Would independence make Scotland's welfare fairer?

Citation for published version:
McEwen, N Would independence make Scotland's welfare fairer?.

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Publisher Rights Statement:

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
At its height, the welfare state was a symbol of nationhood and solidarity that helped Scots to feel at home in Britain. Nowadays, much of the core welfare state functions have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament. The one that remains at Westminster - social security - is taking a battering.

UK welfare reform has helped to make welfare and ‘fairness’ a central feature of the independence referendum. For the Scottish Government, independence would mean having the power to create a more equal society. But how distinctive would an independent Scottish welfare state be?

Not very, if we look to last year’s report by the Expert Working Group on Welfare. It recommended Scottish/rUK co-operation to deliver pensions and benefits for a transitional period to avoid any disruption in benefit pay-outs. The report also pointed to the complex arrangements for delivering pensions and benefits: most – though not all – benefits paid to Scots are processed in Scotland, but these DWP offices also process payments for claimants in the north of England, Yorkshire and London. Sharing service delivery would limit the scope for the two governments’ policies to diverge.

The independence White Paper hinted at more radical change. It included a commitment to immediately scrap the bedroom tax and halt the roll-out of universal credit and PIPs, pending the design and implementation of a new system of social protection. The expert group will set out its welfare vision this spring. Expect it to look more Nordic than British.

Change, however, won’t come easy. Independence would not be a ‘year zero’. Scotland would inherit existing institutions and services. These come with vested interests and modes of operation that can stymie change. Shifting resources from one group to another is always difficult politically, especially since rUK would remain Scotland’s main point of reference. The pressure would be for all Scottish public services and benefits to be at least on a par with those in England, if not more generous.

Scottish policy choices would also be constrained by the demographic and economic pressures that have made social protection the highest proportion of government expenditure across Europe. It’s far from clear that the Scottish government would have the fiscal resources and policy freedom to match its welfare ambition.

Dr Nicola McEwen is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Edinburgh and Associate Director of the ESRC Scottish Centre on Constitutional Change