

## State of the union

# New powers for English MPs is no answer. We need a United Kingdom fit for modern times

In the real world, few big constitutional changes have ever taken place in ideal circumstances. In practice, most political reforms get written under the pressure of time and events by people who disagree. Enduring constitutions nevertheless require three essential things: first, a general recognition that there is a problem that needs solving; second, a shared willingness to produce a shared outcome; and, third, a degree of readiness and goodwill to make that outcome a lasting settlement.

Modern Britain has to rise to this challenge. Yet recent attempts to reform and renegotiate the union of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have fallen well short. Responsibility is widely shared on all sides of many borders. The key immediate failing was nevertheless David Cameron's. When he responded to Scotland's vote to remain in the UK by launching a fresh drive for English powers, the prime minister squandered an opportunity to bring the nations of Britain closer together by taking an action which is now driving them further apart.

Yesterday William Hague put some flesh on the bones of the Cameron approach when he announced the powers that the Conservatives would give to England if they form the next government. By comparison with some of his party's wilder English nationalist urgings, Mr Hague's speech represented a small step back from the brink. There could be no question of parts of the House of Commons sitting separately as an English parliament. All MPs would retain the right to vote and speak on all government business, including the budget. A Scottish MP can still be chancellor or prime minister. English MPs would have a moral veto over bills that affected England alone, but not a statutory veto. This is not the cruder version of English votes for English laws that some Tories so recklessly desire.

Mr Hague is nevertheless playing with fire. Even on the most generous reading, his proposals offer immense opportunities for a Westminster version of the gridlock that has brought the US system of federal government almost to its knees. His greatest foolishness, though, is to try to solve constitutional issues that affect the whole of the United Kingdom

with proposals that are both partial - aimed at England alone - and partisan: aimed at advantaging the Tories. England certainly needs a new constitutional settlement. But not this one and not this way. The goal must be achieved as part of an all-embracing and modern approach to the 21st-century UK; it must be done on a cross-party and all-nation basis; it must be about more than just devolution; and it must be much more sensitive than it is so far to the asymmetric position of England's power within the union.

Many have called for a constitutional convention as a means of achieving this new British settlement, though without clarifying the idea properly. An open and comprehensive approach is nevertheless urgently needed, along with a moratorium on new bilateral or unilateral changes. Ideally, the approach would draw on the new reflections by the UK's Changing Union project involving Cardiff University, the Institute for Welsh Affairs and other groups in a Welsh nation which is too often left out of consideration elsewhere but whose status would be utterly changed if Mr Hague got his way. These Welsh ideas included the bedrock principles of a federal union not a unitary state, a consistent though not uniform approach, a commitment to shared solidarity, and a shared understanding of the need to temper England's asymmetric role.

The pressures forcing this country apart are strong. Their seriousness should be recognised. Many of the signs are very discouraging. The reality is that the United Kingdom may not long survive unless virtuous principles are grasped and acted on by whatever government is elected as soon as the general election has taken place. The paramount aims must be to bridge divides, to find solutions which can enjoy consent, and to renegotiate the union as an all-embracing working system that takes account of the lessons of recent past. There is public goodwill if there is decisive and visionary leadership. Britain needs a constitutional convention. But it must not be an excuse to wallow or to grandstand. The new government will need to act quickly and in a more open spirit than this one is doing.