

News Politics

Scots target assisted dying after winning hunt battle

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The SNP is considering an ambush on assisted dying as part of a war of attrition by Nicola Sturgeon over the treatment of her MPs in the Commons.

Scotland's first minister warned that her party in Westminster would con-

tinue to vote on English-only laws in coming months, after SNP MPs forced David Cameron into a humiliating climbdown on fox hunting yesterday.

The party made clear that its intervention in non-Scottish matters, breaking the SNP's custom of abstaining on English-only votes, was in part in revenge for the Tory UK government's

plans to introduce English votes for English laws (Evel) and its unwillingness to devolve greater powers to Scotland.

An SNP MP last night told *The Times* that assisted dying, due to come before the Commons for a second reading in September, had been identified as the next English-only legislation passing through the Commons on which the

SNP could vote. Because it is likely to be a free vote rather than a whipped one, the SNP could potentially hold the balance of power if it voted en bloc.

David Cameron last month made clear that he opposed the bill, brought forward by the Labour MP Rob Marris, stating during prime minister's questions: "I don't support the assisted dying proposals. I don't support euthanasia."

SNP insiders said that nothing had been decided or ruled out yet, with one indicating the party may decide as a group to allow a free vote among its own MPs on assisted dying.

The SNP has also not ruled out voting on English education or other health laws, which are devolved matters in Scotland. The government's plan to scrap maintenance grants for poorer students, revealed in last week's budget, is one English-only education issue the SNP may vote on.

Stewart Hosie, the SNP's Westminster spokesman on the economy, made clear in his response to the budget that the party would be examining the proposals, which are set to save £2.5 billion over the next five years, to see whether they lead to a decrease in the funding for Scotland via the Barnett formula.

Speaking at *The Times* CEO summit yesterday, Ms Sturgeon said she hoped that the government and the SNP could come to an agreement over the legislation on which Scottish MPs should vote. "I want to get to a point in the House of Commons where there is some agreed understanding on both sides about where voting on both sides is appropriate and where it is not and the appropriate respect that should be given to the Scottish mandate," she said.

Mr Cameron came under pressure from Tory MPs last night to toughen up proposals to block Scottish MPs vetoing English-only laws after he was forced to retreat on relaxing the fox hunting ban.

Conservative backbenchers spoke out after the prime minister indicated yesterday that he was not planning to strengthen new draft proposals for English votes for English laws.

Many backbenchers consider the current proposals for Evel too weak.

Asked if he would toughen the Evel laws before the autumn, the prime minister said: "I'm a believer in the United Kingdom. If you want total perfection in terms of English laws, you'd have to have an English parliament; you'd have to have a federal system. That's not what we are proposing."

However, the Evel proposals, which have just been redrafted and will be voted upon in the autumn, would not stop the SNP from blocking English-only legislation such as the fox hunting amendment in future.

Tory MPs called on the prime minister to think again and redraft stronger proposals to restrict the voting rights of Scottish MPs on non-Scottish laws.

Bill Cash, MP for Stone, told *The Times* the proposals were "convoluted" and needed simplification.

Nadine Dorries, MP for Mid Bedfordshire, said: "By what the SNP have done [on the fox hunting vote], they have ensured we must pass changes that don't allow the SNP to vote on legislation that is English-only."

Despite the prime minister's refusal to commit to strengthening Evel, she added: "I can tell you now there is no stomach for the SNP voting on English-only issues. The appetite is not here in parliament nor in the public either."

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