

Scotland's future: Scottish Labour's better alternative

In the last decade we have lived through an unprecedented period of extreme instability and risk with multiple and profound society-reshaping events - compressed into an intense and short timescale - which have repeatedly hit the poorest hardest. These have included the consequences of the global financial collapse of 2008 and subsequent years of austerity, the constitutional upheaval of the independence referendum in 2014 and then the Brexit referendum in 2016 with the consequences of that Brexit referendum yet to play out.

Scotland is now also engaged in fighting a global pandemic which is still not at an end or with any predictable timescale for its completion or adjustment to a 'new normal'. Scientists suggest that the presence of the Covid-19 virus itself is likely to persist for many months if not years. Economists argue that the consequences for economies and societies will be enduring and probably permanent with altered cultural, social and economic practices. In any event most organisations and global institutions expect the world to be facing at least a five to ten year period in which the combined demands of resisting the virus and trying to recover from its impact will have to be the primary focus of governments and economies everywhere.

In this context the mission for any political party – but particularly those on the left committed to delivering and protecting social justice – must be to simultaneously minimise any further risk and instability while also promoting co-operation, innovation and transformation in the way that our structures of government work to deliver recovery and a transformed society.

Further constitutional instability would be both an accelerator of the risk and uncertainty which has marked the last decade and a distraction from the real political prize of ensuring that Scotland reimagined is a country of jobs, inclusion, solidarity and social justice. In short, this is not the era for proposing that Scottish families and communities should be offered even more risk as the response to a sustained period of less reward.

The economic and social impact of the coronavirus pandemic is far-reaching. It has exposed weaknesses in the economy, precariousness in workplaces, and the underfunding of public services and so it has fuelled inequalities across society. As a result, it has also stirred up discontent with the status quo. So there has never been a better time to put forward our vision of change for Scotland, built on investment in people, communities, industry and public services.

Remaining in and reforming the UK, we will seek to develop a new post-Brexit, post-Covid settlement. New democracy and resilience will be needed to weather the aftermath of this crisis, and to prevent any future incidents having the same catastrophic effects, that means we must urgently bring power closer to the people. We can neither allow a Tory government to tell us that it's back to business as usual after this crisis – and nor can we allow SNP ministers to unleash vast public spending cuts in a separate Scotland. There is a better Scottish Labour alternative.

Where we stand:

- Scottish Labour's approach to the constitution is rooted in solidarity and a belief that unity is strength. We stand for solidarity not separation and internationalism not isolationism.
- Labour is the party of devolution and delivered the Scottish Parliament and fully supports democratic reform and continued decentralisation from Westminster for the whole United Kingdom.
- Scottish Labour believes in a reformed and renewed Scotland within the multi-national, multicultural, and democratically reformed United Kingdom.
- Scottish Labour is committed to Scotland remaining in the UK with a plan for further devolution for the whole of the United Kingdom and a renewed partnership between all nations of the UK based on a progressive federal structure.
- Scottish Labour is neither a nationalist nor a unionist party but a democratic socialist party and believes further devolution must include further powers being devolved to local government.
- Constitutional issues have divided Scotland, Scottish Labour plans to unite the country by delivering a platform of economic, social and environmental change as we reshape our society and economy after the Covid19 pandemic and invest in public services.
- At a UK level we want to see the establishment of a Constitutional Convention, the abolition of the House of Lords and its replacement with a Senate of the Nations and Regions.
- A Scottish Labour government at Holyrood would ensure that all the powers devolved to the Scottish Parliament were fully utilised to tackle poverty, inequality and redistribute power and wealth across society and provide opportunity for all and harness the talents of everyone in Scotland.
- Scottish Labour, does not support independence. We believe that the 2021 elections must be about electing a Government and a parliament that will dedicate its entire focus to rebuilding Scotland's economy, public services and communities after the devastating impact of Covid-19. That work must be the focus of the next Scottish Government and so we will be going into that election in 2021 with a Scottish Labour party position that is not for a second referendum.

"We approach this question of democratic reform from the standpoint of the individual...seeking greater freedom, better opportunities, a fair start in life. We do not approach it from the standpoint of authority or the vested interest of wealth, or from the position of a privileged elite. It is for this reason that

the Labour Party is the natural party of constitutional reform...

Since its beginnings, therefore, Labour has been a vehicle for individual aspirations, a vehicle for social justice, and consequently a vehicle for democratic reform."

John Smith 1992

Labour's tradition

Twenty years on from the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, constitutional reform and democratic modernisation remains a Labour priority. We need to re-state our position on Scotland's constitutional future which reflects our tradition of home rule, devolution and democratic reform and advance within the UK.

We are a democratic socialist party that has never believed in separatism, nor are we a defender of the status quo. We believe in a democratically and economically renewed Scotland is stronger within a democratically and economically renewed United Kingdom.

And so we must not be defined by our opponents, and set out a distinctive 2020 Scottish Labour constitutional position which is based on our own Labour values of co-operation and solidarity.

And in turn make clear that this constitutional outlook is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. We campaigned for democratic reform and the creation of a Scottish Parliament because it would be a power for real economic and social change. Because it would be "a vehicle for social justice". And we will make the case and campaign for change in this decade because many of those hopes and ambitions remain unrealised.

Our 2020 vision includes a commitment to remaining in and reforming the UK. It means the establishment of a UK Constitutional Convention to develop a new settlement of powers post-Brexit, on the understanding that far too much power remains centralised in London and Edinburgh. It means working closely with Welsh Labour, elected mayors in England and council leaders across the UK.

Our Vision for the future

It means re-affirming our commitment to the Claim of Right which underpinned the creation of the Scottish Parliament inside the UK. It is the sovereign right of the people to determine their future, and the right of the people of Scotland to determine the form of government suited to their needs. As the country starts to contemplate a future beyond the pandemic, it is clear that the people are neither demanding a second referendum nor independence. Scottish Labour is clear that following the Brexit debacle and the COVID-19 pandemic the last thing Scotland needs is more constitutional turmoil and economic instability. The priority for a post pandemic Scotland is securing full employment, tackling low pay, poverty and inequality and rebuilding our public services.

In the immediate term this means setting out a distinctive Scottish Labour prospectus in the lead up to the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections of our vision for economic, social and environmental change and our plan for achieving it, an effective challenge to thirteen years of mismanagement, missed opportunity, and a clear and distinct position on Scotland's constitutional future. Unless we set out a credible, radical and appealing Scottish Labour alternative on the latter, we will not get a hearing on the former. We need to lead not simply follow public opinion, but we can only do so by first understanding why people do not currently see Labour as the vehicle for the realisation of their hopes.

Scotland remains divided, Scottish Labour wants to unite the country by offering a way forward which proposes change, and so rejects the status quo, but rejects as well the SNP's "clear sighted prospectus" of what a separate Scottish state would look like. Which means a decade of austerity and deep cuts to public services, an economy that would be even more reliant on overseas ownership and on more insecurity in work and lower labour standards, and a currency alone that would divert over a £100 billion of public money to set up and defend. At a time when public borrowing has been at record levels to save jobs and businesses as well as lives establishing a separate Scottish state makes no sense. Scottish Labour believes there is a better way than either Scottish nationalism or British nationalism. If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything it is that people do not want to be divided. Communities want and need to come together. We thrive when we are working towards the common good. Scottish Labour remains the only political party that represents that sense of sharing and solidarity, of equality and fairness. These are our values, and coming out of this pandemic we have the opportunity to demonstrate an understanding of the structural change society needs to ensure the power is rooted in communities and flows from the bottom up and not from the top down.

Constitutional Reform

At a UK level we want to see the establishment of a Constitutional Convention, the abolition of the House of Lords and its replacement with a Senate of the Nations and Regions.

We want to see a post-Brexit settlement which includes with immediate effect:

A distribution of powers to the Scottish Parliament and Scottish local government as a far better alternative to an even greater accumulation and centralisation of powers in Whitehall and Westminster. Applying the principle of subsidiarity.

The establishment on a statutory footing of action focussed Joint Governmental and Parliamentary Councils between the Scottish Government and Parliament and the UK Government and Parliament to address shared interests and common needs. There should be a legal requirement for the Councils to be consulted when decisions by the UK Government impact on devolved areas of competence.

So a UK Council of Ministers and a UK Council of Parliaments and Assemblies established on the principle of co-operation and transparency rather than conflict and secrecy, as a step towards a much more federal approach.

The establishment of joint frameworks and common minimum standards in human rights, employment rights, consumer protection, social security, access to public services, environmental rights across the UK, but the right of the Scottish Parliament to enhance, but not reduce, these rights.

Refreshed arrangements to benefit Scotland

The Scottish Government should be given the power to negotiate and enter international treaties and programmes in areas of devolved competence

The continuation of the Barnett Formula and the principle of equalisation which pools resources and then distributes public expenditure according to need. Because we believe in these redistributive principles.

That is why there must also be a re-negotiation of the Fiscal Framework so that Scotland is not financially penalised for tackling poverty and inequality through social security reforms, or financially penalised for relative economic underperformance. Although the Scottish Parliament now has limited borrowing powers these should be extended and augmented with a new power to raise capital by issuing bonds, for both capital and revenue spending.

New tax powers could also be considered, including the power over excise duties as they apply to alcohol and tobacco products, as well as betting and gaming levies.

Further devolution and a reversal of centralisation

Over the last two decades the Scottish economy has continued to lag behind. As a result many of the chronic long term economic and so social challenges remain unmet. There has been no industrial renaissance because there has been no industrial strategy. There has been an insufficient response to the present and future challenges we face through Brexit, climate change, automation, advances in artificial intelligence, and the fourth industrial revolution. And now with the huge challenge of rebuilding the economy after the lockdown every resource must be directed at tackling unemployment, restarting our public services, not least our schools and health services, and building on the values of community and co-operation which have been a feature of the people's response to this crisis.

In any properly functioning democracy, different levels of government have a fair distribution of power and a parity of esteem. That means joint working and greater co-determination between levels of central government. But it also means a new settlement for local government

Under devolution we have witnessed an era of centralisation at the expense of local democracy. We must reverse this centralisation. We need strong local government not weak local administration, with much more power for local autonomy and initiative: in social care and housing, in transport and local economic development, in building sustainable communities.

We must devolve power over Scottish affairs to the Scottish people. We want to re-establish the vision of a people's Parliament, using its powers for social and economic progress. Making full use of the Parliament's powers to tackle poverty and inequality, to spread democracy, and redistribute power and wealth, to plan the economy for the future well-being of the people and the planet, and to do this with the enduring values of co-operation and solidarity.

