

As put forward

“SCOTLAND FORWARD” CONFERENCE: SATURDAY 17 MAY 1997

DRAFT SPEECH FOR MR McLEISH

INTRODUCTION

I am delighted to be invited to speak to you this morning on the Government's proposals for establishing a Scottish Parliament.

The timing of your Conference could not be more appropriate

Earlier this month, the people of the United Kingdom elected a Government committed to introducing a comprehensive programme for constitutional renewal. Elements of that programme include the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into UK Law, the introduction of a Freedom of Information Act, the reform of the House of Lords and the modernisation of the procedures of the House of Commons. Taken together, this all adds up to the most wide-ranging programme for constitutional reform that has been envisaged in modern times. Its purpose: to modernise the institutions of Government to meet the needs of the people and the demands of the 21st Century.

At the heart of this programme, and in its vanguard, are our plans for a Scottish Parliament. The people of Scotland have made it abundantly clear, not just in the General Election earlier this month but over the preceding decade, that they want more control over their own affairs and to remain within the United Kingdom. Our plans for devolution will achieve that.

THE TIMETABLE

Let me set out our timetable. Two weeks after coming into office, the Government have already taken the first steps towards meeting our Manifesto commitment on a Scottish Parliament. Thursday 15 May saw the introduction into the House of Commons of legislation to allow the people of Scotland to vote in a referendum on our proposals to establish a Scottish Parliament with law making powers, firmly based on the agreement reached in the

Scottish Constitutional Convention. We expect that Bill to make speedy progress through both Houses of Parliament.

Our specific proposals will be set out in a White Paper which we are currently developing and which will be published shortly, well ahead of the referendum.

We expect the referendum itself to be held by early Autumn.

On the basis of what we expect to be a resounding popular endorsement of our plans, we shall then immediately bring forward legislation to create the Scottish Parliament.

Once that legislation is enacted, we shall immediately set in hand the necessary preparations to have the Scottish Parliament up and running by the year 2000.

REFERENDUM BILL

You might ask why we are planning to have a referendum when we already have the support of the Scottish people for our manifesto commitments. The answer is to put the popular mandate for these proposals beyond dispute.

The establishment of a Scottish Parliament will affect everyone living in Scotland. While the election result already shows there is a strong demand for constitutional change in Scotland, we believe that it is important to consult on such an important single issue; to establish beyond doubt that there is support in Scotland for our proposals.

The referendum legislation itself is very simple. It sets out the questions to be asked, the electorate, funding and arrangements for the counting of the vote. It provides for the technical detail for running the referendums to be set out in secondary legislation, a draft of which will be published shortly.

The questions have been drafted as a series of propositions - they are simple, clear and fair. People will be asked in the referendum whether they support our proposals for the

establishment of a Scottish Parliament, and whether they agree with our proposals for a Scottish Parliament to have tax-varying powers. We have taken expert advice from electoral practitioners on the format and wording of the ballot papers. There will be no question of the government leading voters. I am confident that our proposals will win on merit alone.

All those who can vote in local government elections in Scotland will be able to vote in the referendum. This is the franchise that was used in 1979. It includes peers and resident EU nationals, who are excluded from voting in national elections. The key criterion is residency in Scotland.

We will hold the referendum in the Autumn, in advance of the party conference season. The exact date for the referendum has not been finalised yet - we need to be clearer on when the Referendum Bill will get Royal Assent, to allow the necessary time for the practical arrangements to be put into place. I do not expect the passage of the Bill to be delayed. I cannot see any good reason to object to giving people in Scotland the opportunity to say directly whether they support our proposals. There will be a full opportunity for Parliament to debate them will come later during the passage of the main devolution Bill.

As in 1979, the counting of the votes will be organised at the level of local authority area, and these results will be announced locally. A national count would not be possible for practical reasons (such as transporting ballot boxes from remote areas to a central point). However the overall result will be announced nationally and this will be the key result.

Provided that there is a simple majority of those voting in favour of our proposals, we will then bring forward legislation to create a Scottish Parliament.

THE WHITE PAPER

We are currently working hard to further the terms of our White Paper which
considerable detail for the Parliament. We have been working on the
Scottish Constitutional Commission, which has helped produce a party which
also the foundation of the basis upon which we are working. Our proposal
will be firmly based on the consensus of the White Paper. We also take
account of the views which have been made in the last few months. We
will be working with constitutional specialists and other interested parties.

The proposal should be a series of further steps with key
constitutional elements, on the basis of the Commission's proposals. We
will be working with the relevant bodies to see their latest advice on how
we should firm up our proposal.

The Government are confident that the process of dialogue which has already taken
place will take the first steps towards our proposal. We will be working with
the Scottish people and the Scottish Parliament to see how we can

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE

We have been here for the last 10 years. The Labour Government started
late for the Scottish Assembly. We will be working with the Government to
work in majority in the House of Commons. We will be working with the
burdened members after the end of the day of the Parliamentary passage.
The Bill will be based on the findings of the Commission. We will be
reaching the 10% threshold required for the Bill to be passed during the
next session.

We have learned two lessons from this:

Firstly, the need to secure the passage of the legislation by asking the people of Scotland for a specific mandate to establish a Scottish Parliament, including defined and limited financial powers to vary tax. The referendum will achieve this.

Secondly, the need to have the detail of our plan settled in advance, rather than continuing to develop them during the passage of the legislation. The White Paper which we shall publish will achieve that.

Have no doubt, this time we will get it right.

CONCLUSION

Scotland now stands on the threshold. The people of Scotland have already waited too long for their wish for a greater say over their own affairs to be realised. This Government are committed to delivering devolution to the people of Scotland, and we shall not fail them. Our action plan - the immediate passage of legislation to hold a referendum, a detailed White Paper, the referendum itself by the Autumn, then the substantive legislation to give effect to the establishment of a Scottish Parliament - will give us a robust package which can be delivered quickly and effectively.

What brought this Government to power, and what will drive this Government forward, is a vision of a better future. A better future for the United Kingdom as a whole. And of course in particular a better future for Scotland, with a Parliament of our own.