and making sure people have the education and skills to get those jobs; which will go a long way to tackling our objective of conquering poverty and deprivation, which must sit at the heart of all our policies and we must address the major issues that currently exist in our National Health Service. Securing the best devolution settlement will support us in government in Scotland to deliver on our policies in tune with Scotland’s priorities.