

How should the UK government handle Devolved government?

I opposed the creation of a devolved Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly when Labour offered its second referendum on these matters in 1997, as did the Conservative party as a whole. I accepted the result fully, even though the Welsh one was very narrow. Since that day I have never asked for another referendum to test opinion again, and have always supported co-operating properly with the devolved bodies.

I have not felt the need to change some of the arguments I put at the time. For example, I argued that setting up these bodies would not create a happily united UK in the way Labour envisaged. It was more likely that nationalists in Scotland would use the excellent platform the Scottish Parliament offered them to campaign continuously to move from devolution to separation. This has predictably come to pass. Not even a full and fair referendum to ask the question did Scotland wish to be independent was sufficient to restore peace on this issue, as the SNP unlike Conservatives never accept the result of a referendum when it goes against them. Today in Parliament every debate on whatever matters is another debate on Scottish independence as far as the SNP is concerned.

Today we see the results of managing the CV 19 response when the devolved authorities of Scotland, Wales and some City Mayors wish to be involved and wish to differentiate what they do. We get mixed messages, public disputes, selective leaks of privileged conversations and variable responses around the UK. I think a good case can be made for more local decision taking on this issue. After all the virus spreads at very different rates and at different times around the country. Hospital admission needs and death rates are very variable. Local circumstances over testing, hospital capacity and Care home management are different.

This argues for a two tier approach. The national government should provide a menu of powers and national advice on the best medical, scientific and economic response to the crisis. The national government and Parliament can decline powers that are thought to be too damaging and unhelpful. Devolved authorities should be free to select from the menu of special powers and responses what they wish to impose in their areas. The U.K. Parliament needs to press harder for a plan which does less economic damage than the current one.

Trying to do it by collaboration is more difficult, as this blurs responsibility and allows devolved authorities to play politics with a national crisis. The SNP government is said to have selectively leaked confidential information about possible future options before a common position was agreed or announced. They also spent the first part of the pandemic setting slightly tougher rules in Scotland, claiming this would allow Scotland to be virus free whilst England would suffer from being too lax. It did not turn out like that, with the Scottish government now needing

to explain why their different approach did not produce better results.

Today why not let devolved authorities decide what they should do about rising case rates. They do not seem to like the national government telling them how to organise their pubs and restaurants, and they want to be more responsible for track and trace in their areas. If a Council or devolved assembly wished it could ask the national government to take responsibility for it. Otherwise the government will need to be firmer with sending plans to local and devolved government that they just need to implement as agents of central government.

The best argument against local differentiation is the variety of rules that will apply. The best argument in favour is many areas of the country will not need the heavy handed lock down the government's advisers think necessary for areas with a high incidence of the pandemic.

(In the 1979 referendum Welsh voters rejected devolution by a massive 4 to 1 margin. In 1997 they voted 50.3% Yes on a 51.3% turnout, with a majority of just 6721 votes for devolution)