**Labour the Party of Scottish Home Rule**

**Katy Clark MSP**

**Scotland’s political debate has been completely dominated by the constitution since 2014. Every election since the independence referendum has been used by the SNP as a “de-facto” vote in support of independence.**

No matter how incompetent the Scottish Government are, how many scandals dominate the media, whatever the issue of the day may be, or which concerns the polls say are important, the main determining factor in how people vote at election time has been and continues to be their view on the constitution.
All the polls suggest, and most people believe, that a Labour Government will be elected at a UK level whenever the next General election takes place. Of course, nothing can be taken for granted. But it will take a seismic shift to reverse the Tories current dismal fortunes. People want change. After more than a decade of austerity, there is no doubt a Labour Government, of any complexion, will start to deliver real change to improve the lives of the people in Scotland, and across the UK. This will also inevitably transform the political dialogue in Scotland.

Gordon Brown’s Report *A New Britain* has much in it which should be warmly welcomed. Some of the ideas of the Red Paper Collective were included, and suggestions from the Scottish Parliamentary Labour Party, the Holyrood group of Labour MSPs.

The Report says much to help develop the debate in England in particular. It rightly criticises the over-centralisation of power in Westminster and Whitehall; the failure by the British state to drive investment, economic success and well-paid employment; and highlights the increasing lack of trust in political leaders. The belief that Westminster democracy wasn’t working was one of the main drivers for support for independence during the 2014 campaign, with many who converted to the “Yes” cause citing the view that there was greater possibility of delivering social justice in Scotland as their reason for supporting separation.

The Report commits to increasing the borrowing powers for the Scottish Parliament but does not include all the tax raising powers that some of us have been arguing for, or for example, proposals on immigration, employment rights and the development of drugs policy. The former Prime Minister was of course one of the most prominent voices in the final days of the 2014 referendum campaign. The “vow” and his description of a relationship of “equals” between the nations of the UK, is often given as a reason by many SNP politicians for their failure to gain more support in the referendum. Many blame him for the outcome rather than the Scottish Government’s inability to provide answers on key economic issues.

Some involved in the 2014 pro-independence campaign never really accepted the outcome of that vote; and will often argue that if there were to be another referendum it is inevitable that their position would win. Many had similar levels of confidence and optimism prior to the 2014 referendum. The country is polarised and it’s highly unlikely in the immediate future there would be a significant win by either side in any binary vote. A close vote is not in the interest of either side of this debate. Given the passions, a narrow win is unlikely to resolve the current stalemate or be accepted by both sides. A close vote for independence may not be accepted by the anti-independence camp who would likely shout “best out of three”.  And a narrow defeat for independence is unlikely to settle the issue for many who support the “indy” cause.

Whatever the Parliamentary arithmetic, if and when Labour wins at the next General Election, and irrespective of whether UK Labour has to rely on the votes of SNP MPs in key votes, a newly elected Labour Government has to address these issues. We can’t carry on like this. It’s corrosive to politics. It divides working class communities and it’s a barrier to building movements that have the capacity to transform society.

The Commission proposals are a good starting point and place the situation in the context of wider constitutional debate. ﻿Central to Gordon Brown’s work is the abolition of the House of Lords - replaced by a democratically elected second chamber, a Senate of the Nations and the Regions. While getting rid of the Lords is a priority, it will be complicated and could easily take a whole Parliamentary session, as many Peers will fight to defend the institution. Linking what is needed for Scotland so heavily to reform of the House of Lord is risky and could prevent there being early legislation by a new Government on Scotland. It’s unlikely there will be symmetrical devolution across the UK and so there is no need to wait for the rest of a constitutional package. It would be a disaster if constitutional wrangling over Lords abolition, and the shape and rules of a new Senate, or indeed over devolution in other parts of the UK, delayed progress in Scotland.

Scotland, and Wales, are always likely to have substantially greater powers than in the regions. There will have to be much greater detail around the proposals for a new revising chamber. For example, I would argue for a Scottish block with “constitutional locks” to enable resolution where there are disputes on legislation with the rest of the UK; and that the second chamber needs to be more than an additional body of heavily whipped politicians. It must require that those scrutinising and revising legislation to put the interests of the people first.  We should take the strengths of the Lords and incorporate them into the new Senate. Enabling representatives in a second chamber to vote with their conscience to amend and revise proposals from the Commons will significantly improve the quality of legislation.

We need to find a pathway through the constitutional quagmire in Scotland to find a settlement that the vast majority of the population can accept and live with. This will probably involve an element of compromise on all sides. It means recognising Scotland’s right to self-determination in the structures of the UK, addressing the legitimate democratic deficits which will always exist given the differing population sizes of the nations of the UK. For Scotland, this must mean further tax and fiscal powers and creating binding constitutional mechanisms to deal with conflicts between the Parliaments.

The demand for a Scottish Parliament gained momentum during the period of Tory governments 1979 until 1997. It was given powers to help protect people in Scotland from any future right wing Tory governments. However, the Parliament has often been too timid in using these powers. It could impose land taxes, devolve local taxes to councils or introduce radical land reform. The Scottish Government is unwilling to take control of strategic industrial assets such as ports, harbours and coastal land, but happily awards contracts to companies like Amazon and Ernst and Young to outsource and design services.

I know there will be those who think the election of a Labour government as meaning constitutional change is no longer needed. Maybe more in Scotland would think that if a new government were delivering radical and redistributive policies. There is also a view that the Supreme Court decision In November last year has put an end to the issue of another referendum. However, the real problem that those who want a referendum face is there isn’t a clear majority support for independence amongst the Scottish people.

Labour was created as a party of Scottish Home Rule and has a proud history of fighting Scotland’s corner. Successive governments attempted to give Scotland attractive financial packages. But the destruction of Scotland’s industrial base, particularly in the Thatcher years, and the failure by both the Scottish and UK Governments to turn round Scotland’s economy have left Scotland with massive challenges such as poor productivity, the highest drugs deaths in Europe and significant poverty and inequality.

It was Scottish Labour who fought for devolution campaigning for and delivering a Scottish Parliament with wide ranging powers. It argued that decades of Tory rule that Scotland hadn’t voted for wasn’t democratic and that a Scottish Parliament could provide protection from any future Tory government.

In many ways that Parliament hasn’t lived up to the expectations of its founders. People thought it would be a working class parliament and that it would involve a new type of open politics. It may not have been everything that was hoped for but it has become central to the politics of Scotland.

We in Scotland now have the challenge to do more and to deliver as big a change as took place when the Parliament was created.

*Katy Clark. Scottish Labour. MSP for West Scotland*