

British devolution and Blair's political *post scriptum*

By Richard Wyn Jones

Contestation. What will the price be of Tony Blair's vanity? In this particular case, it is possible to express the value of vanity in rather precise terms: in order to satisfy the prime minister's desire to see out ten years in office, both Blair and his party seem to have accepted that a referendum on Scottish independence is a price worth paying.



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To serve as prime minister for ten years is an achievement whose meaning is wholly symbolic. There will be no reward for Blair for staying in power until that milestone is reached on 1 May 2007 beyond having his ego burnished and achievements intoned by a diminishing band of admirers. Certainly, there are no benefits accruing to either party or government from the celebration of this anniversary. On the contrary, to delay the handover is simply to delay the much-needed attempt to reinvigorate a tired government and governing party. Continuing delay also deprives Labour of the short-term boost in popularity that would accompany a change in leadership, and this at a time when such a boost is sorely needed. Three difficult elections are looming on the political horizon: for Scottish and Welsh devolved legislatures as well as English local government, all on the 3 May. Yet despite the fact that all this is widely known and accepted in the Labour party, the party is content to allow Mr Blair to celebrate a decade in 10 Downing Street before being sent out to pasture, or, at least, the golden troughs of the international statesman circuit.

An agreement to allow Blair to serve out a decade as prime minister was the result of Labour's near implosion in the summer of 2006, when both Blairites and Brownites pulled back from the brink. Essential to the compromise was that Blair would be allowed to sit until May before the much-vaunted "orderly transition". After all, what difference would another year or so make in the great scheme of things?

Among Labour's electoral challenges, forget the English local government elections. By now setbacks for the governing party at mid-term local elections have become part of the natural order of things in British politics. And although it pains me to say this, forget also the Welsh elections. Wales has long been regarded in government circles as Scotland's "smaller and uglier sister". Here, the costs of miscalculation are relatively lower: while support for devolution has increased rapidly in Wales since the wafer-thin referendum majority in 1997, the debate is about when real legislative devolution should be introduced rather than about establishing a separate state.

No, the real action is north of the border and the real story is the surge in support for the Scottish National Party (SNP).

While the results of individual opinion polls differ, the pattern is relatively clear: Labour is struggling in Scotland while Alex Salmond's SNP are buoyant. The SNP is a long way behind Labour following the 2003 election, while the electoral system also favours Labour. Nevertheless, on current trends there is every prospect of the Nationalists ending up as the largest party in Scotland next May. Should this occur, there is no realistic prospect of a governing coalition without SNP involvement; and there will be no SNP involvement in government without agreement on an independence referendum. More than this, it's not just the poll numbers that favour the Nationalists. Rather, even the most casual observer of the Scottish political scene must be impressed that the broader momentum of debate is with the Nationalists. Unionists, by contrast, are on the defensive with many proponents of the Unionist cause sounding increasingly shrill and uncomfortable.

We've been here before, of course. Seasoned Labour campaigners remind us that previous nationalist tides have ebbed away with remarkable rapidity. Just wait, we are told, for the real campaigning to begin. When faced with the prospect of separation, the Scottish electorate will balk. Even seasoned nationalists are fearful of the disappointment that awaits them should they raise their hopes too high and it is certainly true that the SNP has wilted before in the face of a sustained unionist onslaught. But will this inevitably be the case again before May? There are at least three reasons for thinking that this may not be the case.

The first is the very fact of devolution itself. Constitutional change of such magnitude has profound effects on political culture, and this has certainly been the case in Scotland. Devolution has impacted on every aspect of political life from party organisation to political rhetoric. This is part of the reason that those Labour UK "cabinet heavyweights" who lined up to "bash the Nats" at the recent Scottish Labour conference in Oban appeared so heavy-handed and out of touch. The fact of the matter is that, since devolution, they are out of touch. Their rhetoric and arguments for the union are relics of the pre-devolution era: an era that may have formed them but which has now passed.

A second new development is the sheer contempt in which Labour is now held among large swathes of its traditional supporters. Most graphically demonstrated at the recent

Westminster and Assembly by-elections in the Welsh constituency of Blaenau Gwent, where lavishly supported Labour campaigns were trounced by ramshackle and barely solvent independent campaigns, leaving the party's credibility in tatters. As a result, the pronouncements of leading figures carry much less weight than in the past. So, for example, did anyone at all believe Dr John Reid's warning that independence would make Scotland more vulnerable to terrorist attack?

Finally, it appears that by whatever as yet dimly understood process, the union has become a loveless marriage. Determinations as to whether or not to divorce appear now almost entirely pragmatic in character. That is certainly the case in Scotland where the future of the union is subject to the kind of cost-benefit calculation that has underpinned the country's financial services industry. In England, the prevailing attitude is best characterised by the catchphrase of today's somnolent youth - "whatever." Nobody seems to care. It seems,

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in fact, that the only people capable of being stirred to a passionate defence of the union are those who benefit most obviously from its continuation, namely London-based Scottish Labour politicians: hardly the most persuasive of advocates.

With only a few short months before the Scottish elections, it appears that one of the few developments that might make a

difference to the outcome is the resignation of Tony Blair and his replacement by a Gordon Brown government. This is not because of some particular bond between Mr Brown and the Scottish electorate - the Chancellor is a divisive figure in his homeland. Rather, any boost would depend on Brown's ability to inject new dynamism and hope into the Labour body politic. No chance of that, say sceptics, pointing to the undeniable fact that Brown has been implicated in every aspect of the New Labour story-so-far.

Others will warn of the dangers of underestimating a man who has almost certainly been planning his first hundred days as prime minister since the morning after that dinner at the Granita restaurant. But in truth, it is almost certain that we will never find out one way or the other what difference a Brown premiership would have made to the result of the Scottish election. Blair will be allowed to celebrate his tenth anniversary as prime minister, and if the price to be paid for that is a vote on Scottish independence, then so be it. But make no mistake, whatever its result, such a referendum would permanently alter the nature of the United Kingdom state.