

# Scottish devolution and the Labour Party: how a snowball started rolling

By Helle Linné Eriksen

A perilous journey. In addition to the anniversary of the Union, the year 2007 also marks the ten-year anniversary of the 1997 New Labour Government. The very first public Bill of this Government, introduced only a fortnight after the election victory, legislated for devolution referendums to be held in Scotland and Wales and resulted in the setting up of a Welsh Assembly and a Scottish Parliament within two years. Devolution had become a New Labour project, in spite of the fact that the policy had originated in the need to placate the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Scottish electorate a couple of decades earlier.



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In a way, the Labour Government only continued where it had left off, as it was the failed attempt at establishing devolved assemblies which triggered the fall of the Callaghan Government in the spring of 1979 following the long "Winter of Discontent". On 28 March the House of Commons passed a Motion of No Confidence in the Government. It was the first (and only) time since 1924 that a British government had lost such a motion. The result of the subsequent election is well known: Margaret Thatcher changed her address to 10 Downing Street, and it would be 18 years before the people of the United Kingdom again elected a Labour Party government.

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been the party of centralisation, and had successfully resisted any suggestions of devolving power to elected assemblies in the peripheries of the kingdom.

When a Royal Commission set down by Labour concluded in favour of some measure of devolution, and this coincided with a strong support for the SNP in the February 1974 general election, however, a change of policy took place within weeks. The lack of a lengthy debate at all levels of the party resulted in a high degree of dissent within Labour, weakening the devolution Bills on their journey through Parliament. When a Scotland Act was presented in 1979 it did not convince the electorate, and was thus rejected in a referendum on 1 March. Anti-devolutionists within Labour had fought their own campaign, making it easier for Labour voters to oppose the Scotland Act without feeling that they betrayed their party. The break-up of the United Kingdom was frequently projected by the anti-devolutionists, and it was feared that an Assembly or Parliament in Edinburgh would provide the SNP with a platform to promote its policies of separation, and to gain increased support for the party.

By 1997, opposition to devolution had all but disappeared within the Labour Party, and favouring such constitutional reform was now perceived to be consistent with the new ideology of the party. Devolution to Scotland and Wales was seen by New Labour as a way of keeping a diverse kingdom united, by giving the regions or nations a measure of self-government

instead of regarding their individual national identities as threats. Still, the few anti-devolutionists left in Labour were not convinced, and named as one of their main fears that devolution would serve as a stepping-stone to full independence for Scotland. What will eventually be the result remains to be seen, eight years after a Scottish Parliament was established, but it is worth noting that, in late November 2006, the Sunday Telegraph could present an ICM opinion poll which showed a clear majority in favour of full independence for Scotland. It was supported by 52 per cent of Scottish voters, and perhaps more surprisingly, by 59 per cent of English voters. The latter figure points to a growing English nationalism, a tendency also found in another part of the poll, which revealed 68 per cent in favour of a separate English parliament.

The ICM poll also revealed that support for the SNP stood at 34 per cent in Scotland, which put them five points ahead of Labour. When support for the SNP climbed to similar heights in 1974, Labour's desperate reaction was to

propose devolution, in spite of the major break with party policy this entailed. What will be the answer this time, at the Scottish Parliamentary elections draw closer? And will the anniversary year of 2007 be the year Scotland chooses an SNP representative as the leader of the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood?

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## Union and devolution - a bibliography

**Literary platform.** There exists a plethora of good and informative literature on both the Union of 1707 and on issues related to the government of Scotland, or to Home Rule and Devolution. This list is by no means meant to be exhaustive, but presents some of the more recent works to be published on these topics, useful for those who might wish to study them more in depth.

### Union:

- Christopher A. Whatley (2006): *The Scots and the Union*.
- Michael Fry (2006): *The Union: England, Scotland and the Treaty of 1707*.
- Paul Henderson Scott (2006): *The Union of 1707: Why and How*.
- Christopher A. Whatley (1994): *Bought and Sold for English Gold? Explaining the Union of 1707*.

### Devolution:

- Vernon Bogdanor (2001): *Devolution in the United Kingdom*.
- H.T. Dickinson, and Michael Lynch, eds. (2000): *The Challenge to Westminster: Sovereignty, Devolution and Independence*.
- Alan Trench, ed. (2005): *The Dynamics of Devolution: the State of the Nations 2005*. [latest book in the State of the Nation-series, an annual publication addressing the developments of the devolution project since 1997].