

# The West Lothian question and the elephant in the room

Scotland may have voted narrowly to remain within the UK but the concessions promised by David Cameron to keep the country together have opened a real can of worms. At the heart of the growing debate on a new constitutional settlement for the UK is the so-called West Lothian Question – the power enjoyed by Scottish MPs to vote on issues which concern only England and Wales. This contentious subject, named after the constituency of MP who first raised the issue in 1977, Tam Dalyell, has acquired even greater potency since devolution and the creation of a Scottish parliament. It has also ruptured the uneasy alliance between the two biggest pro-unionist parties as Labour fears that if it won the next General Election with a narrow majority, it would be unable to pursue some of its policy agenda without the votes of its Scottish MPs.

The Scottish referendum campaign, besides stirring great emotions north of the border, has raised the broader question of just how best this country should be governed. Far less power is devolved to parish, town and county councils than to their equivalents in many other democracies. However, press reporting on this issue has conspicuously ignored the elephant in the room – the European Union.

The Campaign for an Independent Britain feels that it is pointless to discuss devolving powers down from Westminster when so much power has been sub-contracted to Brussels. Any move to take democracy down to a grass roots level will be no more than window-dressing unless we have the right to govern ourselves. While English people may resent the voting power of Scottish MPs in issues that do not concern them, at least the Scots are our own kith and kin; at least some voters in these islands have actually given them a mandate to speak as their representatives. How many of the UK electorate voted for

Angela Merkel? Or Matteo Renzi? Or Viktor Orban? Not one. Yet these foreign heads of state can do far more damage to England by voting in support of unhelpful legislation in the European Council than any number of Scottish MPs in Westminster. What about the European Commission? Not one of these men and women were elected. All were appointed to their posts by their respective governments. Is it right that these unelected overpaid bureaucrats should have more power than our own elected representatives?

CIB believes that it is vital to ensure that the EU dimension is not excluded from any discussion about a new constitutional settlement. Unless this is the case, we may find that the EU, through its malevolent supporters in our Parliament seeks to hijack the debate for its own advantage by reviving the issue of regional assemblies. Thanks to the superb campaign led by Neil Herron, the North East, the only "region" in the UK to vote on the creation of a regional assembly, rejected the idea comprehensively. This was a great blow to John Prescott, but it did not see the abolition of the regional structures already in place, such as the Regional Development Agencies, which remained in place until 2012. Calls for greater powers for our larger cities need to be watched closely for any hidden agenda to bring back these assemblies by the back door.

There is a strange irony in reviving the constitutional debate inasmuch as what is in effect a demand for more levels of government comes at a time when trust in politicians at all levels is at rock bottom. This is not to ignore the genuine proposals to bring power closer to the people, such as Douglas Carswell's book *The end of politics and the birth of i-democracy* or the Harrogate Agenda of Dr Richard North. It is significant that both these men are also supporters of EU withdrawal. It is also significant that the country which has most successfully brought power closer to the people, Switzerland, has twice voted not to join the EU. While the imbalance in favour of England means that it would be

impractical to replicate much of the Swiss Federal system of government, the message is pretty clear:- if we want a political system which is fairer for all voters in the UK as a whole, let us have less politicians, not more, and let us start by ridding ourselves of those least entitled or qualified to have a say in the UK's future – in other words, let us withdraw from the European Union..