COMPENDIUM #70

SNP VERSUS UNION

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> *Union Deceit Exposed: Why comparing twenty years of constrained devolved administration against three centuries of sovereign Westminster rule collapses under historical and empirical scrutiny.*

For more than three centuries Scotland was governed entirely by Unionist administrations at Westminster or by Unionist political establishments operating within the Union. Yet many of the same political forces that dominated that period attempt to portray twenty years of SNP government at Holyrood as the source of Scotland's problems. That argument collapses when examined against the historical record.

The first fact that Unionist politicians rarely note is that the Scottish Parliament is not a sovereign parliament. Major economic powers, immigration, most welfare spending, defence, foreign affairs, energy market regulation, broadcasting, borrowing powers and macroeconomic policy remain largely reserved to Westminster. The Scottish Parliament operates within devolved powers created under the Scotland settlement and remains subject to significant constitutional limits .

Therefore a fair comparison is not between twenty years of SNP government with full state powers and three hundred years of Unionist government. The real comparison is between what the SNP achieved with limited authority and what Unionist parties achieved when they possessed full powers.

The record shows that since entering government in 2007 the SNP has introduced or protected a series of policies that differ significantly from those pursued elsewhere in the UK. University tuition remains free for Scottish students, prescription charges were abolished, free personal care was expanded, a universal Baby Box programme was created, funded childcare was expanded, free bus travel was introduced for major groups, and the Scottish Child Payment became a unique anti-poverty benefit not available elsewhere in the UK .

The Baby Box programme alone has delivered more than 350,000 boxes to new parents across Scotland and remains unique within the UK .

The Scottish Child Payment has supported more than 241,000 families and over 322,000 children with more than £1.3 billion distributed to lower-income households. Scottish Government figures state that it is estimated to keep around 40,000 children out of relative poverty .

Prescription charges, abolished in Scotland in 2011, continue to be levied in England. Analysis cited by multiple sources indicates Scottish households save hundreds of pounds yearly because of that decision .

They are all policies with measurable effects.

Now consider the longer Unionist record.

The Unionists say that Westminster governments delivered stability, prosperity and good governance for Scotland. Yet many of the most controversial decisions affecting Scotland originated from governments that Scotland did not vote for.

The poll tax remains one of the clearest examples. Scotland became the testing ground for Margaret Thatcher's Community Charge one year before England and Wales. The policy generated enormous opposition, mass campaigns and widespread public anger. Even senior figures later acknowledged it was a political mistake .

The industrial destruction of many mining and manufacturing communities during the 1980s also left utterly damaging social and economic consequences. Research examining former industrial regions identifies continuing deprivation and inequality associated with deindustrialisation and later austerity policies .

The austerity programme introduced after 2010 brought further criticism. Academic research has argued that spending reductions and welfare reforms disproportionately affected vulnerable communities and intensified hardship .

This creates an uncomfortable question for Unionist politicians.

If Westminster governments exercised overwhelmingly greater authority over Scotland for centuries why should responsibility for economic decline, industrial collapse, regional inequality, the poll tax experiment or austerity be assigned entirely to a devolved parliament established only in 1999?

Critics of the SNP are entitled to point to problems in health waiting times, education performance, ferry procurement, public finance pressures and other areas. Those criticisms are legitimate subjects for democratic debate. But honesty requires consistency. If the SNP can be judged on twenty years of devolved administration, then Unionist parties must also be judged on the consequences of the vastly longer period during which they controlled the principal levers of power.

The central contradiction in much Unionist rhetoric is obvious. When Scotland performs well, Unionists often praise the strength of the United Kingdom. When Scotland struggles, responsibility is frequently assigned exclusively to Holyrood. Both claims cannot be true.

The historical record demonstrates that Scotland's devolved government operates within limits set by Westminster. It demonstrates that the SNP used those limited powers to create policies that differ sharply from those operating elsewhere in the UK, including free tuition, free prescriptions, the Baby Box programme and the Scottish Child Payment .

The debate therefore should not be based on slogans. It should be based on evidence.

Three hundred years of Unionist dominance cannot be erased from history when discussing Scotland's condition. Nor can twenty years of devolved government be fairly assessed without recognising the limits under which it operates.

The question facing voters is not whether the SNP has been perfect. No government is. The real question is whether parties that exercised power for generations can pretend they bear little responsibility for the outcomes of those generations while demanding that every modern problem be laid solely at the door of a parliament whose powers remain constrained.

That is the contradiction at the heart of the Unionist case, and it is one that deserves more scrutiny than it usually receives.

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