

Looking Back, Looking Forward

The Cook-Maclennan Agreement,
Eight Years On

Robin Cook
&
Robert Maclennan



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By Robin Cook & Robert Maclennan

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The opinions in this paper reflect those of the individual authors only

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About the authors

Rt Hon Robin Cook MP

Robin Cook first entered Parliament as Labour MP for Edinburgh Central in 1974. Since 1983 he has been MP for Livingston. Between 1980 and 1989 he was Opposition Spokesman for Treasury and Economic Affairs (1980-83); European and Community Affairs (1983-84) and Health and Social Security (1987-89). He became Shadow Health Secretary (1989-92); Shadow Trade and Industry Secretary 1992-94 and finally Shadow Foreign Secretary 1994-97.

With the return of a Labour Government at the 1997 general election he served as Foreign Secretary from 1997 until 2001 and as Leader of the House of Commons from 2001 until 2003.

He is author of numerous works including most recently: "The Point of Departure: Diaries from the Front Bench" (2004). Robin Cook keenly follows horse-racing and has written racing columns in his spare time.

Robert Maclennan (Lord Maclennan of Rogart)

Robert Maclennan was Member of Parliament for Caithness and Sutherland from 1966 until 1997 and MP for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross from 1997 until 2001. Formerly a member of the Labour Party, he served as Minister at the Department of Prices and Consumer Protection in the 1974-79 Labour Government. Robert Maclennan left the Labour Party in 1981 to become a founder-member of the Social Democratic Party. He was elected Leader of the SDP in August 1987, in which position he successfully led the negotiations with the Liberal Party which culminated in the formation of the Liberal Democrats in March 1988.

Shortly before the 1997 general election Robert co-authored the Cook-Maclennan agreement, and with Robin Cook later became co-chairman of the Joint Consultative Committee on Constitutional Reform.

He stood down from Parliament in 2001, and became a member of the House of Lords. He is married with three children, and his interests include the theatre, music and the visual arts.

Introduction and Executive Summary

British politics is highly adversarial and political change is usually delivered by a single party, rather than by parties working together. Constitutional reform is an exception to that rule. Most of the constitutional changes implemented after the 1997 general election gained partial cross-party support through an agreement made between Labour and the Liberal Democrats in the run up to that year's election. Named after the two party's chief negotiators, Robin Cook and Robert Maclennan, the Cook-Maclennan agreement led to the most extensive package of reform ever offered to the British electorate in one election.

This agreement did not come out of a vacuum, but from a very particular political context. After 18 years of Conservative governments, the agreement identified and codified what had become the consensus position of progressive reformers at the time. It was hoped by many that it would herald the start of a new politics of co-operation. But as it turned out it, the agreement and the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee which followed it after the election, was to be the high water mark of cross-party working rather than representing a permanent change in the style of governance.

The implementation of a large part of the Cook-Maclennan agreement by the Labour government fundamentally changed the way Britain is now governed. It helped pave the way for, among other things: devolution; the incorporation of European Convention on Human Rights into UK law and the passing of the Freedom of Information Act.

As a result of the devolution settlement we now have a living example in Scotland of how coalition government can work and how proportional representation can deliver a more representative politics. Devolved assemblies in Wales, Scotland and London are demonstrating admirably that

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pluralism in political governance can work and can be beneficial to the United Kingdom as a whole, contrary to the assertions of centralist critics. In the Cook-Maclennan agreement we have a model of how cross-party working can successfully deliver political change: it is important to remember, looking back, that the outcome was by no means certain when the parties began the process.

In this pamphlet Robin Cook and Robert Maclennan look at what has been achieved in the last eight years. They then look forward to what still needs to be done. They both agree on three broad priorities for constitutional change: House of Lords Reform; the introduction of a more proportional voting system for Westminster and the establishment of a written constitution for the United Kingdom.

Robin Cook in his interview also tackles the need for political parties to be more open, less concerned with internal discipline and based on a clear value system. Robert Maclennan identifies the need to tackle the power of the Executive and deal with the royal prerogative. Overall this pamphlet celebrates how far we have come, but is sober in looking at how far we still have to travel.

Peter Facey
Director, NPN