

UK Conservatives set out “English Votes for English Laws”

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The Conservative government has outlined proposals to introduce legislation on “English Votes for English Laws” (EVEL), if it wins the May 7 General Election.

Under the measures set out by Conservative Party leader of the House William Hague, Members of Parliament representing constituencies in England will be given an effective veto over matters only affecting England, or, where appropriate, England and Wales. MPs representing Scottish seats at Westminster will be confined to a “residual debating” role on such matters.

The proposals flow from the pledge made by Prime Minister David Cameron following the referendum on Scottish independence on September 18 last year. The vote against separation was won by 55.3 percent to 44.7 percent, but the last week of the campaign caused fear that the “No” vote could lose.

Leading the “Yes” campaign, the Scottish National Party (SNP) was able to capitalise on widespread alienation from Westminster to posture as a progressive alternative to the “London-based” parties, a false claim assiduously promoted by the pseudo-left groups. With a poll showing that the 307-year union between England and Scotland was threatened, prompting a sharp fall on the London stock market, Cameron, Labour leader Ed Miliband and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg pledged greater powers to the devolved Scottish parliament in the event of a “No” vote.

Their panicked vow effectively overturned the decision to rule an option on greater devolution (Devo Max) out of the referenda. Despite a “No” majority of some 10 percentage points, it helped ensure that the crisis of the British nation state would only deepen.

Immediately after the vote, Cameron poured petrol on the fire, insisting that it was now time to listen to the “millions of voices of England.” Greater powers for Scotland would be matched by the introduction of

EVEL, he said, announcing the establishment of a cross-party commission, headed by Lord Robert Smith, to explore a new constitutional settlement.

The prime minister’s appeal to English nationalism is indicative of the utter recklessness and short-term calculations that constitute bourgeois politics, not only in Britain but internationally. Having effectively destroyed the social, democratic and political foundations of the UK over the preceding 30 years, and beholden entirely to the interests of the financial elite, the bourgeoisie is appealing to the most reactionary, grasping sentiments to try and shore up its rule.

Greater devolution, whether in its Scottish or English guise, is directed towards a layer of the upper middle class hostile to any semblance of redistributive economic measures. Through devolution, they hope to retain a greater share of their wealth and establish a direct political stake in the exploitation of the working class.

At breakneck speed, the Smith Commission drew up proposals for the greatest decentralisation of powers in the history of the Union. In just weeks, it recommended devolving control over income tax rates to the Scottish parliament, along with control over certain welfare benefits and workfare programmes, air passenger duty and the licensing of onshore oil and gas extraction (fracking) in Scotland.

Supposedly to ensure the constitutional integrity of the UK, it proposed that all MPs would “continue to decide the UK’s Budget, including Income Tax.” This clause was inserted on Labour’s insistence so as to thwart calls for a complete ban on Scottish MPs in Westminster from voting on “English” matters.

This demand was similarly determined by short-term expediency. Neither the Conservatives nor Labour look able to form a majority government after the May 7

poll. Currently polling only around 30 percent each, and with the Liberal Democrats flatlining, many are forecasting a hung parliament.

If, as expected, Labour loses a significant number of seats in Scotland, it would be dependent on forming a government in some form of coalition with the SNP. To this end, it is making a concerted appeal to woo the Scottish nationalists.

Miliband has promised Labour will place a Home Rule Bill for Scotland before parliament within 100 days should it win the election. Devolution “will be one of the first things on” his new government’s agenda, he said.

Former Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Scottish Labour leader Jim Murphy have also taken to the stump to pledge a radical extension of Scotland’s power over welfare and that Labour will produce a separate Scottish manifesto for the election.

Brown attacked the proposal for EVEL, accusing Cameron of killing off the Union, likening him to Lord Fredrick North who, as prime minister between 1770 and 1782, led Britain through most of the American War of Independence.

As “North is remembered for only one thing—losing America,” he wrote in the *Guardian*, would Cameron be remembered for lighting the “fuse that eventually blew the union apart?”

In reality, it was Labour that piloted devolution in 1997 for Scotland and Wales, as part of its big business and tax-cutting agenda. It also sought to introduce greater devolution in England for the same purpose, proposing the introduction of regional assemblies, but had to retreat when this was overwhelmingly rejected in several local referenda. A number within Labour’s ranks are known to favour EVEL.

Hague tried to package the Conservative’s proposals as being in line with the Smith Commission’s recommendations and one that would maintain the union. Legislation affecting England would be considered in committee by English-only MPs until a third and final reading that would involve all MPs. Untangling just what constitutes “English-only” matters would be decided by the Speaker of the House.

This has not satisfied many in his own party who want a complete ban on Scottish MPs voting at Westminster. The right-wing 1922 committee of Conservative backbench MPs are demanding the party

go further than EVEL to English Votes for English Issues (EVEI) and English votes for English needs (EVEN).

Virtually wiped out in Scotland, the Tories’ best chance of winning office is to win the majority of seats in England. Therefore, even if it were unable to win a majority across the whole of the UK, it would still have a determining influence in domestic policy. Failing that, EVEL has the advantage of potentially paralysing a Labour/SNP coalition.

But some amongst the Tories complain that by effectively provoking a larger vote for the SNP, they could be building up problems for a future Conservative administration.

For its part, the SNP is insisting that Scottish MPs must be allowed to vote on all legislation, including that only affecting England and Wales.

The SNP is a right-wing, bourgeois party indistinguishable in all essentials from the “London parties” it rails against. Its aim is to gain control over tax and fiscal policies so as to slash corporation tax and offer Scotland up as a cheap-labour, low-tax haven.

This was underscored in the remarks by SNP deputy leader Stewart Hosie, who stressed that “Until Income Tax—for example—is devolved in full, it is illogical and wrong for anyone to carve Scottish MPs out of important decision making.”

Hague’s proposals had only strengthened the case for “full fiscal devolution” in Scotland, he said.



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