

Devolution essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Devolution, is the granting of power by a superior authority to a minor authority. The superior authority is usually central government and the minor authority a regional assembly. Devolution is often presented as a means to make government more accountable, by allowing policy making to be carried out at lower levels. It may also be argued that devolution offers a means to reduce the size of government by dismantling central bureaucratic systems.

Since the powers that are to be devolved are within the gift of central government, which is usually also anxious to ensure its own role and to maintain the unitary nature of the State, the result is often a compromise, with devolution taking place only down to certain levels and in certain functions, such as education and policing. Devolution is used in Britain for proposals for the establishment of local assemblies in the constituent nations of the United Kingdom with considerable powers over local matters.

Northern Ireland had devolved powers via the Stormont parliament from 1921, although these were suspended in 1972 as a result of the deepening crisis there. The word became current in the 1970s to describe the moves to give Scotland and Wales greater self-government. The Kilbrandon Report, published in November 1973 following the successes of the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru. A high threshold of 40 per cent of eligible voters were required to support devolution, which was narrowly missed in Scotland, but overwhelmingly lost in Wales.

The devolution issue was laid to rest for some years, but further successes by the Scottish Nationalists in 1988 and the acceptance by two of the major parties, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democratic Party, of devolution

policies led to its return to the political agenda; only the Conservative Party openly opposed devolution for Scotland and Wales. Informal agreements were reached on a cross-party basis in Scotland, which led to the meeting of a Scottish Convention in 1989 (boycotted by the Scottish Nationalists) urging devolution as a matter of urgency.

In Northern Ireland, sporadic attempts were made to introduce devolved forms of government, including a Northern Ireland Assembly which met briefly in 1974 and from 1982 to 1986. The success of the Labour Party, pledged to support Scottish and Welsh devolution, in the general election of May 1997, transformed the situation. New referendums were promised on a Scottish parliament and a Welsh Assembly. In September 1997, the Scottish referendum voted 74 per cent to 26 per cent (on a 60 per cent turnout) in favour of a Scottish Parliament, and, by a lesser majority, for such a parliament to have tax-raising powers.

A week later, Wales narrowly voted (on a 50 per cent turnout) for a Welsh Assembly with lesser powers than the Scottish Parliament. The first elections for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly were held in May 1999. At the same time, the Good Friday Agreement signed in Northern Ireland in April 1998 promised the return of a Northern Irish Assembly with its own executive, provided certain ceasefire conditions were met. When the Scottish Parliament was opened in July 1999, Donald Dewar, Labour Party MP for Glasgow Anniesland, took up the post of Head of the Scottish Executive (First Minister).

When Dewar died from a brain haemorrhage in October 2000, he was succeeded as First Minister by Henry McLeish, Labour MP for Fife Central, who in turn was replaced by Jack McConnell, Labour Party MSP for Motherwell and Wishaw, in November 2001. In early 2000 Rhodri Morgan, Labour MP for Cardiff West, became First Secretary of the Welsh Assembly, following the resignation of Alun Michael. In the Devolution referendum of 1997 the voter apathy of the Scottish and Welsh electorate was such that there was insufficient democratic mandate for devolution.

In Scotland, of a 64% turnout, 74% voted "yes", only an overall 44% of the entire population actually voted "yes". In Wales, the figures are even lower with 50% turnout, and 50% voted "yes" thus resulting in an overall 25% of the Welsh population voting "yes". This is clearly not a resounding approval for Scottish and Welsh devolution, and this important constitutional matter was not supported by the true majority. Devolution will fracture the UK and could be the first step towards independence. In Scotland, for example, support for the Scottish Nationalist Party is already growing.

In the future, the independent parliaments may demand the residual powers left to Westminster. In addition, there may be a blurring of the boundaries between the jurisdictions of each parliament, creating a potential for aspects of government duties to be neglected due to confusion over who holds the responsibility. Devolution has led to the absurd situation whereby Scottish MPs are allowed to vote in Westminster on matters concerning England, but English MPs have no say over matters relating to Scotland.

This means that Scottish and Welsh representatives have in theory twice as much power as English representatives: this is clearly undemocratic. The creation of another level of bureaucracy is a drain on the finances of the whole country. The cost of setting up the Welsh and Scottish parliaments was i?? 60 million and the running costs and salaries for elected officials and civil servants adds an extra burden to the economy - could the money not be better spent on health, education, etc. hich would have a more obvious direct benefit for the taxpayer. The Scottish Parliament and the Welsh assembly do not have the same powers as Westminster, therefore all MPs have an equal say in the highest governing power in the UK. A further way to possibly resolve this issue is to devolve the English Parliament, as suggested by the Kilbrandon Committee. It makes for a far better democratic and representative system for decisions to be taken at different levels.

Smaller regional matters are best dealt with by regional powers and the culmination of larger regional interests, such as in Scotland, (e. g farming, agriculture) are better served by a Scottish governing body. Similarly national interests such as economics and foreign affairs are suited to a national government such as Westminster. In fact government is far more effective for this extra tier of bureaucracy, and this money spent will in theory improve the efficiency of public services. In actuality, examples in other countries embody success.

In Switzerland's semi-autonomous cantons for example and Germany and Spain, there is effective co-operation between local and national governments. Development and economic growth has also been a feature of these regions. The main powers of government remain firmly embedded in

London and the Scottish Parliament can only deal with Scottish issues rather than trespassing into issues involving other regions. Important issues affecting Scotland, such as foreign affairs and major financial policies are still dealt with by London.

Scotland does have its own education system but it effectively had this before devolution. It would be hard now to sustain an argument that devolution has brought on the break-up of the UK. It could be argued that it has strengthened ties as the enmity once felt in Scotland regarding the domination of London has now decreased by degrees. The 2001 election result did not show a great boost for the SNP as would have been expected if the bulk of Scottish voters still felt let down by the devolutionary process.

Devolution has meant that politics has become closer to the people in Scotland but Iain Macwhirter claims that Scotland has been swept " by a tidal wave of disillusion at the succession of disasters that have marred devolution's infancy. " He also claims that there has been a " meltdown" in the Scottish public's confidence in the devolutionary process. However, it may simply be the case that too much was expected out of the Scottish Parliament too soon and that the whole bedding in process might take awhile longer than was at first anticipated.

There has been no magical regional improvement in housing and the health system - but this takes money and the Scottish Parliament does not have major revenue collecting powers. However, the education system has seen stability with the Scottish teachers union coming to an agreement with the devolved government on terms of service - an agreement that was envied

by the English and Welsh teaching unions and one which they could not achieve with the Education Department in London. The Scottish Parliament had a less than stable first year.

It had to face a hostile press – especially from the “ Daily Record” and the “ Scotsman” – over its handling of the tuition fees issue and the repeal of Clause 28. The most public anger came over the summer 2000 exam results whereby some pupils got the wrong results and others did not get any and faced the prospect of not going to a university of their choice as they did not have the entry grades. The head of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) resigned but not the Member of the Scottish Parliament responsible for education, Sam Galbraith.

There has been much public disquiet about the cost of the new parliamentary building at Holyrood. The sudden death of the Scottish First Minister, Donald Dewar, in October 2000, did not help to stabilise the Parliament. Dewar was rightly regarded as the elder statesman of the new Parliament and as a former Cabinet member of the Labour Government could command respect for his views in London. His death meant that the Scottish Parliament lost a valuable link to Downing Street. But has the Scottish Parliament achieved anything?

In its first year it passed eight bills into acts and eleven bills were going through the parliamentary process. Therefore, in 12 months 19 issues relating to Scotland were either finalised or going through the process of being accepted or not. On average, the House of Commons passed one or two acts a year that directly related to Scotland. In this sense, the Scottish

Parliament has been very successful. Prior to this in pre-devolutionary days, those who represented Scotland at Westminster could only present their issues within the forum of Westminster.

Seven times a year Scottish Question Time was held. Now debate on uniquely Scottish affairs is a week-in week-out affair at Holyrood and Scottish issues can still be discussed at Westminster with Scottish MP's representing their constituents there as well as MSP's representing their constituents at Holyrood. In this sense, the Scots get a better 'deal' than their English counterparts as they have representation in two Parliaments.