

THE CURIOUS INCIDENT:
SCOTTISH PARTY COMPETITION SINCE 1979

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"Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

"To the Curious incident of the dog in the night-time".

"The dog did nothing in the night-time".

"That was the curious incident", remarked Sherlock Holmes.

The Conservative government formed after the May 1979 general election lacked a parliamentary majority in Scotland. For the seventh election in succession the Scottish people had returned a Labour majority. The government owed its parliamentary strength to its victories in the South of England. Forty-four of Scotland's seventy-one MPs were Labour: twenty-two Conservative: there were also three each sitting for the Liberal and the Scottish National parties. To be sure, Labour's predominance amongst Scotland's MPs overstated her plurality in votes. Labour won 41.5% of the vote to the Conservative's 31.4%. The SNP won 17.3% and the Liberals held 9.0%. But it was the apparent permanence of the Labour plurality which stood out.

From the moment the results were declared it was obvious to all that the newly elected Government would have trouble in Scotland. How, with just twenty-two MPs would it find sufficient men of calibre to run the Scottish Office and contribute to the British ministries while also running the Commons' committees? Labour would be able to use its majority on the Scottish Grand Committee to needle the government; it could use the Chair of the Scottish Select Committee (resurrected by the newly elected Government) to expose the weakness of the administration; and its control of Scotland's major local authorities to defend local services against Westminster attack. Surely no government lacking a Scottish majority could expect to push through the kind of policies to which the Thatcher team were

committed without difficulty.

Some of the central ideas in the new Government's manifesto were bound to hurt Scotland particularly. Cutting public expenditure would take cash away from the industries and public services on which Scotland was disproportionately dependent. "Improving the productivity" of the nationalised industries might easily lead to considerable unemployment in Scotland. Cuts in regional employment grants, on which Scotland was dependent would hurt too. Only a cursory glance at the history of recent Conservative governments lacking a Scottish plurality showed the danger. The Macmillan-Home administration was harried to derision toward the end of its term by the Scottish Parliamentary Labour team led by Willie Ross. The Heath government had been forced into one of its most humiliating volte-face over the collapse of Upper Clyde Shipbuilders.

And the new Government had more than Labour to fear. If the official Opposition failed to make the running against her, then the SNP was only too anxious to do so. After all, it was under previous Conservative administrations that the SNP had erupted. In 1962 in West Lothian, and again in 1973 in Glasgow Govan it showed its mettle. Throughout Britain the 'third' parties had historically grown fastest under Conservative governments. The scene for another such advance could hardly have been more carefully set.

Undaunted, the Government has fulfilled its promises. It did not flinch from cutting the social services: public capital expenditure on items like school buildings and housing has all but stopped. All locally administered services - other than the police - have suffered. British Leyland has ceased to produce tractors in Scotland; Linwood - Scotland's last automobile assembly plant closed in May 1981. The huge pulp mill in Fort William has ceased production. At Invergordon in the Highlands only one week's notice of the closure of the aluminium smelter was given. Prestwick lost much of its North American trade. Government policies have robbed Scotland, and yet, there is the curious incident of the guard dog in the night-time. The dog did nothing in the night-time. It neither bit nor barked.

I

Elections can be a time for barking or for biting. Since the 1979 general election there have been three parliamentary by-elections

and two Scotland-wide local elections. There were parliamentary by-elections in Glasgow Central, Glasgow Hillhead, and Coatbridge and Airdrie. There were local government elections for the Districts (all of Scotland other than the three island councils) in May 1980 and for the Regions (all of Scotland) in May 1982.

The by-election in Glasgow Central, occurred in June 1980. Glasgow Central is one of the smallest seats in the United Kingdom. Its electorate at the by-election was 18,854. It is also overwhelmingly Labour. The election happened a year after the new Government took office. For all of these reasons only a sensational overturning of the Labour majority would have given any general meaning to this result. In the event Labour and Conservative candidates both lost votes. Labour lost 11% of its general election percentage; the Conservative lost 7% of its May 1980 percentage. The SNP managed to discover some voters in the desolate parking lots of Glasgow Central and put its vote up respectably from 11% to 26%. No one, however, saw any sign of revolt against the Government here.

The previous month all of Scotland had a chance to vote in the District elections. 45% of the voters turned out - a small drop on the previous election in 1977. Labour gained 45% of the vote, an improvement of 14% since 1977: the Conservatives gained 24%, a drop of 3% and the SNP lost 8% to end at 15% of the total. The most important change in votes was the drop in the nationalist vote. But more important Labour gained control of a number of Councils which had previously not had any one party in over-all control. They regained control of eleven districts which had previously been theirs in 1974 but they had lost in 1977. They gained control of four Districts in which they had only previously been the largest party - Dundee, Falkirk, Clydebank and Strathkelvin - and they took four in which they had never previously been even the largest party - Clackmannan, Cumbernauld and Kilsyth, East Kilbride and Kyle and Carrick. These gains were mostly achieved at the expense of the SNP and they further strengthened the hand of Labour in Opposition to the Conservative Secretary of State, but the victories of May 1980 hardly registered electoral defeats for the Conservatives. They had too little to lose for that.

In March 1982 the new Social Democratic/Liberal alliance captured control of Glasgow Hillhead in a parliamentary by-election. The

Alliance candidate, Roy Jenkins received 10,106 votes (33.4%); Gerald Malone the Conservative candidate came second with 8,086 votes (26.6%) Labour's David Wiseman was third with 7,846 votes (25.9%) and the SNP candidate lost his deposit, gaining only 3,416 votes. The defeat of the Conservative candidate, in this, their only remaining seat in Glasgow, was certainly a major event. But Hillhead was seen as part of a British trend of SDP/Liberal Alliance victories and compared to its predecessors the Tories did not do at all badly. Their drop from 41% to 26% was nothing to be ashamed of.

In May, under the shadow of the battle for the Falklands, voters in Scotland could choose between the parties in Regional elections. Forty-three per cent did so. Labour remain the largest party with 37.3% of the vote, the Conservatives were second with 25.1%; the Alliance pushed its way into third place with 18% and the SNP brought up the rear with 13%. The Conservatives did well to become the dominant group in Lothian Region though Labour increased its already considerable lead in Strathclyde. The Conservatives and Labour have twenty-two seats each in Lothian, but the former have an informal pact with the Alliance which gives them control. In Strathclyde Labour have seventy-nine seats to the Conservatives' fifteen - there are nine other councillors. In June 1982 Labour retained control of Coatbridge and Airdrie comfortably. Tom Clarke, the Labour candidate won 19,208 votes; Hugh de Burgh (Conservative) won 9,118 and the SNP and Liberal candidates lost their deposits. There was a small swing to the Conservatives in this socialist bastion.

In none of this can one detect any major swing of votes away from the Government. The dog - or dogs - of opposition have failed to bark. Why?

II

In part the answer has to do with the skill of the Government. This is not simply a matter of media manipulation - though there is that - but rather of an older skill. The present Government is adept at knowing when to fight and when to give in. It gave in to the miners at the first sign of trouble but held out against the civil servants and eventually forced them to concede. It should also be said that despite some large, well publicised failures of economic policy, the Government has had some not insignificant successes.

Alec Fletcher, the junior spokesman on industry has done much to protect the independence of Scotland's industry and banking. Most of this work was done behind the scenes and yet a judicious policy of leaks has kept the Scottish press happy. Fletcher lobbied extensively in private to preserve Ferranti - precisely the sort of high technology firm with its 7,000 employees that Scotland needs. Fletcher also arranged for the rival foreign bids for the Royal Bank of Scotland to be referred to the Monopolies Commission. That Commission ultimately recommended that the Bank remain independent - that is, Scottish.

But the Government's most impressive success was much more public. It radically curtailed the independence of local governments, forced local authorities to make cuts many of the them protested were impossible, and made the most vociferous of their opponents take the blame. While making the cuts they focused the public argument on the self-proclaimed Marxism of the Labour group in Lothian Region.

By using the innocuously titled Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions)(Scotland) Act 1981, the Government can require any authority whose expenditure it deems 'unreasonable and excessive' to reduce it. Not content with that, the Government went further in 1982. Overspending authorities are now required to return money to the rate-payers. Through their administration of these Acts the Government has, in effect, thrown all caution to the wind. The old-fashioned notion that central and local government should collaborate, whatever the partisan differences between them, has been abandoned. Lothian, Dundee and Stirling have been made the chief whipping boys of Government action - not because they have behaved particularly outrageously as measured by any objective criteria - but simply because their Labour Councillors (especially in Lothian until May 1982) have clothed their actions in the rhetoric of the Left and sought confrontation with central government.

The Government's action in destroying local autonomy in order to retaliate against certain local authorities is out of keeping with the prevailing style of the present Scottish Office team. Indeed, it is out of style with the normal Scottish Office mode of operation. It is also contrary to the traditional respect English Tories (at least

those in local government) have had for local autonomy. Scots Tories, who lacked a local government base until the mid-sixties have never had the same feeling as their southern brothers. On the contrary, Scots Tories are heir to the long tradition of colonial government and the present Scottish Office team is a colonial government at its best. Truly is George Younger heir to those Ministers at the Foreign Office who ruled a populous Nigeria with a bare handful of men. Younger has just twenty-two MPs to tie down the rebellious Scots, and, aided by a reticent Opposition front bench, he has been making a job of it.

Lothian is, of course, the exception. It barked. From the return of the Conservative government in 1979 until Labour lost control of the region in May 1982, Lothian barked furiously. The genius - or luck - of the Government consisted in isolating Lothian. The foolishness - or luck - of the Region consisted in its failure to make common cause with the other Labour controlled councils. In part this was a matter of dogma: the Lothian Labour Party contained many who wanted to be more left-wing than anyone else. In part too, it was a matter of overwhelming complexity. Councillors are amateurs and they have no paid political staff. Getting agreement within the Lothian group and with the Lothian Party was difficult enough. Working with Strathclyde and others was just too much to take on. But the effect was to make Lothian look the mad dog. The claim, for instance, of some of Lothian's senior Labour councillors, that acceptance of the £45 million cut demanded by the Government in June 1981 would mean 14,000 redundancies - a figure they never justified - was characteristic.

It is because the fight with the local authorities - especially Lothian - is so exceptional that it deserves serious consideration. Most of the initial barking came from Lothian Region. Their action in going for growth in 1980 when the Government was pressing local authorities to cut back was the flag which attracted the Tory bull. The 53% rates increases which the Lothian Council forced on its constituents offered the Government a potential weapon: appeal to the ratepayers' sense of outrage, force the 'local reds' to give the money back. Lothian made the confrontation all the more inevitable by refusing to trim even when the Government had made its intentions known.

From that point most of the aggression came from the Younger team. The question is, why? Several possible answers suggest themselves: pressure from the Prime Minister and the Cabinet must have been a factor: pressure from Edinburgh Conservative MPs and party members was not lacking: but above all there was the temptation to take a swipe at a local authority which had had the effrontery to unfurl the Red Flag over Scotland's capital. Around its 'cut the rates' slogan the Government was able to rally its own voters and isolate Lothian. The final fruit of this victory came in May 1982 when the voters of Lothian voted Labour out in four Regional seats and gave the administration of the Region to a Conservative dominated coalition.

There was, to be sure, one public attempt to outmanoeuvre the Government on this issue. RAGE - the Rate-payers' Action Group Executive - threatened at one point to put up candidates against the Conservative candidates in the 1982 Regional elections. The threat was born of ratepayer frustration at the ineffectiveness of these councillors in stopping the rates' rise. But in the event this possible split in the right wing vote was avoided - but not too surprisingly, as the leader of RAGE, David Guest had been an officer of the Conservative Party in Edinburgh North all along! In May 1982 he was an unsuccessful Conservative candidate himself.

The ballot boxes had hardly been restored to their cupboards when Guest, wearing his RAGE hat, began to attack the government again. This time it appeared that neither the new Conservative dominated Region nor the Government were sufficiently serious about cutting the rates to placate RAGE. Men who wear many hats can sometimes remind one of circus clowns: but Guest's renewed attack pointed up a serious enough problem for the Government: having raised ratepayers expectations in order to win votes, they had better do something to fulfil them. This is the second time within three years that the Conservatives have played the ratepayers card. First they promised to abolish the rates in their General Election (and did nothing); later they ran against high-spending, high-rating Labour councils. They have not abolished the rates because their own civil servants have shown them how difficult the task is: the income would be difficult to replace. They have trouble keeping the rates down - or

forcing councils to return it - because of the damage this might do to services. In this later argument we see that the Tories have not had it all their own way. Labour has done much to win the public argument about the level of services citizens need from Local Government. This has cut the new Conservative rulers of Lothian's room for manoeuvre.

Part of the Government's success in Scotland since the General Election has to do with the Conservative Party's public unity. The difficulties with RAGE threatened to break this facade, but only momentarily. On the whole the Conservatives have continued their tradition of allowing other parties to fight each other in public. But this is far from saying that the Conservative Party in Scotland is of one mind on the key issues: it isn't. The major division within the party is between the localists and the centralisers. In England, the Conservative Party has a strong and well entrenched interest in local politics. In Scotland it lacks this tradition and until the late 'Sixties the Conservative Party was content to allow others to fight their local government battles. Most Conservative voters plumped for 'Independent' or 'Progressive' candidates. Nevertheless, the Conservative Party has a strong ideological objection to strong central control and its ties with agricultural, rural, and landed interests, bids it hold off too strong a use of central government powers. Now Conservatives fight local government elections under their own banner - and control a number of councils - their interest in preserving local autonomy is stronger than ever. But the pressures these interests and sentiments induce are countered by their overwhelming posture as a colonial government in Scotland. After all, COSLA are largely hostile to Conservatism.

The election of a Conservative dominated council in Lothian is bound to strengthen the hands of the localists within the Tory party. It may also, marginally, affect the stance of COSLA, the local government voice of Scotland, and make it less Socialist. Their control of Lothian lasted hardly a month before the new council began to squabble with the Government. In this way the fight within the Conservative Party may become more public, and more difficult for the party managers to control. The hand of the localists has also been immeasurably strengthened by the promotion out of the Scottish Office

of Malcolm Rifkind. Rifkind was central government's man in charge of relations with local government. His replacement, Alan Stewart (MP East Renfrewshire) is not in the same league. Stewart is also much less effective against Labour's local government spokesman in the House of Commons, Donald Dewar (MP, Garscadden).

III

But if part of the government's success in Scotland can be credited to its own efforts, that is far from the whole of the story. The opposition are in disarray. The internal wrangles of the Labour Party have played a role, but the problems of Labour have to do with much more fundamental causes. The differences within the Conservative camp between localists and centralisers are as nothing compared to the differences within the Labour movement between the unions and the Labour Party. The Government's economic policy which has led to a doubling of unemployment - to 324,709 in May 1982 - has not produced any coherent response from Labour.

Initially this had much to do with the shock and horror of the election of the Thatcher team and with the guilt not a few union leaders felt about their own role in the demise of the Callaghan government. But this was soon put aside. The Government, for its part, cleverly divided the union movement into the strong and the weak. It avoided fights with the former and slapped down the latter. It also increased unemployment. This hurt union finances and made it more difficult for union leaders to convince their men to come out, or stay out, on strike. These problems intensified as the Government passed the halfway mark of its term. In the summer of 1982 one could even hear trade union officials speaking of major unions going bankrupt within months. Such is not the stuff of strong opposition.

For its part the Parliamentary Labour Party has been so caught up in the internal constitutional disputes of its party since the General Election, that it has not formed a popular alternative to the Government.

The Parliamentary Labour Party opposed three constitutional changes: party-wide election of the Leader and Deputy Leader; mandatory reselection of MPs between each election; and control of the Manifesto by the NEC. The first two of these battles it lost. Soon the PLP selected Michael Foot to succeed James Callaghan in a forlorn

attempt to stop the rot. The Labour Party has been riven between a more or less united Parliamentary Party on the one hand and the large majority of Constituency Parties on the other. The latter blame the former for the mistakes of the last government. The trade unions are evenly split on these issues. One result of the struggles within the party and the changes in the Constitution which the reformers in the Constituency Parties have won is that MPs no longer feel secure in their seats. Cut off from behind they are in no position from which to attack Mrs Thatcher.

The British Labour Party fights have had their echo in Scotland. The majority of the Scottish constituency parties are normally in the reformist wing of the party. There was a short time too - in October and November 1981 - when the Scottish Council (of the Labour Party) Executive was in the hands of the left. In those months it backed Mr Benn in his fight with Mr Foot. But mostly the Scottish Council Executive has not embarrassed the Leadership.

There is a paradox about Labour in Scotland in this period. On the one hand the party is capable of passing left wing resolutions and of accusing the previous Labour Government of every knavery imaginable. On the other hand, not a single Scottish Labour MP has failed to gain reselection - though Mr Willie Hamilton in Central Fife came very close - and the majority of Labour's Scottish MPs are on the right of the parliamentary party. Mr Bruce Millan's position as Shadow Scottish Secretary is unchallenged and his team is hardly full of left-wingers. Though there are some dependable supporters of Mr Benn amongst Scottish MPs, Ernie Ross (Dundee West), Ron Brown (Leith) and Allan Adams (Paisley) amongst them, none of these carries much weight. Labour's 1982 (British) Chairman, on the other hand is Mrs Judith Hart, MP (Lanark) and she often sides with Benn but makes no impression on Scottish politics.

The other outstanding feature about Labour in Scotland is the impressive solidity - one might say stolidity - of its vote in Strathclyde Region. Neither of the newer parties - the SNP or the SDP - has been able to break this hold. In May 1982 Labour's proportion of the Strathclyde vote actually rose by 3%. It is noticeable that the more respectable Labour leadership in the West is able to hold its vote while the more tempestuous Lothian Party is not: whether there is anything more than a coincidence here is impossible to say.

One noticeable feature of the Labour Party in the present parliament is its slow retreat from devolution. The retreat is yet to be registered in formal resolutions. Nominally the party is as committed to devolution as ever and some senior spokesmen, such as John Smith MP (North Lanark) Labour's frontbench spokesman on Trade push the cause within Labour's councils, as George Foulkes MP (South Ayrshire) pushes it in public. All now see that local government is an unsatisfactory platform from which to resist the policies of a central government. But most are cool. Already the signs of weakened interest in devolution are noticeable. At the 1981 party conference at Brighton no fringe meeting on devolution could be organised: no speaker of stature would perform. In the Spring of 1982 Labour's draft "Programme for 1982" (which may well be the basis of the next general election manifesto) caused consternation in Scotland when it was realised that it made only passing reference to devolution.

IV

If Labour has failed to make much of an impact why has the SNP not filled the vacuum? The SNP entered the parliament badly deflated. In the middle seventies it had shaken the foundations of the state: by the end of the decade it had lost its way. The Scotland Act of the previous Government would have given Scotland a measure of home rule. The SNP had campaigned for it even though it thought the measure paltry. Scots had let the opportunity go in the referendum of March 1st 1979 when a third of voters said 'yes', a third said 'no' and a third stayed at home. In the following May the SNP slipped back from second to third place amongst the Scottish parties and held only two of its eleven seats.

Not surprisingly the first reaction to these events was to blame the defeat on the party's own moderate line. At its 1979 annual conference the SNP decided that next time it would campaign for full independence - nothing less. It would have no more truck with parties who promised devolution. At that Conference too, the SNP moved decisively toward the personalities who had always championed a simple uncomplicated appeal for independence. It rejected the sophisticated ideas of the newly formed '79 Group.

The '79 Group was the most interesting faction of the Scottish

Party. It brought together many of the younger ex-Labour and ex-left-wing members of the SNP and committed itself to working for an independent socialist republic. Its most prominent members were Margo MacDonald (ex MP for Govan) and Stephen Maxwell (ex-Press Officer) and they were joined a year later by Jim Sillars (ex-Labour MP for South Ayrshire who broke away from Labour to found the short-lived Scottish Labour Party).

Most of the Group's thinking came from Maxwell. He urged that the SNP's only future lay in wooing the Labour vote. The Party had to divest itself of its petit-bourgeois image. It had to show the working people of Scotland that their patience with the Labour Party was earning them nothing. In election after election, Scotland returned Labour majorities to England. To win in Scotland the SNP needed to break the Labour vote - not the Conservative vote - therefore it should challenge Labour on its own territory: Socialism.

There has long been a lacuna in this strategy which may prevent it from winning many votes. Labour votes are not the same as socialist votes. Britain's working people have voted for a respectable Labour Party. They are not perhaps as keen on socialism. In Scotland the leadership of the party is more united and more obviously respectable than in England - no Tony Benn, no Ken Livingstone and only a brief glimpse of George Galloway - hence some of the solidity of Labour's support in Scotland. Labour's increased strength in Strathclyde points up this trend. In Strathclyde Labour provide a very respectable leadership: in Lothian they are a trifle unreliable. The '79 Group's hope that ex-Labour voters will remain socialist voters and vote for a socialist nationalist party thus runs considerable dangers: that ex-Labour voters might either stay at home or vote for a right wing party.

Initially the bulk of SNP conference delegates were unimpressed by this strategy. But the leaders they elected in 1979 did nothing. The SNP's voice, once so loud and clear, all but disappeared. At the May 1981 conference the party reversed itself. It elected Jim Sillars, not yet a member of one year's standing, as a Vice-Chairman. Sillars, a member of the '79 Group - even if many in the Group felt more used than helped by him - committed himself to a campaign of civil disobedience at the 1981 Conference. People who were there re-

member Sillars promising that the jails would be full - the SNP would court martyrdom. Along with Sillars the Conference elected other prominent '79ers to the Executive.

The campaign of civil disobedience which Sillars organised on behalf of the SNP consisted of breaking into the deserted Royal High School building in Edinburgh (the once proposed site for the devolved Assembly) with a number of colleagues. He was fined. Fed up with the opprobrium which they thought such antics attracted to the party, a number of right-wing members, led by Mrs Winifred Ewing (MEP for Highlands and Islands) counterattacked on the eve of the party's 1982 Conference. They set up another faction. This forced the hand of Party Chairman Gordon Wilson, who attacked all factions and the Conference passed a resolution banning factions and giving their members three months to disband.

The voters' uninterest in these activities was shown starkly twice in the Spring of 1982. In March, despite having an excellent candidate in George Leslie and a ferociously active campaign, the SNP could manage only a fourth place in the Hillhead by-election. More damagingly, the seat went to a man who, perhaps as much as anyone living, personified the sophisticated affluent South of England to many Scots - Roy Jenkins. Jenkins, on behalf of the newly created Social Democratic Party - in alliance with the Liberals - won the seat and humiliated Leslie and the SNP by simply ignoring them.

By-elections with a major national figure such as Mr Jenkins competing in them are typical of nothing. The SNP tried to console itself that it would improve its performance in the May 1982 Regional elections. It was not to be. With the exception of Central Region, where the SNP remained the second party to Labour and a few rural seats which the SNP managed to win, the results of May were bleak for the SNP. Labour, with 37.3% of the vote won 188 regional seats; the Conservatives with 25.1% won 119 seats; the alliance of Liberals and Social Democrats came third with 18% of the vote and 25 seats and the SNP was pushed into fourth with 13.4% of the vote and 23 seats. The Independents and others won 165, mostly rural seats on 6.2% of the vote.

Not only had the new alliance pushed the SNP down away from the action, the humiliation was increased by the fact that the new party

was so unScottish in appeal. More damaging to the '79 Group strategy, the Social Democrats seemed to have scored particularly well amongst the voters the SNP's left had wanted. It appeared - these remarks are necessarily impressionistic - that those voters who deserted Labour went not to the SNP but to the SDP. The new party was thus blocking the '79 Group's most hopeful line of advance. Reduced to fourth place faction-ridden and apparently halted the SNP was in no position to frighten the government.

V

The Social Democratic Party was formed in March 1981. It was formed from the top-down. Its founders were prominent people, most of them MPs, some senior ex-Ministers. Around them the founders quickly built a party executive, a bureaucracy and individual members. The individual members were vital in the early stages for their £9 per annum membership fees were the party's main source of income. The first Scottish electoral test of the new party - and of its new alliance with the Liberal Party - occurred on March 25th 1982: the day before the Party's first birthday.

Robert MacLennan MP (Caithness and Sutherland) and a barrister joined the Party at an early stage. He was subsequently joined by another Labour MP, Dr. J. Dickson Mabon (Greenock and Port Glasgow). MacLennan had an important role in the counsels of the new Party. He drafted the constitution. The new constitution proposed by the leaders to the membership suggested that the Party be organised not on the traditional Constituency basis but on an 'area' basis. These areas were to be groups of two to seven constituencies. The Areas were to be grouped into Regions. Scotland would be a Region.

The party members accepted most of the draft constitution which MacLennan put to them but insisted on some changes. They wanted individual constituencies to be able to be an area and they wanted regions to be voluntary. The former change was important for the party in Scotland as in some parts - Lothian for instance - the party already was working on a constituency basis. Here they had sufficient members to make this practical. In the Strathclyde area however, they did not have many members and adopted the larger unit of organisation. The other change forced on the party by the members - making regions voluntary - was a blow to Scotland. It was widely

reckoned that this change would mean that only Scotland and Wales would form Regions and hence the Regions would not be an important tier within the party structure.

Constitutional arrangements necessarily preoccupy a party in its early months. But building a party is more than writing a constitution. A party needs members and votes as well. In Britain as a whole the party has a membership of about 70,000. This is about 110 members per parliamentary seat. Scottish seats have fewer voters so it would be unreasonable for the party to expect to have as many members per seat here as in the South. In fact with 4,125 members there are an average of fifty-eight members per constituency in Scotland.

The new Party's performance in the opinion polls trailed its performance in England. The party did well in England first and only began to catch on in Scotland later. At its euphoric peak in the wake of Mrs Williams' victory in Crosby in November 1981, the party touched 48% in one UK poll. In Scotland it never reached more than 25% (in January 1982, twice in System 3 polls). But almost immediately thereafter the public moved slowly away from the Party. Over the Christmas recess a row between the two allies over the allocation of parliamentary seats - which party was to stand in which seats - broke out in public. The decline in Party fortunes can be dated from here.

More generally it seems that the public, during the 1979 parliament, has been sensitive to rows within parties. The Labour Party reached a peak on the eve of its 1980 conference in Blackpool which led directly to the breaking away of the Social Democratic MPs. The two peaks of support for the new party - or for the idea of a new party - came in the wake of Labour's two most bitter periods of internal wrangling: after the Blackpool conference and leading up to, and after, the 1981 conference in Brighton. In the former case the Party wrangled over its constitution; in the latter it fought over using the new rules to elect a Deputy Leader. In the weeks before the Hillhead by-election Michael Foot patched together something of a truce - which he called the spirit of Bishops' Stortford (because he had the idea at a meeting there). Amongst other things the Hillhead contest would see if the truce could last.

Roy Jenkins began the Hillhead fight in the lead. His stature - former Home Secretary, former Chancellor of the Exchequer, former

Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, former President of the European Commission and possible Alliance leader and Prime Minister - turned a few heads. The Sunday Standard fairly swooned at the thought of a Prime Minister from Glasgow and the initial reactions of the Glasgow Herald and the Scotsman were not entirely dissimilar.

In the event Jenkins nearly lost. He trailed in the opinion polls for much of the last two weeks. His party's efforts were saved only by the last minute rescue mounted by the Liberals. At no time did the Alliance dominate the activity on the streets as Mrs Williams' team had done at Crosby. The energetic SNP campaign saw to that. Of course, the SDP's newness did not help either. It had few members in the immediate vicinity. Glasgow North, which includes Hillhead as well as all of Garscadden, Kelvingrove, Provan, Springburn, Maryhill, Central and Shettleston and parts of Bothwell, Rutherglen and North Lanark, had only 380 members when the by-election began. Furthermore Jenkins did not receive the kind of free gift which the Conservatives gave Mrs Williams in Crosby; in Hillhead neither Conservative nor Labour made any major errors.

With supreme good timing the Scottish Liberals had scheduled their annual conference for the day after the by-election in St. Andrews. Jenkins was received as a hero and he and David Steel began to talk in public about Jenkins' fight for the leadership of the SDP. In this Steel helped his friend by making it clear that Jenkins would be an acceptable leader of the Alliance. Should the SDP choose anyone else Steel expected to be the leader.

VI

Jenkins' victory in Hillhead neatly encapsulates what had happened to Scottish party politics since 1979. It has been nationalised. One important reason why the Scottish Office team have such an easy ride is that their main opponents aim their fire as part of British armies, ignoring the Scottish front. Despite his strong commitment to devolution during the Hillhead by-election - which commitment suffers from some of the same problems as Labour's - Jenkins has not made a single serious mark on Scottish politics since his election.

Not surprisingly he has been more preoccupied with winning his Party's leadership. But then that is the problem. Should he become

Leader he will be a British, not a Scottish, figure. David Steel is a British figure for all that he sits on a Scottish seat. Jenkins position will be the same. He will not be able to give special attention to Scottish issues. The Scottish press and broadcasters will not be able to use him - lest the other parties demand to have their leaders on too.

Not more than two weeks after the Hillhead by-election the whole focus and emphasis of Scottish and British politics was changed by the Argentine invasion of the Falklands. The Falklands have served as a whaling base for a Scottish firm (Christian Salvesen), but even though one of its villages is called Leith the action has nothing to do with Scotland or the Scottish dimension of British Politics. On the contrary, the war for the Falkland islands displaced the entire political agenda. Items already low, such as devolution, disappear. Politicians associated with them also seemed to shrink. Others increased in stature, like Dr David Owen - Mr Jenkins' rival for SDP leadership - and, most of all, the Prime Minister herself: - Boadicea reincarnated, who put everyone and everything else in her shadow. It is a long way from Leith to Leith. And you can't hear dogs at that distance even if they are barking very loudly.