

More devolution would benefit and improve the whole of the United Kingdom

By Democratic Audit

Later this year, Scotland will vote on whether to become independent. But while the debate about the country's future has necessarily been between the maintaining the current union as is, or full independence, what most Scots want more than either is greater and better devolution. Here, Guy Lodge and Alan Trench argue that welfare should be devolved as the next stage of a journey towards a deeper and better devolution settlement.

With just six months to go until the referendum on Scotland's constitutional future the unionist parties are finally beginning to get their act together in respect of offering a model of enhanced devolution that provides a clear alternative to independence. The Scottish Liberal Democrats under Sir Ming Campbell have resurrected the old Liberal demand for Home Rule while the Scottish Conservatives were dropping strong hints at their spring conference last weekend that they support giving the Scottish Parliament beefed up taxation powers. Today all eyes will be on Scottish Labour – the largest unionist party in Scotland – as it unveils the final report of its Devolution Commission.

Devolution is popular and voters in the devolved nations want more of it. The question is how do you strengthen the powers of the devolved institutions in a way which both meets the aspirations of Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish voters and which preserves the integrity of the United Kingdom. Answering this has been at the heart of IPPR's [Devo More](#) programme, launched last year. In essence the debate about further devolution relates to the extent to which there is a case for giving the devolved institutions more clout over taxation and social security, the two major areas of domestic policy, which remain reserved matters for the UK government.

We examined the scope for tax devolution in our [report](#) [Funding Devo More: Fiscal options for strengthening the union](#). In our latest [publication](#) we consider the case for welfare devolution.

Why propose devolving welfare? One reason could be tactical. It's clear people in Scotland want more powers devolved, so offering more control over welfare might help to head off a Yes vote. A much better reason for this course, however, is that it would improve social and economic outcomes in Scotland. A measure of welfare devolution is not only consistent with preserving the UK's social union, it can help strengthen public attachment to it.

Many aspects of welfare – and the big risks associated with them – are best managed across the whole of the UK, and Scotland has some distinct problems which reinforce that. A social union means that unemployment benefits, disability payments and pensions should be provided by the UK Government on the same basis across the whole of the UK.

Scotland's demographic problems, in particular its ageing population, mean this works to Scotland's advantage in both the short and long terms. But preserving the key elements of the social union is not the same as the status quo.

Welfare is not an all-or-nothing affair; many things which affect welfare are already devolved, and a well thought through extension of devolved powers will serve to make better policy.

There are strong arguments for a substantial measure of welfare devolution. In framing our ideas, our guiding principle is "powers for a purpose". So we propose devolving housing benefit, which has a close interaction with social housing. Devolving it will help improve housing policy and ensure more people live in good housing, whether that is publicly or privately owned.

The Work Programme tries to find jobs for those who have been unemployed for a long time or who have serious health problems. Devolving administration of that will enable public services to be joined up, to help more people

find work and improve their lives.

The Scottish Government already has most of the levers it needs to improve childcare and provision for children in early years; what is needed is more tax devolution, so it can reap the fiscal benefits of greater social investment. And beyond that, devolved governments should be free to supplement UK levels of welfare when they think that would be the best approach – for instance they might choose to boost in-work benefits to incentivise the return to work of particular groups, or perhaps increase child benefit to help with the costs of raising children.

The important thing is to get devolution right; to produce a model for a devolved UK that commands broad public support. Forcing voters to choose between two options – independence and the status quo – which are not really what they want, is not the right way to approach such a constitutional debate – nor is thinking that handing more powers to Scotland amounts to giving the SNP a “consolation prize”.

Better devolution will not just get on the right side of public opinion. It will make devolution work better; less point-scoring and blame-shifting, and better, more joined-up policy making. It's about improving government not just in Scotland, but across the UK as a whole.

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