

# Will 2012 be the year of the referendum for the UK and Scotland? Columnist.

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THE Coalition Government is struggling. Unemployment and the deficit are simultaneously rising, breaking political promises at the last election to give an 'expansionary fiscal contraction'. This will be the year that the cuts really start to bite into the public, and might be a year of political crisis. The House of Lords - including peers in Coalition parties - are voting with increasing regularity against government proposals.

The Government faces many competing priorities this year for their limited resources, whether pushing banking back towards supporting small businesses and homeowners, preventing their health reforms creating chaos in the NHS or tackling exploding youth unemployment.

In short, January 2012 seems a fairly odd time to start an obscure constitutional argument over a Scottish independence referendum. But the Government have done precisely that, arguing that SNP-led Scottish Government have no legal right to organise an independence referendum, despite winning an overall majority and being a key manifesto proposal.

The most obvious explanation the UK Government wants a referendum on their own terms.

The conventional wisdom is that the Unionist parties, most notably the Conservatives, are strongly against independence. So a 'snap referendum' could allow (anti-independence) Unionists to run a short, scare campaign and get the supposedly desired 'no' vote.

But the bigger issue is how can Unionist parties campaign in Scotland and constructively influence the vote? The mainstream parties are so desperately unpopular in Scotland that a campaign with London's fingerprints could be just what the SNP need to persuade the public they are better off alone.

History argues both ways - Scotland is clearly culturally distinct, but for four centuries there have been the deepest ties between the crowns and the countries.

What the SNP can easily do is make the argument by pointing just over their southern border.

Whilst Cumbria and the North East struggle with pitiful infrastructure and public

services, Scotland has been forging ahead in many areas that really matter to people, in health, housing, education and transport .

The Scottish Government is able to put Scotland first in a way that government south of the border will never be able. Most notably is its flagship National Health Service for Scotland which has avoided Westminster's continual market reforms whilst providing high levels of efficiency and satisfaction.

But it is not just Scotland that is disadvantaged by Government from London. A recent IPPR North report analysed recent government transport investment plans for England. They found that a shameful 0.04% of the pounds 300bn investment will be made into the North East.

To put it into some perspective, for every 1,000 people that live in England, 50 live in the North East. For every pounds 1,000 that the government will be spending on transport in coming years, 40p will be spent in the region, not the fair sum of pounds 50.

This is not an isolated example. It is part of a recurrent pattern by Westminster governments of all political colours to channel investment into the Greater south east region, in the vain hope that this will bring prosperity for all.

Recent figures show that this approach's shortcomings. Unemployment remains concentrated in a few hotspots outside London, most notably Teesside, Merseyside and Birmingham.

Boris Johnson can conjure up money to solve London's problems, but for the once great cities of Liverpool, Manchester and Newcastle, the future is not belt-tightening but the closing of the public purse strings.

This is an unbeatable argument for Scottish independence against which the Coalition currently have no answer.

It is not that Scotland would be wealthier outside the Union, or that England is a poor country that cannot afford to support its citizens' welfare. Rather, the argument is that London-based politicians have a tendency to reward places they think are successful.

If David Cameron is serious about the survival of the Union, then it is this problem of centralism that he must address. If London politicians are smart, then 2012 will be the year they start ensuring the benefits of London rule are as clear to the North East and Cumbria as the benefits of Union to Scotland.

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