UK parliament passes ‘English Votes for English Laws’

Trevor Johnson
13 November 2015

The UK House of Commons voted October 22 in favour of the Conservative government’s proposal for ‘English votes for English laws’ (EVEL). This means that Members of Parliament (MPs) 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 will be unable to vote on these matters. The change comes into effect immediately.

The decision on which laws are to be affected by EVEL will be made by the Speaker of the House of Commons, currently Conservative MP John Bercow, a post with a hitherto nominally non-political role of keeping order.

The EVEL legislation was voted through by 312 to 270—a difference more than double the Conservative majority of 17 seats. A number of MPs within Labour’s ranks, including Hilary Benn and Sadiq Khan, are known to favour EVEL.

Before the vote, Commons leader Chris Grayling, a Conservative, told MPs, “These proposed changes enable us to… say England will have its own piece of our devolution settlement.”

Ministers suggested Scottish MPs could be prevented from voting on the issue of Heathrow Airport’s expansion.

It was left to Loyalist politicians from Northern Ireland—whose existence is based on their ties to the UK—to warn of the consequences. Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader Nigel Dodds said, “Our profound fear is… what it potentially does to the fabric of our union. Quite frankly, our union does not need any more rending.”

Scottish National Party (SNP) MP Tommy Sheppard accused Conservative ministers of “pandering” to the English nationalism of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), a hypocritical remark in view of the fact that the SNP has promoted a reactionary nationalist perspective for decades.

The proposal for EVEL stemmed from the pledge made by Prime Minister David Cameron following the referendum on Scottish independence held on September 18 last year. The “No” vote against separation won by more than 10 percent, but during the last week of the campaign fears increased that the separatists could win the vote.

Leading the “Yes” campaign, the SNP was able to capitalise on widespread alienation from Westminster to posture as a progressive alternative to the austerity agenda of “London-based” parties. This false claim was assiduously promoted by the pseudo-left groups.

With an opinion poll before the referendum showing that the 307-year union between England and Scotland was threatened –prompting a sharp fall on London’s stock market—Cameron, then 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.

Immediately after the referendum 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.

At record speed, the Smith Commission drew up proposals for the greatest decentralisation of powers in the history of the Union. In a matter of weeks, it recommended devolving control over income tax rates to the Scottish parliament, along with control over certain welfare benefits and workfare programmes, air

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passenger duty and the licensing of onshore oil and gas extraction (fracking) in Scotland. This was similar to the Devo-Max proposal that had been ruled out earlier during the Scottish referendum campaign. The initial proposals were rejected due to backbench disagreements with the details of changes to parliamentary procedure, which led to a number of minor amendments.

When the Labour Party initiated devolution in the 1990s, it expected it would improve its electoral fortunes at the expense of the SNP. During the last election campaign, however, the shift to the SNP (as a result of Labour's pro-austerity policies) resulted in SNP candidates beating Labour in all but one of Labour's 41 Scottish constituencies, with the SNP now in power in 56 of the 59 seats in Scotland.

The *Economist* commented on the EVEL vote that, "this movie has two possible endings--the happier one is federalism; the second and more likely ending is separation."

Several newspapers, such as the *Telegraph*, used the occasion to promote unabashed English nationalism. Others restricted themselves to quoting one or two MPs who had voted against, with little if any weighing of the significance of EVEL. The media generally supported the government claim that EVEL was a genuine effort to resolve an "anomaly" (that English MPs could not vote on Scottish-only laws passed in Holyrood but Scottish MPs could vote on English-only issues in Westminster).

In reality, because the population of England is 85 percent of the total UK population, there have been only a few occasions (0.7 percent) when the votes of Scottish MPs have changed the outcome of a vote relating to an English law.

The move to "English votes for English laws" emerges from the cultivation of nationalism by all the bourgeois parties throughout the UK. The British ruling class is recklessly undermining the political, legal and social glue that has kept the oldest capitalist nation state together.

The SNP, with a massive majority in Scotland, has responded to the EVEL vote by demanding an even greater share of the assets of the UK. Ahead of the publication of the Scotland Bill next March, which will implement the conclusion of the Smith Commission, Deputy First Minister John Swinney called for the removal of all constraints on social security powers, new powers over benefits in devolved areas and employment support, and control of all the Crown Estate's economic assets in Scotland including the Fort Kinnaird retail park in Edinburgh, valued at £480 million.

This month, former First Minister and ex-SNP leader Alex Salmond and other senior party figures gave their support to an amendment to the Scotland Bill, in which they proposed the Scottish government be able to hold a second independence referendum without requiring the consent of the UK's government at Westminster.

Greater devolution, whether in its Scottish, English or more local guises, is directed towards a layer of the upper middle class who sees devolution as a means of obtaining for themselves a greater share of the wealth secured through driving up the rate of exploitation of the working class and imposing tax cuts and other measures to attract corporate investment. Scottish and Welsh separatism, EVEL and other proposals for regional devolution such as the creation of a "Northern powerhouse", in which the main towns and cities in northern England are being encouraged to establish competing "city regions" to fight over a dwindling allocation of central government funding, show how advanced these tendencies are.

Workers are to be forced into a race to the bottom. Public health care, social care, general practitioner services, mental health and acute services, and community care is threatened, as the funding of these is entirely handed over to competing local governments.

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