

The £30 per week cuts to sick and disabled peoples benefit that the Tories are determined to get through was defeated twice in the House of Lords. Last week Peers voted to force the Tory ministers to reveal what impact the proposed cuts to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) would have on the health, financial circumstances and job prospects of claimants. But once again MPs overturned the decision by 309 votes to 274.

The BBC reported **that in light of the Commons' verdict, peers are now going to defer to the views of MPs.**

Cuts will affect those in the work-related activity group of ESA, people who have been deemed unfit to work, but are able to attend interviews and/or training with the aim to get them back to work.

Tory ministers are accusing Peers of "*overstepping their mark*" by resisting the changes twice despite the Commons supporting the proposals. Work and Pensions minister Lord Freud said they had "*discharged their duty*" by assessing the bill to remove "*unintended consequences*" and sending back concerns for the Commons to reconsider. Baroness Grey-Thompson lamented the decision to back down on the plans. "*It may be seen as a victory in terms of voting numbers in the Commons but we can't forget there are many disabled people who will lose out.*"



No one said it better than Lord Low when he addresses the HoL on Monday 7 March: "*My Lords, perhaps I might be permitted to say a word about the Commons rejection of my amendment. Despite the Minister's best efforts to soften the impact of the £30 cut in the incomes of disabled people in the employment and support allowance WRAG, which I readily acknowledge, this is a black day for disabled people. The Commons have spoken decisively and we must bow to their wishes, but we do so under protest. Do not let anyone kid you that this is democracy in action. There is more to democracy than just being elected. Questions of representativeness, accessibility, openness and responsiveness all come into it as well. From these standpoints, this House, though unelected, is much more democratic. Organisations representing the needs of poor and dispossessed people find it much easier to get their point across and have it taken on board in the House of Lords than in the House of Commons, which is more politicised and subservient to the Whips—and the Whips were certainly working overtime last Wednesday night in the House of Commons, going round handing out bribes and blandishments like there was no tomorrow.*"

"*Last week, the noble Lord, Lord Young of Cookham, took me to task for quoting selectively from the Commons debate on our amendments, but I did so because the debate ran largely one way. Last Wednesday, the Minister had a bit more support, but some telling points were still made against the Government. Commenting on the Commons reason for refusing our amendments— that is,*"

"Because it would alter the financial arrangements made by the Commons, and the Commons do not offer any further Reason, trusting that this Reason may be deemed sufficient"—

Neil Gray, MP for Airdrie and Shotts, said: "*So the Commons did not offer 'any further Reason', which I found shocking. The Government could not come up with anything else to say—no empirical evidence, no logical argument, nothing!*"

So yet another Tory attack on the poor, infirm and vulnerable has been successful, to think Scotland could have been independent in less than 60 days from now and Tory Governments would have become a thing of myth..



UK makes up the "truth" on the hoof. The Cromarty Firth Port Authority wants to carry out ship-to-ship transfers off the coast of Ross-shire, campaigners are worried about the effects on the coastline and marine wildlife, including the Moray Firth's dolphin population.

Ian Blackford, SNP MP for Ross, Skye and Lochaber raised a point of order in the House of Commons, referring to an earlier debate where he had asked "*what negotiations had taken place concerning the transfers*". He went on to say the UK Government is being "*economical with the truth*" over the controversial issue of ship-to-ship oil transfers in the Cromarty Firth.

Blackford said he had asked Transport Minister Robert Goodwill specifically if Marine Scotland (representing the Scottish Government) had been consulted, and had received a reply, which stated: "*Marine Scotland was directly consulted on 10 December and 8 February, when consultation ended. It has not responded. When it was asked whether it intended to respond it answered 'no.'*" Ian Blackford said "*he was surprised because he would have expected Marine Scotland to reply, so he checked with the Scottish Government*". He continued, "*the Scottish Government is not aware of being directly approached by the UK Government during consultation on the Cromarty Firth oil transfers.*" There was informal contact through the Port of Cromarty Firth, but they were not contacted by the UK Government or the Maritime and Coastguard Agency." He added: "***That is a very worrying statement, and opens the suggestion that the Government has been economical with the truth, to say the very least.***"

The Scottish Government is responsible for environmental protection, including marine and coastal environments but the powers over STS transfers are reserved to Westminster. Scottish Secretary David Mundell said he would investigate the matter, don't hold your breath for an honest answer.

Blackford told The National newspaper that he planned to write to Robert Goodwill questioning his reasons for bringing "**inaccurate**" information to the House. He said: "*I'll be asking him to explain why he thinks Marine Scotland and, as a consequence the Scottish Government, have been consulted and why did he take that view to the House when the Scottish Government have made it very clear they haven't had any communications from the UK Government. This actually holes them below the line, because **one of the key determinants is the issue of environmental protection, and you cannot consider a case such as this unless there's been proper consultation with Marine Scotland.** We have to take the marine environment seriously and the agency responsible for that through the Scottish Government, has not been consulted. That can't be right.*"

Blackford reiterated his previous call for responsibility for STS transfers to be devolved to Holyrood. He said: "*It's a disgrace, and it shows some of the shortcomings in the devolution of powers to Holyrood. We are getting enhanced powers through the Scotland Bill, but there are still situations like this that the Scottish Government has no say in. That's completely unacceptable.*"

Now it's been caught red handed telling bare faced lies. No consultation on the environmental risks of pumping oil from ship to ship in a marine conservation area, have been done. Scotland has been ignored and the dolphins and marine life are expendable, according to the UK government and it's pals in the oil corporations.

SNP avoids fiscal deal cuts, Westminster avoids devolving any real power. The Scottish Government managed to stop a stealth cut to Scotland's budget on the back of underwhelming new powers



BOTH sides are claiming victory in the Scotland Bill fiscal agreement negotiations – and there will be much debate about who got more of what they wanted. But I cannot help feel it is the Scottish people who have lost out due to Westminster's less than half-hearted commitment to the devolution they promised.

On one hand we have the Daily Record claiming John Swinney and Nicola Sturgeon are “the only political partnership in history to take on the UK Treasury and win”, and that it is a great victory for Scotland. In fact the victory they have won is that they have stopped the Westminster Government attaching a stealth cut to Scotland's budget on the back of the underwhelming powers contained in the Scotland Bill.

Any victory over the Treasury's cuts agenda should be congratulated and it is clear the UK Government saw an opportunity to cut Scotland's budget through the fiscal framework. How two-faced is that when you consider a core sentence from The Vow: “because of the continuation of the Barnett allocation for resources and the powers of the Scottish Parliament to raise revenue we can state categorically that the final say on how much is spent on the NHS will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament”, unless you plan to cut Scotland's budget and it is cut by £7 billion as part of this deal.

In September 2014 the media was desperate to suggest devo max was on offer. The Daily Record claimed Gordon Brown was the architect of The Vow and that “Nicola Sturgeon had vowed to back Gordon's call for devo max if it is a No vote”. The Guardian said *The Vow reiterated extensive new “devo max” powers for the Scottish Parliament that would follow on from a No vote.* Sky said “David Cameron has pledged new powers for Scotland that some have said amount to devo max” and The Spectator complained that “this was the first time he (Cameron) has been so definitive about backing a devo plus or a devo max”.

Way before the referendum the House of Lords stated any offer of devo max would be unconstitutional stating: “Whereas both the UK Government and the Scottish Government have recognised that independence is a Scottish question, devolution max is not. Proper constitutional process requires that negotiations involving all parts of the United Kingdom precede any referendum on an agreed scheme of devolution max.”

‘The Vow’ encapsulates all those promises of more powers, but it's not being delivered by the Scotland Bill

In other words they believe that there needs to be a whole UK referendum on devo max, and English voters, the House of Lords and Commons have the power to veto. The Scotland Bill now has a third reading in the Lords. They could still block it if they do not like the fiscal agreement but they will not block it for having too many powers — because it doesn't.

People on both sides of the independence debate must admit that there is a strong majority in Scotland for devo-max powers for the Scottish Parliament. Poll after poll has shown that to be the case but the UK Government insisted that there be no devo-max option the 2014 ballot paper.

How supporters of devolution feel about the Scotland Bill will define Scotland's constitutional future. Research compiled by Ashcroft on why Scotland voted No found that 25% of No voters selected “A No vote would still mean extra powers for the Scottish Parliament together with the security of remaining part of the UK, giving the best of both worlds” as their main reason for voting No.

The famed Vow was only one of many promises of more powers during a long campaign. However, it has become a phrase used to encapsulate all of those more-powers promises. So when research by YouGov found that only nine per cent of Scots believe that the Vow was being delivered by the proposed Scotland Bill, it begs the question who really benefits politically from the deal that allows the Bill to progress?

THE Tories will proclaim The Vow has been delivered and Ruth Davidson will campaign on two key messages, firstly that only the Tories stand up for the Union, and secondly that she will challenge the SNP to say what they will do with the extensive new powers now that Scotland is the most powerful devolved parliament in the world. She knows that the most powerful parliament claim does not stand up to scrutiny, but she also knows that the powers are a trap.

Labour, despite the fact that the powers trap was meant for the SNP, blundered in and demonstrated the limited nature of the proposed tax powers with an entirely muddled and unworkable 1p tax-rise plan. Labour provided a clear case study on how the proposed powers are largely unusable window dressing – but maybe the SNP have a way through.



Leaving the powers unused and claiming they are unusable is a risky tactic. But using the powers is also risky – risky because people who hoped for more powers and voted No, that crucial 15% to 20% of current union supporters, are often middle class, university educated, salaried and very wary of tax rises and of left-wing policies in general.

Ruth Davidson will want the SNP to raise income tax, she wants them to alienate the SNP voters who voted No. The SNP might be able to use the tax powers if they simultaneously completely revamped the council tax system so that more revenue was raised but the overall tax situation was progressive. Even that is problematic for independence. Some polls suggest in parts of Scotland up to 20 per cent of regular SNP voters voted No in 2014. Look at some of the biggest No vote areas where the SNP usually romps home, in Aberdeenshire (60.3% No) and Perth and Kinross (60.1% No). In Angus, where the SNP holds both Westminster and Holyrood seats, only 44% voted Yes. Moray, which also returns an SNP MP, said 59% No.

The left put on a great show – and they voted Yes in big numbers. But most Scots sit either slightly left or slightly right of centre, as do the majority of SNP voters, and they were frightened of a vision of a true socialist left-wing Scotland. The only way to convince the non-left on independence is to publish a forward-thinking, creative, progressive and fully costed roadmap to greater economic prosperity and a fairer, more environmentally sustainable, independent Scotland. If the SNP does not grasp that thistle, even the growing disappointment with limited devolution, increasing disillusionment with Westminster and even a forced Brexit will not alone guarantee independence within a decade.