

## The Prime Minister has no Scottish strategy and is at the mercy of events

**Alan Convery** argues that the Tories have failed to outline a vision for Scotland's place within the United Kingdom and thus Conservative policy on Scotland is constantly subject to ad hoc adjustments. If they want to get on the front foot, Conservatives need to think about what type of devolution they want Scotland to have.



Where does the Conservative Party see Scotland in 10 years? The fact that it has no answer beyond 'not independent' means that it is constantly reacting to events, rather than setting the agenda. In contrast with its ideas about localism and elected mayors in England, the Conservative Party has thus far failed to think strategically about how devolution could be reformed in a manner which suits its electoral and political interests.

The Conservatives played a full part in the [Calman Commission](#) on Scottish devolution which recommended further powers for the Scottish Parliament. Distancing themselves from the report's conclusions could have reinforced the impression that the Conservatives were anti-Scottish.

However, support for the Calman proposals and the subsequent Scotland Bill has not translated into a coherent Conservative approach to the challenge of devolution. In the event it did not do much to improve the Conservatives' image in Scotland; nor did it demonstrate a set of principles which the Conservatives were applying to Scotland in order to further their interests and keep the United Kingdom together. It was an obvious and easy way to fill a gap in political thinking: granting relatively painless concessions from the centre but finding the strategy inadequate when it is overtaken by events.

The Prime Minister thus found himself in a position of championing a Bill which received lukewarm support from all quarters: the SNP saw it as a first step; unionist-minded Conservatives in Scotland disliked the transfer of powers but saw it as the price of looking 'pro-Scottish'; and more radical voices on the centre-right in Scotland (and England) thought the fiscal powers did not go far enough to deal with English resentment or Scottish dependency.

The measures in the Scotland Bill were swiftly overtaken by the election of an SNP majority government in 2011. This called into question the Conservatives' entire strategy towards Scotland and guaranteed a referendum on independence. The Prime Minister's response has predictably been to make speeches defending the Union. What he has not chosen to do is outline a vision for Scotland's place within the United Kingdom. This means that policy tends to be rewritten every time the Prime Minister visits.

The most egregious example of this occurred in February 2012 and captures many of the political dangers of Cameron's approach. In a [speech](#) to business leaders in Edinburgh the Prime Minister said that 'when the referendum is over, I am open to looking at how the devolution settlement can be improved further. And, yes, this does mean considering what further powers could be devolved'. This was interpreted in Scotland as a new position for the Conservative Party.

It also appeared not to have been cleared with Ruth Davidson, the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, who promised during her election campaign that the Scotland Bill was a 'line in the sand' in terms of further powers. The remark also prompted unflattering comparisons with similar comments by Sir Alec Douglas-Home ahead of the 1979 devolution referendum. He also promised that a negative referendum result would not take devolution off the agenda.

It immediately begged questions about what exactly the Prime Minister was proposing. Would he be outlining these new powers? Was this approach agreed with the Scottish party? Would these powers fall short of full fiscal autonomy? It appeared that the Prime Minister himself did not know. Nor, it appears,

had he been advised about the consequences of outlining a significant change in policy on Scotland without preparing the ground or thinking about the implications. Conservative policy on Scotland is thus constantly subject to ad hoc adjustments, to burnish the main argument of a speech or to help with appearing relaxed about Scottish aspirations. It does not emerge out of a strategy to make the Scottish sense of nationhood work for Conservative interests.

If they want to get on the front foot in terms of the Scottish Question, the Conservatives need to think about what type of devolution they want Scotland to have. It is not difficult to see how the Conservative Party could fruitfully engage with ideas about [Devo Plus](#), [federalism](#) and furthering localism by acknowledging the territorial dimension.

This would, however, require a deeper commitment to constitutional thinking that the Prime Minister has yet displayed. Having just embarked upon a battle over House of Lords reform, Mr Cameron could perhaps be forgiven for not wanting to open up a second front about devolution. Nevertheless maintaining a studied ambiguity about a post-referendum Scotland is a high-risk strategy for maintaining the Union.

**This is fourth in a series of posts by contributors to the recent ‘Conservatives in Coalition Government’ conference organised by the [Political Studies Association Specialist Group for the study of Conservatives and Conservatism](#) and the [Centre for British Politics at the University of Hull](#). The views expressed are those of the author alone and not those of the Political Studies Association or the University of Hull.**

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