

Labour and Scotland

THE Scottish Labour Party has been thrown into a state of chaos by the new Blairite line on the creation of a Scottish Assembly.

Throughout the twentieth century the labour movement in Scotland has generally advocated some form or other of Scottish self-government, albeit with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

In the immediate aftermath of the First World War (supposedly a war fought for the "rights of small nations") for example, the labour movement campaigned vigorously for the "small nation of Scotland" to have its own parliament.

Within a decade, however, it had become a virtually forgotten demand. Economic planning at a national level, rather than the devolution of economic powers, was seen as the solution to Scotland's economic problems.

Similar ebbs and flows in the level of support for a Scottish parliament followed in subsequent decades. But since the Tories came to power in 1979 there has been a fundamental change in the situation.

At UK level the Tories have won all the General Elections since 1979. In Scotland, however, the Tories have won only a minority of seats, and a steadily dwindling minority at that. Support for the Tories in Scotland is currently around the 12% mark.

The imposition of Tory legislation and public spending cuts on a Scotland which repeatedly rejected Tory policies at the ballot box created the problem of the "democratic deficit". The majority of Scots voted anti-Tory, only to find themselves the victims of Tory policies.

The Scottish Assembly was the solution to this "democratic deficit". Scotland would be governed, within the framework of the UK, by a parliament of its own, one which implemented the wishes of the majority of the Scottish electorate rather than the policies of the majority party at Westminster.

Rather less good motives have also given impetus to the demand for a Scottish Assembly.

For the Scottish Labour Party leadership, calling on the next Labour government to create a Scottish Assembly was essentially a cop out.

Rather than fight the Tories in the here and now, they advocated passivity. A future Scottish Assembly, not class struggle, would put the world (or Scot-

land at least) to rights.

For others in the labour movement, calling for a Scottish Assembly flowed out of an accommodation to Scottish nationalism, or meshed in with their own careerist designs — unable to get selected for Westminster, they saw a seat in the Assembly as the next best thing.

Out of this mixture of often conflicting motives, the creation of a Scottish Assembly had become by the end of the 1980s a touchstone of mainstream Scottish politics. It had become the centrepiece of the Scottish Labour Party's political programme.

Once Blair took control of the Party, it quickly became the Scottish Labour Party's "only piece". As Blair ditched one policy after another, remorselessly driving the Party to the right, the Scottish Labour Party's promise of an Assembly became virtually its own vote winner.

Moreover, insofar as the Scottish Labour Party had anything left by way of even a semi-coherent set of economic and social policies, the vehicle for their implementation was to be a Scottish Assembly.

Now all this has effectively been tossed aside by Blair.

The Scottish Labour Party was committed to the creation of an Assembly without a referendum — the mandate gained at a General Election would suffice — and the Assembly would have the powers to vary national rates of income tax by plus or minus 3p in the pound.

Blair and his hangers-on have now decided that the creation of an Assembly and its possible tax-raising powers will be the subject of separate questions in a referendum.

This has made a laughing stock of the Scottish Labour Party. It promised an Assembly so that Scottish people could run their own affairs. But now the Scottish Labour Party looks like a tame poodle of the national leader in London.

The centrality of a Scottish Assembly to the Scottish Labour Party's policies, combined with the autocratic London-based re-writing of party policy on the issue, accounts for the fury which greeted the new Blairite line.

Blair managed to win a majority on the Scottish Executive for his new line. But the shock waves continue.

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