Christine Bell: Thoughts of an 'Ordinary Mum' on Devo Max Versus Independence

Posted on September 16 2014

It's the morning. I've got the kids out the door, a cup of tea in my hand. Aahh, I've time to think. In fact, I also work full time as Professor of Constitutional Law, so sometimes thinking is part of my job. But this is personal. I have a vote to cast and my kids, and a lot of other people's futures, appears to lie on it. And the tea helps more than the constitutional law – we have been off all constitutional charts for some time now.

Should I reconsider how to vote now that a no vote is a vote for devo-max? It's a funny old one this. Devo-max seems a nice half-way house between independence and the status quo of remaining within the UK. The latest UK 'better together' offer has been made on that basis. There is of course a deep irony that the 'third option' which was not permitted to be on the ballot paper, now has eclipsed a straight 'no' that we understood was on the ballot paper. I hated the binary choice. I hate referendums. So does this persuade me away from the 'yes' I had slowly come to?

Let's leave aside questions of good faith for a minute, and let's also leave aside discrepancies in what the different parties are offering. There are several more profound difficulties with devo-max which make me hesitate.

What more power to devolve is difficult to resolve in any coherent work-able way. The lack of clarity from the three UK political parties on either their own or a combined devo-max package does not reflect a commitment of will, it reflects the fact that further splitting of power is actually quite difficult to do coherently. The 2012 Act does devolve more power, and leaves little room for further 'playing around the edges' with regard to power-splitting. With more power-splitting the whole devolution-UK settlement becomes a bit chaotic – this part of this tax, by this much percentage to go up not down, this piece of welfare maybe, if we can work the computer system out (and in Northern Ireland where welfare is devolved, evidently the computers say 'no' to doing anything differently from the UK). It looks difficult to work, and difficult to assess what will result. Sounds pretty complex for businesses who tell us that any complexity leads to price rises, and for governments who assure us they all are committed to social justice but seem unsure what the social justice implications of this jumbled tapestry of powers are.

The closer devo-max comes to independence, the more it raises all the same objections to independence. And that’s just the thing. Further trying to split up tax and welfare as far as I can see gives rise to all the same objections that better together Labour supporters and others are objecting to with regard to independence. These are: the risks of 'a race to the bottom', greater transaction costs for individuals moving between jurisdictions, different tax regimes for corporations creating costs they will 'pass on' to consumers. This is why Labour – the keenest proponent of devolution among the three parties - have produced the most limited proposals for more devolution on the table. Partial financial devolution of bits of tax and welfare, make for an incoherent UK-wide social vision on which their positive arguments for Union depend. So for those in Labour who are telling me that this is a way to preserve the social union (and my vote is vulnerable to anyone who can persuade me of greater social justice), well I don’t see it. Paradoxically, if you give away all the same powers you need to deliver the social-democratic vision of the UK as an entity, what good is the Union in delivering it?

More taxation and borrowing powers create an absolutely inevitable need to re-work the Barnett formula, and without devolution of control over natural resources. So tax rises and/or borrowing, will be the only way to pay for protecting public services against austerity. It is difficult to see how this is a great alternative to independence, although it may be difficult for nationalists to oppose anything that looks like more power. This is why Tories, paradoxically in contrast to Labour, have produced some of the most far-reaching new devolution powers on offer. More tax raising and borrowing powers in some limited formula neatly solves a few problems all at once: devolve taxation and let Scotland pay for all its wanton education and health through increased taxes if it wants to, or hammer it for rejecting 'more power' if it does not (and note the dressing of tax-raising powers in the false garb of strengthening the 'pocket-money' Parliament, a term that unfairly demeanes an effective institution, we do all pay the taxes to Westminster that it devolves back in 'pocket-money' after all). The pledge published to-day in the Daily Record (and pretty difficult to find anywhere else on the web) is very watered down compared to Gordon Brown's proposed 'three guarantees' which included a 'guarantee' to preserve the Barnett formula. The Barnett formula is not guaranteed in to-day's rather lacking-in-content pledge, just mentioned.

The proposals don't meet the aspirations for democratic renewal that is giving rise to 'yes' momentum. Devo-max is something I could have definitely gone for at an earlier stage, if credibly presented and debated. But at this point is feels like the answer to the wrong question. The momentum for yes is not, in my view, based on a negative desire for 'divorce' or 'amputation' from the UK body-corporate – 'better together' metaphors. Neither is it now just a movement for the 'economic levers of power', the SNP metaphor. It is a movement for democratic renewal. People have woken up to the fact that this vote matters and that each individual can make a difference. David Cameron nearly got it right when he talked about 'kicking the effing Tories' but crucially – not quite. This vote is now about kicking political elites into responding to those to whom they are accountable: the people. A bit of an enlightenment revival really. Quite simply, people don't just feel this vote matters, they feel that the SNP or any Scottish government post-independence will be forced to be accountable to them in a way that Westminster has ceased to be for many across the UK. The guardian tells us 'politics can’t be like this all of the time'. Sure, but we used to expect that it was a bit like this, some of the time, particularly on things that really matter to us. Now we have a chance that it will be.

Preserving the Union would require placing something invariable at its centre. A commitment to a Union based in social justice, it seems to me would involve less focus on more powers to Scotland, and more on veto rights from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland on matters of UK-wide constitutional principle. The UK has fundamental values written into its (unwritten) constitution, which are the only tangible glue that binds the Union as a union. These values are written into every devolution statute as reserved powers. The Union is held together by a common tax base, a common commitment to common welfare state, human rights protections to create a common platform of human decency across all regions, a common foreign and defence policy, and membership of international organisations and the legal framework of the EU, the UN and the European Convention on Human Rights which enshrine and reflect our values. This is the written constitutional foundation of the Union. Are these values untouchable – no of course not – we could change them. But surely in a devolved context we should only do so as a United Kingdom. At present – ironically – nearly all the parts of this Union 'glue' are under unprecedented attack by the current government. And the political consequences when they do are terrible. Let’s look around for a minute: forcing the...
developed areas to implement austerity in a Tory package is bringing down the power-sharing government in Northern Ireland with potential to devolved areas to implement austerity in a Tory package is bringing down the power-sharing government in Northern Ireland with potential to...
Against this, I must weigh Independence and the possibility of a new politics with democratic accountability and social justice at its heart. I don’t feel we cut loose from the island-wide or even the global social justice project by claiming it for Scotland: I feel we re-invent it for everyone. (Would Labour be talking social justice in these terms this close to a general election if not for this referendum, it seems a public language of the last two weeks?) If independence comes about that is our responsibility and our challenge.

I definitely feel more scared than I did: project fear has not been without effect. Independence could really happen: do we consign ourselves to investable doom destruction and devastation by taking this chance? But I have resisted accepting inevitable doom and destruction all my life in much worse circumstances. Anything good I have seen politically came from people believing that things could be different and working to make them so. On my own political journey taught by those in the most desperate of circumstances in war-torn countries, I have learnt that it is pessimism and not optimism that is falsely naïve: it tells us that things will never change for the better and that we are defeated before we begin. Pessimism retains its hold even when what it offers is unattractive because it claims to offer certainties where optimism is clear it can only offer chances. Taking chances is scary.

So, the kids are out at school, I’ve finished my tea, the Westminster train has come and gone. I’ve made up my mind. I’ll take my chances with this because it feels like the chance of a lifetime.

So, it’s still a yes from me then.

Christine Bell is Professor of Constitutional Law at the University of Edinburgh and Director of the Global Justice Academy

Actions: Comments (2)