

If implemented in full, the Smith Commission report will provide Scotland with a welcome range of new powers

By Democratic Audit UK

*The Smith Commission which looked at future options for the governance of Scotland in the post referendum landscape. **Norman Bonney** assesses the document, looking at its proposals on local governance, Air Passenger Duty, the continuing UK framework, and the new respective roles of the Scottish Parliament and Government, concluding that the range of powers offered are welcome and appropriate.*



(Credit: [Strevo](#), CC BY ND 2.0)

Crossed wires and divergent perspectives between London based and Scottish based Labour elected politicians and senior party officials have been a persistent feature of Labour and devolution politics in recent decades. In 1973/4 UK Labour leader Harold Wilson had to insist, over dissident Labour Scots, that the establishment of a Scottish Assembly should be a manifesto priority. The establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 by the Blair Labour government was surrounded by considerable tensions between the two centres of power as indicated in Alistair Campbell's and Lance Price's spin doctor memoirs.

The latest manifestations of these perpetual tensions have been the resignation of the Leader of the Labour Party in the Scottish Parliament, Johann Lamont, stating she felt that the Scottish party was treated like a 'branch office' and the conflicting perspectives of senior Westminster based politicians like Alistair Darling and Gordon Brown over support by the leading candidate in the elections for a successor, Jim Murphy MP, that all of Scottish income tax revenues should be assigned to the Scottish Parliament. That neither of the two more senior MPs are likely to stand for re-election to Westminster in May 2015 is perhaps an indication of their fears that the concession of control over income tax banding and rates, with the exception of the initial threshold of eligibility to pay the tax, to the Scottish Parliament, endangers the position of a potential future Labour government to control the Westminster Parliament.

The internal party tensions of the Labour Party between Westminster and Holyrood find parallels in the machinery of government and the Smith Commission recommends closer working between the two arms of UK Government – which will be all the more needed given the complexity of the proposed recommendations of the Commission that will require much more detailed collaboration before they can be properly legislated for, and implemented.

There will be many a slip between cup and lip.

Local governance and public understanding

The enduring shibboleth that there should be more devolution of power to local communities receives a further iteration in the Commission's report but there is little evidence that local authorities or the Scottish Parliament have any disposition to relax their existing strong powers over local communities. Neighbourhood community councils have been potential sources of local initiative and governance since 1973 legislation but they are always starved of resources and influence as local councillors are reluctant to concede them any power .

The Commission rightly encourages efforts at promoting greater understanding by the parliamentary authorities of the current and future governance arrangements of Scotland. This is clearly needed. Participants in the debate over enhanced devolution powers keep asserting what the Scottish people want but research by [What Scotland thinks](#) demonstrates that over half the Scottish population do not understand the distinction between the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government.

The Scottish public's lack of understanding of the process of governance provides fertile ground for numerous interest groups with paid professional staffs to attempt to influence the governance of Scotland and the work of the Smith Commission itself in the name of the people and purportedly special 'civic Scotland'. And such groups have been especially active attempting to influence the Commission's work.

Air passenger duty – a 'beggar my neighbour' scenario

The devolution of air passenger duty to the Scottish Government and Parliament could well open a 'beggar my neighbour' set of policy conflicts north and south of the border. If Scotland reduces or removes the tax Newcastle and other northern English airports could call 'foul' and seek similar concessions. Indeed it might be a good idea for regional decentralisation and development in England for Manchester, Birmingham and Newcastle airports to seek analogous changes while retaining the duty at the major London area airports.

The continuing UK framework

The continuing responsibility of the UK government and parliament for major functions such as the state old age pension and equality laws is to be welcomed – although the role of Church of England bishops in making laws in reserved matters for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales needs consideration.

The suggestion in the report that the BBC should report to the Scottish Parliament is quite reprehensible. There were attempts in the referendum campaign by the 'Yes' team to intimidate the independent reporting by the BBC. Broadcasting is a UK responsibility and the BBC should not be accountable to the Scottish Parliament. The proper forum of accountability is in Westminster and Whitehall where Scottish MPs will continue to play their important UK roles.

The enhanced responsibilities of the Scottish Parliament and Government

The need of the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament now to raise the revenues that it spends is a welcome addition to their powers. For a decade from 2009 they enjoyed expanding revenues without the responsibility for raising them. In more recent years they have had to curb expenditure while still being more generously funded for the functions served than was the case south of the border. Now they will have to make difficult decisions about how to raise a much higher proportion of the required revenues from the voters of Scotland. This can only be for the good.

—

Note: this post is a lengthened version of Norman's contribution to our 'Ask the Experts' series on the publication of the Smith Commission. It represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

—

Norman Bonney was a lecturer and researcher at Aberdeen University and, The Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen. He was head of psychology and sociology at Edinburgh Napier University, where he is currently Emeritus Professor. His 'Monarchy, religion and the state; civil religion in the UK, Canada, Australia and the Commonwealth' was published by Manchester University Press in October 2013. Further details can be found [here](#). *His recent publications are listed [here](#).*

