

THE YEAR AT WESTMINSTER

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The year at Westminster ended as it began, under the shadow of industrial disaster. One of the last duties of MPs before they set off for the long summer recess was to listen to George Younger, the Scottish Secretary, announce that the curtain had finally been rung down on the Invergordon smelter. The fate of the 890 jobs in Easter Ross had been at the heart of the Parliamentary debate for months, and it seemed a fitting end to a year in which pessimism was the dominant theme.

Legislatively, it was quiet. After the radical measures of the first two years of Conservative Government - The Criminal Justice Act, The Education Act and the Tenants Rights Act - the long-drawn arguments over the Civic Government (Scotland) Bill and the Local Government and Planning (Scotland) Bill seemed less than earth-shaking, for all the important matters tucked away in the corners of the legislation. There was a feeling that the Government's mind, like the mind of the country was on other matters. Month by month as unemployment record after unemployment record was set, Younger and his Ministers found their main task was to defend the consequences of Government economic strategy rather than the detail of their legislative plans. They should perhaps have found it harder than they did.

It is always a tricky matter to spot the weakness of an opposition party: if there were an easy formula for harrassing Governments into eventual defeat it would be simple to judge where the Labour Party have gone wrong. Instead there was, as MPs left Westminster, a lingering feeling that once again Scottish Office Ministers had survived unscathed in a way which surprised them, as well as outside observers. True, Alex Fletcher (in his increasingly difficult dual role as Industry and Education Minister) faced some rough treatment, and cries of "Resign" would ring out regularly, but, oddly, the

Government never looked shaken. Younger's unruffled calm, as infuriating to his opponents as it was reassuring to his supporters, seemed time and again to defuse potentially riotous Commons exchanges on unemployment figures, or on individual factory closures (which seemed to punctuate the year) when he should have been scurrying for cover. Month by month Ministers would emerge from Scottish question time relieved rather than shaken, their predictions, at their regular Wednesday-morning meeting, of wild scenes having been disproved yet again.

This is not to say that Ministers always discharged themselves well. Fletcher is not the best of Commons performers, and though he has a certain love of a fight which serves him well at the Dispatch Box, there were times (particularly on educational policy) when he floundered. There was never any serious talk, however, of changing his portfolio, though a reshuffle involving a reorganisation of functions as well as individuals became more likely as the year reached its end. Younger himself maintained his reputation for calm, a quality which resulted in "complacent" being the adjective most often hurled at him by Opposition MPs. This was the charge - that Younger was complacent, soft and ineffective in Cabinet. Bruce Millan returned to the theme on the day of the end of the smelter. Many people in Scotland, not just honourable Members, felt that the way in which the Secretary of State dealt with this matter was the real test of his credibility as the Minister who looked after Scottish economic and industrial interests. If that is the test, the Secretary of State has failed lamentably.

In earlier years the focus of the attack had been on the Tories' legislative plans - the assisted places scheme, stop-and-search powers for the police, the widespread sale of council houses - but now, against the background of miserable industrial performance (an impression reinforced by the CBI quarterly survey just after Parliament rose for the summer) the accusation facing Younger was that he had mismanaged the areas of the economy for which he was directly responsible and, further, had failed to fight Scotland's case adequately in the Cabinet. It is worth examining the last charge.

It has always been a bit of a mystery whether or not Younger considers himself a fully-fledged "wet", fighting with the likes of James Prior and Peter Walker against the central economic strategy of the Prime Minister and Sir Geoffrey Howe. The difficulty of placing him in

the Cabinet has probably as much to do with the unsatisfactory nature of an over-simplified "wet-dry" spectrum as with Younger's beliefs. He is, at once, a loyalist and a pragmatist. He is never heard, publicly, to disagree strongly with policies he has opposed in Cabinet but which are nonetheless approved. He is, in the American phrase, a team player. This cannot be said of some prominent "wets", who specialise in coded speeches attacking Mrs Thatcher's strategy, a technique which Peter Walker has made his own. Younger indulges in none of that, but it would be wrong to conclude as a result that he is always on the Prime Minister's side. He is not.

His loyalty is principally to William Whitelaw, who represents so much of the Conservative Party that Younger has known all his life. Both are wealthy landowners, Wykehamists, ex-Army officers and they have precisely the same kind of approach to Conservatism, based on a dislike of dogma. Younger, in difficulties, turns to Whitelaw. There he gets his political advice.

On specifically Scottish matters, Younger has won some struggles with an uncompromising Prime Minister. His long battle with Sir Keith Joseph, in his days at the Industry Department, over development areas brought him into direct conflict with Mrs Thatcher and he succeeded in salvaging something from plans which had serious implications for Scotland. On Invergordon he succeeded in winning Mrs Thatcher's early support for a rescue package - by using party political arguments (principally at the time of the Hillhead by-election) as well as putting a social case. As a result the proposed rescue package had reached more than £100 million by the time the deal collapsed, a plan which enraged many English Tory MPs when it was subsequently revealed. There is an argument that Mrs Thatcher indulged in some vulgar politics with her declaration of confidence in the Invergordon rescue only a few days before polling in Hillhead (a ploy in which Younger was a happy co-conspirator) but the success in putting together a possible rescue package cannot be taken from him. The more fertile ground for criticism is the circumstances which led to the closure itself, and the possible failure to predict difficulties at the smelter.

On more general matters in Cabinet, Younger is a prominent member of a group of Ministers who began to argue forcefully in the summer of 1982 for a greater effort on the Government's part to reduce industry's costs. Patrick Jenkin, the Industry Secretary, came

close to revealing some very damp patches when the Cabinet had their first full-scale public spending debate in July. He took the lead in arguing, in effect, for an Autumn package of economic measures which would exploit the little room for manoeuvre left to the Government to give direct help for industry rather than to wait for a Spring Budget likely to be devoted to pre-election income tax cuts if Mrs Thatcher and her Chancellor prevailed. This was the essential division in the Cabinet as the annual public expenditure discussions began in the Autumn: between those who wanted direct help to industry and those who preferred to wait for popular tax cuts. Younger was firmly in the former group.

Of course, his stewardship of the Scottish economy, so heavily criticised by the Opposition, was always a reflection of the central policies determined by a Cabinet of which he was a member. For all his apparent success in deflecting the occasional blow of the axe - and in holding support, for example, for a consistently tough line in European fishing negotiations - he will be remembered, at least partly, as a Secretary of State who watched unemployment levels rise to a point which would have been considered only a few years ago to be socially unacceptable. He also looked out from St Andrews House at a country in which his party looked unlikely to prosper at the next election, despite the rosy post-Falklands opinion polls which enlivened breakfast time in Downing Street throughout the summer and into the early autumn. The Conservatives in Scotland, having lost their last foothold in Glasgow with the success of Roy Jenkins in Hillhead, and winning no significant benefit from Boundary Commission proposals, were already looking forward to a difficult general election. They noted, with some surprise, that their traditional vote was holding up, even in such hostile territory as Coatbridge and Airdrie, but could expect no electoral benefits to flow from the performance of the Scottish Office.

Younger's team changed radically in the year. With the sideways move of Malcolm Rifkind to an under-secretaryship in the Foreign Office (considered in Westminster terms to be a promotion) Allan Stewart took on local government and home affairs, leaving John Mackay to join the team as Minister for Health and Social Services. Stewart's intellectual abilities served him well in the seemingly endless arguments with local authority leaders over the level of council spending, but there

was a strong suspicion at Westminster that he lacked the instinctive toughness which had enabled Rifkind to win such difficult battles for his Government. Stewart's good fortune was that the nastiest struggles were over: the local elections removed the Labour administration in Lothian, and Stirling District found little support for their defiance of Ministers' spending guidelines. For all the opposition mounted against Younger and Stewart on local government spending, the truth is that at Westminster they were never forced into any major policy shifts, despite stinging rebukes at every stage from Millan and Donald Dewar, who again confirmed his reputation as one of the most able spokesmen on any portfolio on the Opposition front bench, keeping debate on the Civic Government Bill in committee going on late into the night to effect fairly minor changes which he believed important, despite the apparent disinterest of many of his Labour colleagues who left him, at some crucial moments, to wage a very lonely struggle. While Tory MPs were shipped into their seats night after long night, many Labour members treated the proceedings with fairly obvious disinterest.

Indeed, the year at Westminster showed clearly that in a Parliamentary situation in which it was almost impossible to defeat the Government on a major issue because of their inbuilt (UK) majority, the essence of Opposition is the maintenance of a wearing and publicly-appealing campaign to harrass Ministers, to force them into mistakes and to reveal their failings for all to see. Though Labour scarcely needed such an effort to maintain their effortless grip on the Scottish electorate, at least in their traditional strongholds, their failure to drive Younger to public despair allowed the Conservatives to claim victories they would never perhaps have enjoyed.

Maybe one of the most distressing symptoms of this malaise during the year was the performance of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, which slipped noticeably from its once-proud position as a potentially lethal weapon for the Opposition and for backbenchers on both sides to the status of a rather ineffective debating society. There was little to show for their efforts.

Despite a valiant effort to consider youth unemployment and training, and the consideration of such interesting questions as the future of Prestwick Airport, the committee failed to make Ministers answer fully for the effects of their policies. Never was this revealed

more clearly than when Younger himself appeared before them, accompanied by a phalanx of officials and briefs, to be questioned on economic matters. He scarcely needed his briefing papers, far less the officials, to parry the ineffective questions tossed at him like so many soft balls. There seemed no pattern in the questioning (more evidence of a lack of cross-party co-operation) from the committee as a whole, and from Labour members there was a distressing inability to force the Secretary of State into difficult corners. This, at a time of record unemployment, stagnant production and regular factory closures was a spectacular failure indeed. Some of the questions, carefully prepared by Opposition members, even sought information which had been helpfully provided to the committee in advance by Scottish Office officials. It had clearly not been read, or if it had, not understood. The apparent decline of the Select Committee is one of the deep concerns among many MPs at Westminster. At a time when other departmental "watchdogs" are beginning to reap some rewards for their efforts, and to develop an expert network of professional advisers, the Scottish committee seems ineffective and many of the members uninterested.

That is not to say that all Scots backbenchers have not played their part at Westminster. Despite some front-bench irritation, such Labour MPs as George Foulkes have finally found their feet in the Commons and discovered ways of discomfitting Ministers from time to time. Foulkes has emerged, indeed, as a notable "loner" in the mould (dare one say it) of Tam Dalyell - interested in nearly everything, and bursting to speak in almost every debate. He is now a Labour success story. On the Tory side the trouble is that they are running out of backbenchers: their meagre Scottish representation, whittled down by the requirements of Scottish and UK departments, means that the remaining backbench army is peopled mostly by unpredictable independents like Albert McQuarrie and Bill Walker, two regular thorns in the Government's flesh.

In the other parties, the two SNP MPs remained under a cloud, partly because of the party's organisational difficulties and found it hard again to make any significant impact. The same applies to the Liberals and the Social Democrats, for the old reason: the Westminster stage is designed for two players, and it is difficult to sidle

into the limelight very often. There was, however, the inevitable surge of expectation at the arrival in our midst of the SDP MP for Hillhead.

Jenkins had an unhappy month or two after his election. Jostling with Tribunitives to find a seat, jeered mercilessly every time he rose, he found it difficult to slip back into the style which had made him once an impressive Commons performer. He was keenly aware that he had a duty to be interested in Scotland, and that a dozen points of order were lying ready in wait for the first occasion on which he was absent from Scottish question time, or the Scottish Grand Committee, in Edinburgh or London. He blinked in bemused fashion from his seat as he sat through the early days, scarcely recognising, no doubt, much of the detail which was under discussion, nor probably feeling any affinity with the lively badinage which surrounds any Scottish occasion at Westminster, featuring as it does a relatively small group of MPs who tend to have similar interests, perform on the same restricted stage and generally know each other well. In such a setting Jenkins seemed an unlikely figure, never more so than when he made his first Scottish speech on the subject of Glasgow taxis in the Grand Committee. Typically elegant and polished though it was, it seemed something less than the voice of the new radicalism. It seems likely that Jenkins' relationship with Scottish issues, as he tried to revive the momentum of the SDP and the Alliance, will be a difficult one at Westminster. He knows he must maintain it, but it promises to be uncomfortable.

The Hillhead by-election campaign in March was, of course, one of the political milestones of the year, in Westminster as in Scotland, but it is a fact that the conduct of the political battle inside the Commons is less conditioned by such external happenings as the UK-wide debate tends to be. This is not to underestimate the Tory disappointment at losing Hillhead (though the defeat was narrower than they had feared when the by-election was forced upon them, and the more disappointing because midway through the campaign they had actually considered they might maintain their hold on the seat) but it was simply a reflection of the unchanging nature of Scottish electoral politics. The Conservatives know the next election will be won or lost in the south, probably most crucially in the West Midlands and the London suburbs, and not in Scotland where the change in their

representation is likely to be slight. The Alliance predict no great breakthrough north of the border; the Labour Party expect to hold what they have, at least. All (even the SNP) recognise that an earthquake is unlikely at the next election, and thus it is true that the ebb and flow of the Scottish argument at Westminster has a quite different character from the UK debate, and it may be one of the reasons why the Labour Party seem to have failed to wreak maximum damage on Younger and his men. They hold what they have, the overwhelming support of the Scottish electorate and their difficulty is not in spreading their word in Scotland, but elsewhere. Labour's Scottish MPs are therefore caught in the trap - numerical superiority but relative impotence in the Commons - which induces considerable depression (reflected in the independent noises being made by a small group of them in the summer of 1982).

They look, the vast majority of them, for devolution. John Prescott, the party's regional affairs spokesman, has however an extremely tricky task in trying to bring round many English MPs, most notably from the North-east, to a cause which they sabotaged so effectively in 1978-79. The Scots have made their feelings plain, and they have kept the strong support of Michael Foot, the party leader, but there is much work to be done. Given the party's preoccupation with its internal wrangles (less in Scotland than elsewhere) the priority for devolution was seen to be slipping. Rocks and shoals lie ahead.

On the Conservative side, of course, devolution was scarcely mentioned. Lord Home's celebrated advice during the 1979 referendum campaign - that a "No" vote was a step towards a better devolution scheme under a Conservative Government - has slipped further from the mind, if that was possible, and only the arrival of the Scottish Grand Committee in the planned Assembly Building in the old Royal High School in Edinburgh (now called, neutrally, Crown Office Buildings) was a gesture towards decentralisation. The experiment was unpopular with some MPs who regarded it as window-dressing of a particularly useless sort, but there were others who insisted that it was of symbolic importance in demonstrating that Scottish issues could be discussed in Scotland, however impotent the forum. When Labour MPs were faced with deciding whether to recommend to the Government that the experiment

be continued, those who were most unenthusiastic were roundly beaten. The experiment is likely to go on, despite the lukewarm approach of many Conservatives, because there is no-one who would like to be branded as the first MP to suggest that the grand committee be whisked back to London. The psychology of devolution, if nothing else, still works. There are few who would claim that the Grant Committee experiment has achieved much in itself, but there are quite a few who argue that it represents a step forward, tentative but nonetheless important.

It provides, they argue, a focus for the Scottish debate which does not exist at Westminster. Certainly, it must be to the advantage of any Opposition to take the debate outside the Commons and subject Ministers to perhaps more public scrutiny, assuming they have the equipment and the alternative policies with which to do the job. Labour's problem throughout the year was the internal weaknesses and divisions, on policy as well as organisation, which made the Tory counter-attack easy. For someone like John Mackay, who could have expected the proverbial baptism of fire, the target was inviting. Mackay, whose political abilities lie mainly in his formidable skills in rough-and-tumble debate, established himself quickly as a surprisingly difficult Minister to knock off his stride. In Conservative eyes he had a promising start in his Ministerial career.

Another career in office ended spectacularly, of course, with the resignation of Nicholas Fairbairn as Solicitor General. It was a shattering blow to so sensitive a man, and a surprising number of his colleagues (and opponents) were prepared to admit that he had probably suffered far more than his offence dictated. In the extraordinary furore which billowed around the non-prosecution of three Glasgow youths for rape, Fairbairn gave a couple of unwise interviews to the Press, followed it with a disastrous statement and apology to the Commons, and fell within an hour. Following the unnecessary and harsh revelations about aspects of his private life only a few months earlier he had taken on the look of a law officer who was accident prone, and that, for the Prime Minister, was enough. His last performance on the Government front bench was a sad affair, evoking genuine sympathy from all sides of the Commons. With the later publication of Lord Hunter's report on the Paddy Meehan affair it was a bad year for Fairbairn, but

few of his colleagues doubted as it ended that he would be back to emerge as one of the most colourful, and unpredictable backbenchers in the Commons.

Personalities thus emerged strongly during the year, etched against the great events, whether in economic policy, industrial disaster or party political changes. The legislative burden on Scots MPs was heavy, but there were few of the great issues which had occupied their attention in the two previous years.

The Civic Government (Scotland) Bill was a hotch-potch of minor provisions, most of them designed to replace the plethora of local by-laws long-since outdated. It was one of the portmanteau pieces of legislation which float around a department for years until a suitable Parliamentary "window" appears. Thus McQuarrie and David Myles, Tory MP for Banffshire, were able to wage a lengthy campaign about various aspects of the nuisance caused by dogs; there was a prolonged debate about the rights of Glasgow taxi drivers in new licensing procedures; and a host of other relatively minor matters. MPs did, however, grapple with two questions of some importance - the control of sex emporia, which was causing considerable concern to MPs on all sides because of the tendency for fleshy entrepreneurs to set up business near schools, and the problem of public processions and marches, a subject which raised fundamental questions about civil liberties and public order.

The other main piece of legislation was the Local Government and Planning (Scotland) Act which implemented many of the recommendations of the Stodart Committee of Inquiry into local government. It changed some of the responsibilities divided between regional and district councils, altered aspects of development planning and listed building control. The Government also used the Act to strengthen the tenant's "right to buy" a council house, and to toughen up the system whereby the Secretary of State has power, with Parliamentary approval, to penalise authorities he considers to be planning "excessive and unreasonable" spending, the power in 1982 against Stirling District Council, though a settlement with the newly-elected Tory council in Lothian Region was reached and the threat of similar action was withdrawn in return for reduced spending plans by the council.

Little legislation was promised for the following year: a Bill

to allow divorce to be arranged through Sheriff Courts, and an alteration to the legal aid system, a Mental Health Bill and a number of minor Bills. The Government have achieved their major legislative objectives, and the focus in 1983 will be firmly on the economy, as it was in 1982.

Younger and his team know that they will be judged at the polls on their economic performance. It was a bleak and depressing picture last year, with Scotland suffering the worst recession since the war. It was the constant cry of Ministers that the winds were even chillier elsewhere in the UK, but to justify the confident rhetoric with which they waged their battles in the Commons in 1982 they will have to produce much more tangible signs in 1983 that their central economic strategy can produce many more benefits, and fewer catastrophes. It will be a difficult year for them, or at least it should be.