

Red Paper Collective

Response to Scottish Environment LINK's 'Referendum Challenge'.

The 'Referendum Challenge' by Scottish Environment LINK asks organisations campaigning for the varying constitutional options in the referendum debate to state how their preferred option will best meet LINK's 10 environmental aspirations.

Unlike the 'Think Tank' proposals that are produced in a darkened room by a limited group of authors, Red Paper is at this stage stimulating the debate on what a left alternative might look like. This means we are not in a position to provide a definitive response to the Referendum Challenge. What we can do is respond on the basis of the principles that underpin our approach to this issue.

Combating climate change and protecting the environment are likely to be a key part of our 'vision' for Scotland. We believe that the general principles we start from of a more equal, democratic society are important in creating the kind of sustainable growth with social justice that is necessary for a proper Just Transition to a low carbon economy.

In a world of globalisation, where countries are so interdependent, and where casino capitalism led to the financial crisis that the poorest are now being expected to pay for, it is hard to see how Scotland becoming independent, in and of itself, could be argued to be more likely than either the current settlement or further devolution to provide better options for promoting long-term sustainable development. Whilst it could be argued that an independent Scotland would be in a good position to champion at a European level better environmental policies it is unlikely to have the same influence as the UK would have, if the political will existed, due to its smaller size and influence. Therefore, it would also be unlikely to have any stronger influence on EU emissions reductions policies, for example, nor would it seem likely to lead to the unilateral introduction of any form of 'Robin Hood' financial transactions tax that we would support.

The various ways in which being part of the United Kingdom can offer some form of needs-based redistribution of wealth and/or can spread out the costs of socially useful investment, (for example in energy policy) mean that Scotland could be swapping a partnership that could, with the right political will, work well for an uncertain new arrangement that could see us economically weaker and therefore less likely to be able to invest in the necessary areas for a sustainable future in energy, recycling and efficiency (competing in a race to the bottom on corporation tax and working conditions). If Scotland were to become a low tax, low wage economy, it would seem unlikely to be providing the kind of leadership necessary to support effective and urgent action to safeguard the planet for current and future generations. However, the same can be said for the UK and with the present UK government's policy this is a very real threat to the sustainability of our environment and economy.

Members of the Scottish Parliament unanimously supported the challenging targets in the country's world leading Climate Change Act in 2009. Yet only three years on, Stop Climate Chaos Scotland has warned that without new policy initiatives we are on course to only meet one target between now and 2022. Taking the required policy decisions requires political commitment as much as any new powers, although they would be useful in some areas.

While the varying forms of extended devolution/ independence offer different options of economic and other levers, political will is an absolutely key factor. We would want any new powers to be used for people, not profit. For example, on taxation, whatever the actual powers available, will they be used to address inequality, to support strong democratically accountable public services and to drive action on climate change mitigation and adaptation? A concrete example of the kind of policy we would advocate to address environmental concerns whilst at the same time looking to address issues of local empowerment, economic development and inequality would be developing cooperative and community renewables schemes. These would be alternatives to the current “Klondike” where multi nationals are gaining huge subsidy at the expense of electricity customers and the profits are being exported to Paris, Bonn and Madrid rather than kept in the Scotland. In the context of the current debate we would argue that both the correct powers and the correct political will are necessary to address the challenge.

The Red Paper proposals are not finalised. However, we will be making the case for the progressive action we want to see in support of a more sustainable society, under whichever constitutional outcome.

We would be interested in the views of the Scottish Environment Link on what powers they think would be needed and where they would be best placed in order to address the issues that concern them.

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