

THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT AND SOCIAL POLICY

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The ability to take distinctive action on social policy has been one of the main justifications for a Scottish Assembly or Parliament. From one angle, the thought of the legislature and government as a powerhouse for a distinctively Scottish attempt to improve social conditions (especially bad physical conditions) has been a motivating force for devolution. Stated this way, the somewhat dated nature of such an approach in an era of small government, low taxation, and private and personal initiative is evident; but it remains a major area of potential creativity for a Scottish policy-making process. From another angle, social policy is the major part of what is left when the putatively non-devolvable areas - foreign policy, external economic relations and the major instruments of domestic economic management - are removed from the equation. Experience has shown that an important area lies between the categories, like a debatable land on the Scotland-England border, consisting of public expenditure policy, public sector management, the relation of the state and the individual, and policy areas with a major, sometimes predominant, European Union aspect. With implementation apparently set fair after Labour's election victory, this article assesses these considerations and asks: what could a Scottish Parliament actually do in the social policy sphere? Is the definition of a devolved Parliament's competence robust? And would the scope for action in an independent Scottish state be markedly greater in these areas?

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THE PROCESS OF IMPLEMENTING A SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

The success of devolution is likely to be related very intimately to the context in which it takes place. Graham Leicester's report for the Constitution Unit in 1996 highlights the inadequacies of the unsuccessful proposals of the 1970s and the matters which need to be worked out this time; it also makes the point that the slightly bolder approach of the 1978 Scotland Act as opposed to the 1976 Scotland and Wales Bill did aid its implementation and argues that 'the stronger and more principled the settlement proposed, the easier it will be to defend in Parliament' (Constitution Unit 1996, p.31). We have a fascinating framework of comparison between the 1970s and 1990s which include some factors favourable, and others unfavourable, to a successful devolution of social policy.

FAVOURABLE FACTORS

The overwhelming positive factor is the scale of the Labour victory of 1 May 1997. Labour brings a stable policy based upon the Scottish Constitutional Convention's inclusive approach to devolution. The pre-legislation referendum protects the process from the most extreme forms of parliamentary obstruction. Should it pass, the traumatised Conservatives will find it difficult to carry through objections of detail on social policy or to plead in either Commons or Lords for the reservation to Westminster of minor points of social policy.

All the opposition parties have something to look forward to in a Scottish Parliament. The Liberal Democrats could realistically look forward to being part of the government, since under the voting system proposed Labour would need a vote in the high 40%*s* to win an outright majority (the system being non-proportional only in that the number of direct constituency mandates would be allowed to exceed the proportional entitlement). The SNP could expect, on opinion poll evidence, a higher vote than they get for Westminster elections and would be free to promote their detailed agenda for social policy as set out in their 1997 election manifesto (which is worth a look as an 'old Labour' statement - higher child benefit; a 'cold climate allowance'; 700 more teachers; a return to student grants; 20,000 council houses in four years). The Conservatives could emerge as a Scottish bourgeois pro-business party, free to develop social policies not derived from English models. The Green Party might aspire to parliamentary representation.

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A further strongly positive element is that the 1997 policy is firmly 'made in Scotland' and guided by Donald Dewar as Secretary of State for Scotland. Even before the election, the Scottish Office was staffing up to take the legislation through, plan for the needs of the new parliament and transform itself into the Government of Scotland. In 1974, by contrast, the devolution policy was 'Made in Whitehall', by the Cabinet Office Constitution Unit (admittedly steered by John Smith for most of the time); the Scottish Office's team under Jim Ross was an internal pressure group pressing against the reservations of English departments and knowing that the plans provided for a continuing Scottish Office in fields like agriculture and economic policy.

Beyond the Scottish Office, Scottish Labour MPs are in important positions - crucially and unprecedentedly providing the Treasury Cabinet ministers (Chancellor Gordon Brown and Chief Secretary Alistair Darling, both with clear pro-devolution credentials). This is no guarantee that questions about the 'excess' of public expenditure (see below) will not be raised. But it lessens the likelihood that financial arrangements will be a major sticking-point in the early years of the Parliament or that ministers will buy into the more aggressive Treasury responses to Scottish expenditure exhibited in recent years.

UNFAVOURABLE FACTORS

Factors less conducive to a successful Parliament relate to the decline of 'devolution' as a theme in the design of British government. From the 1960s there was great interest in the regional level of government, and suggestions that there should be a uniform structures of assemblies covering Scotland, Wales and the English regions (especially in the Crowther-Hunt/Peacock minority report to the Kilbrandon commission on the constitution of 1973). At the time there seemed to be a genuinely regional tier of policy options, because of the structure of public corporations and the health service; the talk was of bringing appointed regional authorities (health, water, electricity) under democratic control and adding others like further education and the police. Scotland would have fitted comfortably into this structure and be accorded additional powers because of its separate legal and educational system.

Today, such talk is obsolete. Nationalised industries have been privatised, and regulated at national level; the internal market in the health service has weakened the regional tier; and even firmer direct lines of control have been

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set in place between the centre and educational establishments. The motif of regional government as undesired and wasteful has gained currency in the Labour Party as well as the Conservative; Labour's manifesto policy seems designed to put locks on regional government in England (a referendum, the consent of local authorities) The individualisation of social policy, with its notion of direct consumer rights, is inimical to territorial policy-making.

This relates to the vastly changed context of social policy debate since the 1970s. There has been a complete modernisation of conceptions about social policy in response to concerns about economic competitiveness and the monopoly position of public sector producers. Competitive quasi-markets and external assessments of performance and quality are now normal parts of the policy environment. Greater differentiation in pay among public sector professionals, the erosion of promotion patterns and age-point pay scales, and cash limits on aggregate running costs have reduced the scope for a spending explosion. A vigorous approach to early retirement and non-filling of senior posts has broken up old hierarchies and introduced flatter management structures. It is very likely that the social policy agencies of the Scottish government will be typical modern organisations comparable to private sector bodies like banks and supermarkets which take their norms from a far wider stage than Scotland. The use of the Scottish Parliament as a powerhouse for state-led social policy development is correspondingly less likely.

This leaves Scottish devolution, as expressed by the Scottish Constitutional Convention report of 1995, as an assertion of the democratic right of the Scottish people, an à la carte nationalism that implicitly seeks to pick and choose between unionist and nationalist emphases in its political system. 'Home rule' in its own right has rather few friends; instead, the devolution project becomes a vehicle for political developments not yet realised on an all-Britain basis - a justiciable Bill of Rights, proportional representation, parity of male and female legislators, coalition governments. In this approach, devolution is less a search for policy development than an expression of political identity and as such an unstable settlement. We may speculate that a Scottish Parliament, once founded, would not have very clear policy directions available to it and that its main political action would be on the 'national question' - the merits of the Westminster connection as a source of money and advantage.

THE SOCIAL POLICY POWERS OF THE PARLIAMENT

The Convention's proposed powers are much more logical and satisfactory than those proposed by the Scotland Act 1978. There is a consensus that the legislation should specify reserved powers and leave the rest to the Scottish Parliament, rather than the mixture of reserved powers, devolved powers and rights in relation to specific previous legislation (e.g. 'The Weeds Act 1959 - included' (Schedule 10)) in the Scotland Act 1978. This is also no longer an attempt to preserve a vestigial Scottish Office for matters like student grants, industry and agriculture. The acquisition of higher education by the Scottish Office in 1991 completed its education powers, and the transfer of the Scottish activities of the Housing Corporation to Scottish Homes in 1989 united all aspects of public sector housing policy; these will simplify social policy devolution and, in the case of universities, add a major devolved area. The list of 40 reserved areas suggested by the unpublished Constitution Unit report (**The Scotsman** 9 May 1997) includes only 'social security' and possibly 'employment regulation' and 'discrimination issues' as ones touching on social policy.

At the heart of the definition of the Parliament's social policy powers is the distinction between non-devolved social security and devolved everything else. This is not inevitable. When national health insurance was started in 1912, there were separate commissioners for England, Scotland and Wales. Local authorities administered the Poor Law before 1948 and those in Scotland tended to be more lenient in benefit payments (an approach vestigially evident in the handling of discretionary needs payments before the Social Fund was introduced in 1988). The benefits system introduced in 1948 denied the importance of territory - no regional inflation indices to determine upratings, and only very limited acknowledgement of varying costs of housing, heating and transport. Recent organisational changes in the Benefits Agency have obscured even a cosmetic local identity for its Scottish operation.

Federal systems typically allow discretion in cash benefits, usually within a framework of cost-sharing and minimum national standards. Without any powers in this area it is difficult to pursue social strategies such as getting people from benefit into work or encouraging stable household patterns. Scottish Parliament powers over matters like higher education and housing might very quickly be constrained by lack of even modest powers on income maintenance. Compared with the 1978 Act, rent allowances and rebates have

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been lost as a part of devolved housing since they have been incorporated into Housing Benefit, a UK-wide social security benefit.

Over the years Scottish Office ministers have shown no enthusiasm for gaining control of social security. Despite its vast budget, the topic brings with it an unwelcome volume of correspondence and complaint. Pressures for regional differences can only be in an upwards direction, and any significant change is likely to be expensive. The United Kingdom has very little fiscal demarcation of social security from the general public finances (the National Insurance Fund covering only a minority of benefit expenditure), and the area has shown a capacity for unexpected rises in spending over recent years. Inclusion of social security in a Scottish budget, pre- or post-devolution, would swamp other spending areas and run the risk of pre-empting other programmes with unexpected cost increases. Northern Ireland's experience under Stormont was that complete parity with British social benefits had to be enforced even with formally separate administration as a condition of Westminster financing of the schemes. These reasons have proved decisive in making the Constitutional Convention and the Labour Party reluctant to make proposals for the Scottish Parliament to take social security, even though this deprives it of around 45% of its spending potential in social policy.

THE INTERFACE BETWEEN DEVOLVED AND NON-DEVOLVED SUBJECTS

If we have this sharp demarcation of devolved expenditure on goods and services but retained expenditure on cash benefits, there is particular interest in policies which cut across them. Such matters preoccupied the drafters of 1970s devolution policies. In the original Scotland and Wales Bill of 1976 there was a general power for Westminster to override Assembly actions on grounds of policy, and there were clauses about national pay policy, model rules for rent rebates and the limitation of public sector rent rises. The 1978 Act removed these and was much more wholehearted in its devolutionary intentions than it is usually given credit for. Such tensions have been much clarified today by the general contraction of government and some specific assertions of uniformity (notably the uniform rules on Housing Benefit, paid out by local authorities but acting as agents of, and wholly reimbursed to the tune of nearly £1bn a year by, the Department of Social Security - a sum not in the Scottish block and of uncertain fate after devolution). But the social policy of a Scottish Parliament will interface with non-devolved matters on:

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- economic policy - taxation, company law, labour mobility;
- European obligations - professional qualifications, access to services, non-discrimination

Even an independent Scotland would be constrained in moving far from the present position in these areas because of European Union obligations. Reserving jobs, housing, access to higher education or residence rights to Scots would be very difficult. EU co-ordination arrangements would protect the social security rights of migrant workers. What would be possible, as foreshadowed in the SNP manifesto, would be a much more vigorous use of direct taxation and public spending to increase the input of resources to public social services.

It is on this interface with taxation that the devolved Parliament's position looks weak. Much has been made of the 'tax-varying powers' proposed for the Parliament: the rather arbitrary figure of 3p on income tax, raising a modest £500m or £214 per income tax payer (Institute for Fiscal Studies 1997, p.55) was specified by the Constitutional Convention but not mentioned in these terms by the Labour manifesto. As a 'headline' figure, this power of income tax would be inflexible and difficult to use without a major political risk. It would tend to become a counter in the general fiscal relations between Edinburgh and Westminster. Much more interesting are the less visible means of raising money, such as:

- reduction of grant to local authorities, forcing them to raise council tax;
- use of Non-Domestic Rates, now under central government control and floated very cautiously in the Labour manifesto for return to local authorities without making it clear whether the 'tough safeguards to protect the interests of local business' will be exercised by Edinburgh or Westminster;
- fees and charges in the areas where these have been allowed - NHS drugs, higher education fees, rents for public sector housing.

The approach of the 1970s legislation was to control loopholes that might lead to fiscal leakage and undermine the control of Scottish Assembly expenditure allowed by the block grant. Labour's approach in 1997 has been much more relaxed, but the text of the legislation will have to be watched very carefully to see whether contingency restraints have been built in. Much will depend for social policy on whether the Scottish Parliament will be left

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to get on with the job or will be monitored for changes that might be seen as bending the rules or have repercussions for United Kingdom policy. Here there are grounds for optimism. The 'control freak' spirit of the 1970s legislation, with power to move rejection of Assembly bills affecting non-devolved matters surviving in the 1978 Act, has been discredited. The long tradition of 'Scotland is different' social policy is likely to permit some quite interesting innovations in policy - provided that the spending potential is contained.

THE JUSTIFICATION FOR PUBLIC EXPENDITURE DIFFERENTIALS

Underlying all debate on the social policy of a Scottish Parliament is the risk that it will be reduced to a defensive protection of Scotland's relative advantage of per capita identifiable public expenditure. On the latest figures (1995-96), this is 78% for housing, 28% for education and 19% for health and social work, a figure stable in recent years (HM Treasury 1997 table 7.6B). On local authority expenditure, the excess is more marked.

The debate has changed. Until Michael Forsyth became Secretary of State the differential was treated by the Scottish Office as a semi-concealed secret to be talked about as little as possible. Forsyth seemed to see it as a dividend of the Union, defensible only by a firm Scottish integration into the Cabinet system and so a potent argument against any kind of constitutional change. Just before the election, Forsyth went public with what he saw as the Treasury target cut:

What I have said to the Opposition privately is, for goodness sake stop going round talking about Scotland being funded on the basis of need because the Treasury's view is that if we had a needs-based formula of funding for Scotland we would be down £2000m to £2500m from the £14bn which we presently enjoy. The Scottish Office view of need is that in a good argument you could perhaps get that down to £1000m to £1500m. These are huge sums of money.

(**The Herald**, 30 April 1997 p1)

Forsyth was right to detect a rather more aggressive attitude by the Treasury to the differential. The problem here is that the Treasury tends to look covetously at structural advantages built into the public expenditure process for certain departments; they have been equally critical of the Ministry of

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Defence. Both of Scotland's traditional defences - need and political clout - became weaker in the 1980s. The convergence of economic indicators within Great Britain made Scotland's status as a beneficiary of regional largesse look dubious. Treasury officials struggling to work in London could hardly help registering at an intuitive level the gracious living enjoyed by their Edinburgh colleagues. By the 1990s the Treasury at ministerial and official level saw no intellectual case for Scotland's position, but conceded that there was no political will to do very much about it, especially once the latter day Secretaries of State for Scotland and Wales, Michael Forsyth and William Hague, were rising stars in the government. After devolution, the Treasury will not owe any fiscal favours to the Scottish Parliament. Indeed, the strongest argument against 'defined and limited' tax-raising powers is that its use would be insisted upon as a precondition of maintaining the present level of transfers to Scotland, and so in practice it could not be used to finance additional expenditure.

Is the Scottish Parliament condemned to be on the defensive from the start on the expenditure front? It is unlikely that disputes about Scotland's fiscal balance will be of more than rhetorical help unless the tax-collection systems were separated much more precisely than is proposed. Apologetic defences of expenditure differentials, like that presented by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on local authority spending, are also of limited help, since the variables on which they rely pack a lesser punch than they once did. Geographical sparsity is not a catch-all defence for a nation with improving communications and an urban concentration of population. Differential use of private services reflects better public services and a lack of private supply, and saves on tax expenditures, but it is hard to justify spending as an anti-privatisation tool. Running a large base of health and education to service the rest of the United Kingdom is indeed an objective explanation of the differential, but it becomes less relevant after devolution; and in any case developments in health and education policy are moving towards more localised provision.

The most plausible line of defence lies in the incremental nature of public sector budgeting. Differentials are eroded by variable rates of growth, not by cuts exercises. With the decades-long pressure on British public expenditure, it is not surprising that relative levels tend to get frozen. When the 'Barnett formula' was introduced in 1979, it was a wager by the Treasury that the containment of increases in expenditure to Scotland's population share would in time produce a clear convergence of per capita spending. For the Scottish Office, the wager was that the formula's protection against cuts going beyond

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Scotland's population share would in practice prove the stronger element. The Scottish Office view turned out to be more perceptive, and hence the Treasury returned to the issue through the Portillo formula of 1992 which entrenched the population basis of the calculation. They are now winning some success in that the Scottish block is clearly declining in real terms, from a peak of £13.9bn in 1994-95 to £13.7 bn in 1995-96 (the price base) and a planned £12.8bn in 1999-2000 (Scottish Office 1997 table 1.5). This emphasises the tightness of the margins faced by the Scottish Parliament.

It is likely, though, that the constraints of incrementalism will be even less well understood after devolution. The annual determination of grant to the Scottish Parliament will be a high-profile announcement, similar to the release of spending levels to local authorities. There will be a similar lack of transparency about decision-making, since the Scottish government will lack the collegial access to the calculation process at present available to the Scottish Office. Whitehall will lack incentives to be accommodating once a Labour Government's desire to give the Parliament a good start has passed. Alarmist estimate of the effect of cuts will be given public prominence as decisions are reached. Public sector pay, and the parity or lack of it with England, will be a primary issue. The setting of the parliament's tax levels will, like local government, be more a function of government targets than of decisions on priorities. A Labour Treasury may be just as wedded to headline control totals as its predecessors. It is difficult to be optimistic about the rationality of budgetary decision-making after devolution. Mair and McAteer's suggestion (1997, p.7) that the Parliament will be able to put effective political pressure on the Treasury to release more funds is a sanguine one but may underestimate the detachment from concern that the Treasury will feel. The imbalance between policy and financial responsibilities which has so undermined local government in Britain is set to be replicated in the Scottish Parliament.

THE POSSIBILITIES FOR SOCIAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT

An article of this kind in the 1970s would have a long section on the things that a Scottish Parliament might do in each policy area in order to tackle what were widely perceived as Scotland's evident needs. By 1983 Gordon Brown and Robin Cook's edited collection, **Scotland: the Real Divide** (a monument to two careers, and a relationship, that have developed on a wider stage) scarcely mentioned a Scottish Parliament and was more concerned with the redistribution of income and wealth at the British level. Now, the debate has

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shifted again. Government has been modernised and privatised and constrained by an imperative of low taxation. It seems unlikely that there will be large-scale building programmes of housing, schools and hospitals and an increase in staffing levels in the public social services. It is more likely that innovation will be in smaller area-based initiatives.

On the structural side, the new Scottish Parliament will face one problem and one opportunity. The problem is the way that Scotland organises social policy in a miniaturised version of England, though it is much smaller and could in practice run services on a national basis. There are, for instance, few enough general hospitals or secondary schools for all to be more than a name at national level. The regional tier of local government went in 1996, but we still have the 15 Health Boards and the 22 Local Enterprise Companies. Quangos like Scottish Homes, Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council stand between the central ministries and the spending bodies. Even without a colonisation of functions from local government (likely to meet political resistance except possibly in police and fire which are run by joint boards) the Scottish government will be very tempted to assert control over, and make national plans for, the delivery of services. The Labour manifesto speaks of 'the rolling back of the unelected state'; while some patronage of appointments will be politically useful, especially in a coalition government, its level is likely to decline. The present competition among, for instance, hospitals, universities and housing associations might rapidly be planned out of existence by an administration less enamoured of internal markets. Practitioners might well encounter further reorganisation of administration as a substitute for any extended provision of services.

The opportunity is for the better handling of clients across service boundaries. Health and social work providers have been thrown into closer collaboration by the community care policies of 1991. Client-centred policies have been promoted - though in a resource-starved climate - which draw in housing and criminal justice agencies. The 16-18 year old sector is an area of similar potential. Single-tier local government in principle promoted this trend, especially by uniting housing and social work. In practice the new councils are often too small to maintain a capability as great as that of the old regions. The Scottish government might build up specialist services on a national basis and tap into the Scottish tradition of a centrally-steered system based on professional norms. Shifting clients to the most cost-effective service might be the most creative initiative of the Scottish Parliament.

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Within each service, choices will have to be faced which go beyond the traditional questions of more or fewer resources. In housing, the balance between local authority housing and the channelling of money through housing associations will have to be addressed. Compulsory transfers of local authority housing stock will be avoided but the future of their now virtually unsubsidised sector is unclear (the biggest single difference from the 1970s - the tenure share falling from 54% to 32% since 1979). The interface between education and work is a constant theme, in the structure of qualifications, the transition from school to higher and further education, and in the financial basis of training opportunities. In health, the end of the internal market has been signalled by Labour with the block on new GP fundholders. Waiting lists and treatment availability are better than in England but it will still be difficult to manage patient demand and expectations. Demonstration projects on urban multiple deprivation will be easier, effective action to deal with unemployment-based poverty much more difficult. Rural poverty will probably take a more prominent place on the agenda as territorial interests get a better hearing in a PR voting system.

The link between the variables will be the political position of the Scottish ministers. There will presumably be ministers of education, health and housing and possibly some based on cross-cutting issues (such as community care, urban regeneration, the 16-18 age group). The ministers (probably of more than one party) will be seeking a political profile from their policies and will embark upon negotiations with the Scottish government's Treasury-equivalent. There is likely to be a premium on relatively inexpensive projects with a visible impact, and important relationships to be negotiated with teachers, doctors, nurses and social workers on their pay and on policy consultation. The result is likely to be a familiar kind of bureaucratic politics in an environment of resource constraint.

CONCLUSION - THREE POSSIBLE FUTURES

Reviewing the overall possibilities for post-devolution social policy, the main variable is the political context in which it is initiated. The British political parties will be the main integrative force between Edinburgh and Westminster, and their view of social policy seems to be converging on a moderate, managerialist, cost-conscious and individualistic approach. The length of time during which the Scottish and British Parliaments have a concurrent majority will probably be the make or break factor. Allowing for this uncertainty, we may identify three possible futures:

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- A professionally-based stasis would traditionally have been the most likely approach. The Scottish professional classes would use their political allies to protect practices and positions within the delivery systems. Had devolution happened in 1979, Scotland would have been most unlikely to follow any of the privatisation and managerialist routes taken by the English Conservatives and imposed on Scotland after 1987. Internal markets would not have happened, education qualifications and curricula would have remained under teacher dominance, and the local authority sector would have remained a force in social housing. Until quite recently, a reversal of these changes would have been a main platform in Scottish elections. Now, the probability under this scenario is of a retrenchment on the present structure, interpreted more benignly and with greater deference to producers. With expectations lower, this might be a tenable approach for a realistic Scottish government, especially a coalition.
- An innovatory social policy has been the great hope of proponents of devolution. This is in part the freer spending of money, but it also includes the mobilisation of local community action, a broad notion of human investment, a flexible and client-centred use of the instruments of policy, and a willingness to offer services to the most marginal and excluded groups. It can be seen in some European Union initiatives, especially the poverty projects. Some aspects of this are very likely to be displayed in the Scottish Parliament, but they are likely to be constrained by financial caution and it will be a test of the bureaucratic and professional resources of the Parliament to make them happen.
- A conflict-ridden social policy might arise if there is a gross imbalance between the expectations of the Parliament and the means available to deliver them. At the intergovernmental level regular acrimonious conflict on finance is possible. Inside Scotland there might be conflict between areas of the nation and action by producers intensified by the proximity to their governors. The 1997 Labour government in Britain is likely to set the tone for the way that a disappointed social policy community reacts to government's inability or unwillingness to release it from Conservative constraints. If such tensions mount and are transferred to the Scottish Parliament, the independence option looms in which access to new revenue possibilities becomes attractive in the safe environment of the European Union.

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In conclusion, we are probably looking at a Scottish Parliament sobered by fiscal realism and in the grip of general trends towards less government. It is not the most inspiring of futures for social policy, and the largely unthinking reservation of social security to Westminster is a major constraint. What cannot be predicted are the dynamic effects of creating the right of action on the Scottish stage without reference to Westminster norms determined by the English political agenda. These will certainly be interesting and might be fruitful.

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- May 1997*