

THE YEAR AT WESTMINSTER

JAMES NAUGHTIE
THE SCOTSMAN

The session limped towards the election, and even after Mrs Thatcher's extraordinary victory, and her overall majority of 143, there was no sense of a new radical urge in the Government's doings in Scotland. The changes brought on by the events of June 9 seemed to be more important in the way in which MPs from Scotland saw their role than in the nature of the legislation proposed. As the Government's plans for their first session of Mrs Thatcher's second term were revealed they seemed much less radical than the heady mixture served up with their opening salvo in 1979.

But changes there were. Faced with disaster south of the border but well over half the seats in Scotland, as usual, Labour MPs began to ponder, perhaps more seriously than ever before, the nature of their mandate. It was to become a tricky word, round which much of the internal arguments in the party in Scotland were to revolve. For the Alliance there was a similar kind of question, though springing from different roots : they now had eight MPs in Scotland and nearly 25 per cent of the vote. How could that position (brought about by inflicting severe damage on Tories across Scotland) be translated into effective opposition in the Commons? For both opposition groups it was a question of tactics.

On the Government side, less changed. George Younger soldiered on as Secretary of State, partly because of the lack of an obvious successor. With Hamish Gray out of the Commons (though bound for the Lords as a Minister of State within a day or two of his rejection by his constituents), Alick Buchanan-Smith too "wet" and too redolent of the devolution arguments of long ago, and Malcolm Rifkind too young, the outcome was maybe inevitable. Alex Fletcher moved off to the Department of Trade and Industry to take on competition policy and, after a long wait, in came Michael Ancram. No surprise there, and when

the first legislative programme was sketched out in the Queen's Speech it promised little excitement.

Even the Tenants' Rights Etc (Scotland) Amendment Bill, whose progenitor caused such a furore four years ago, put the Opposition in a difficult position. With some leading Labour figures giving broad hints that they expected the party's attitude to council house sales to change significantly before the next election, dropping their all-out ideological opposition, the Government were well-placed to advance their argument that a further extension of "tenants' rights" was justified. The Government seemed, legislatively, to have little trouble on the horizon.

That pattern was well-established in the last Parliamentary session of Mrs Thatcher's first term. Bills have a way of filling all the time available - even the most tedious and technical legislation will keep MPs up half the night in the committee stage arguing as if the very future of democracy depended upon it. The 1982-83 session demonstrated that fact of life again: most of the Scottish legislation was either non-controversial, with a good deal of cross-party agreement, or minor stuff. There were little flurries on the jurisdiction of sheriffs in divorce actions (and the transfer from the Court of Session and the High Court of Justiciary to the Secretary of State of the responsibility for regulating legal aid fees), and on changes to land valuation rules, but, for example, on the changes to the Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1960 there was much constructive debate, and no ideological divide.

The Act brought in new safeguards in relation to treatment both with and without the patient's consent, changes in the procedures for compulsory admission to hospital, new rights for mental-disordered offenders, and a reduction by half of the period for which a patient can be detained before the authority for their detention has to be renewed. It was an important piece of legislation but, in the way of the House of Commons, it generated little heat because it never became an inter-party battleground.

The struggle was waged instead on the economy, as before. Younger's difficulties in the year came not from the pitfalls besetting his legislation but from the threats posed by some hard-line

members of the Cabinet, less sensitive than he was to his delicate political position in Scotland. Dominating it all, of course, was the problem of Ravenscraig for which Younger was able to win a partial, though perhaps temporary, reprieve.

During the battles, concentrated in the winter months, his relationship with Ian MacGregor, then Chairman of the British Steel Corporation, and Patrick Jenkin, then the Industry Secretary, went through some sticky patches. There were moments when, in the Scottish Office, all seemed lost, but they emerged with more than they could have hoped for when the whole struggle began. The importance of Ravenscraig was psychological: it became the test of the Government's commitment to what remained of the traditional industrial base of Scotland, and had he failed in his efforts to stave off the first threat of closure Younger would certainly have had to resign. His threat was never made publicly, indeed it was probably never made to the Prime Minister. It was simply assumed (correctly) that no Scottish Secretary who spoke as Younger did of the importance of maintaining some steel-making capacity could survive the loss of Ravenscraig. It became the landmark on the industrial landscape with the longest shadow, a constant reminder to the Government of the depth of the recession. There were others - Timex and Scott Lithgow were running sores - but on steel the Opposition attack was at its sharpest, and Younger's position at its most vulnerable.

In day-to-day exchanges, Fletcher took the heat. His last few months at the Scottish Office were dominated by the issue and it is worth considering what it revealed about his calibre as a Minister. He was at his best arguing at the level of gut politics - putting himself forward as a practical man of business rather than an ideologue, and picturing the Tory-Labour divide on the issue as the difference between those who lived in the "real world" and those who did not. His brief was not an easy one. For all that a Scottish Minister has considerable advantages in Government in-fighting when a largely-captive press and influential broadcasting outlets based in Scotland come, willingly or not, to his aid, Fletcher spent much of his time shutting things down (while Younger, as the wits had it, did all the openings). That was bound to be the fate of any Scottish Industry Minister in a Thatcher Government - all the more reason, then, why he

should have been spared the education portfolio and, perhaps, the educational establishment spared a part-time Minister.

When the Industry-Education link was established after the 1979 General Election it was defended as an imaginative attempt to provide a tangible response to the growing problem of youth training, in and out of school, and unemployment among school leavers. It did not work.

It is probably unfair to blame Fletcher. Faced with the twin problems of trying to save crucial parts of Scottish industry from the gleaming axes of his Cabinet colleagues and the need to sell Scotland abroad, particularly to American and Japanese high-technology firms, it is beyond the power of any normal Minister to give the necessary attention to what must always seem a secondary interest (if only because, at its crudest, it does not very often dominate the headlines and therefore exert the more painful sort of political pressure). Added to the inherent difficulties of the double portfolio was Fletcher's own background in business and his primary interest, industrial policy. As a result he always seemed uncomfortable when he picked up his education brief, and should perhaps have been given a rougher time in the Commons than sometimes he was. Yet, strangely, after the General Election the fiction of a natural link between industrial and education policy at Ministerial level was maintained (under Allan Stewart). It reflected, of course, the fact of the missing Minister, gone since 1979 when Mrs Thatcher deliberately reduced the size of the Scottish Office team in forming her first administration. Surely the awkwardness evident in Fletcher's acrobatics - negotiating at one moment with a Japanese firm for a substantial investment and preparing to fly off to tie up the deal, and the next considering the complicated question of curriculum reform in Scottish schools - has persuaded everyone that the thing is a nonsense? Mrs Thatcher will be having another reshuffle before many moons have passed, probably in Autumn 1984, and surely that would be a moment to tackle the problem. Younger should be aware by now that, under his stewardship, education has not been allowed its proper place.

Fletcher is gone to Whitehall now, there to enmesh himself in the affairs of the City under the guiding hand of Norman Tebbit, one of whose first acts in office was to free the Stock Exchange from the

threat of an inquiry into its workings (and the promise of sterner regulation), and it is time to try to assess his Scottish Office career. He was accused by his opponents, early on, of being the weak link in the team lacking, for example, Rifkind's sparkle. But he demonstrated qualities as the years went by which, though they cannot escape the shadow of the vast unemployment across industrial Scotland, give him claims to be considered a success in some fields: his record in attracting inward investment is a good one. As a dogged political fighter he served Younger loyally, and deserves his thanks.

The new team, shaken up by his departure and the surprising translation of Lord Mansfield to the Northern Ireland Office to make room for the new Lord Gray, featured John Mackay as Health Minister with Stewart taking on the Fletcher role and Ancram being given his fiery baptism with local government. Stewart's background - he taught at St. Andrews and worked for the CBI - has given him a much more ideologically-based approach than Fletcher's and the question mark is over his sense of touch with the unions, something he must develop. Mackay, known to his Tory colleagues as MacTebbit, will continue to make shrewd political capital, but has to juggle with a tricky portfolio, fraught with political difficulty. Health service cuts, in a society still resistant to the Tory campaign for a much bigger private sector, will never be easy to defend. And Ancram, the new boy, will face local authorities who have already learned all they need to know about the best tactics to employ in the annual struggles over rating clawbacks to compensate for over-spending. He will have the toughest of jobs.

They have no legislative horrors ahead. With such a majority, only the occasional wild sally by one of the unpredictable performers (with Bill Walker, MP for North Tayside, and Albert McQuarrie, MP for Banff and Buchan, leading the pack) will cause Ministerial headaches. It is in the day-to-day conduct of the economy and relations with local government that the judgement will be made. On that front the Ministerial team may be vulnerable. They have an advantage in the figure of Younger, with his calm air, who has been remarkably successful in keeping some of his more aggressive Cabinet colleagues at bay and in lowering the temperature in Scottish politics, quite a feat under the circumstances. How long can he continue to do so?

Much depends, naturally, on the condition of the Labour Party under Neil Kinnock and on the extent to which the Alliance can capitalise on their respectable showing in Scotland at the General Election. Both have their problems, one in agreeing on what the problem is, and the other in breaking out of the two-party mentality so firmly rooted in the public mind.

Labour's approach to Scottish policy might appear at first glance to be clear: a directly-elected Assembly, with tax-raising and economic powers, is to be the engine of economic recovery, and the focus for new self-confidence and decentralised decision-making.

Leaving aside the contortions necessary for Kinnock, who opposed vigorously the key provisions of the Scotland Act for so long, the race to devolve, which has been gathering pace in the party since the SNP's breakthrough a decade ago has thrown up a problem which may yet cause fearsome difficulties. It is the argument over the nature of the mandate given to Scottish Labour MPs. With 41 of them, a substantial majority, facing the serried ranks of new Tories from the south it was inevitable that the traditional frustration felt by Scottish Labourites under Tory governments would become particularly irritating. It led some of the 1979 "new boys" to begin to toy with the idea of pursuing, quite bluntly, a policy of non-cooperation with a Parliament so unrepresentative, in its power-structure, of Scottish voters. Such as George Foulkes, MP for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, and John Maxton, MP for Cathcart, were prepared to argue, in effect, that Mrs Thatcher's writ did not run north of the Tweed and the Solway.

It was, of course, a highly-dangerous exercise. Would they be happy to concede, for example that no MP outside London (where Conservatives have a massive majority) should be able to participate in debates and votes on the coming Bill to abolish the Greater London Council? An argument which excludes English votes on Scottish business in a UK Parliament must surely progress that way. Faced with the implications of their argument - one of which is surely the eventual acceptance of proportional representation, since the crux of the argument is the proper weighting of voters' intentions - Foulkes and Maxton began to wobble, to no-one's surprise. But their protest was a fact, and a symptom of widely-sensed frustration in the party.

They began to use the traditional methods to make a nuisance of themselves in the Commons, raising points of order at every opportunity and employing obscure procedural devices to draw attention to what they believed to be the shabby treatment of Scottish business and, as they saw it, the shameful lack of any devolution proposals from the Government. The climax of this phase came with the submission by Foulkes of a number of ideas for organised disruption, including industrial action to deprive the Government of tax revenue and non-cooperation between Labour local authorities and the Scottish Office, for discussion by the Scottish Council of the Labour Party and the Scottish TUC.

These plans were overtaken by a manoeuvre in the Scottish group of MPs itself, where there was some deep disquiet at the implications, not least on the front bench. Appropriately enough the key figures were two new boys - the only ones - from the 1983 General Election, Gordon Brown, MP for Dunfermline East, and Norman Godman, MP for Greenock and Port Glasgow. They were ideally placed to try to bridge the gap between Foulkes, Maxton and Dennis Canavan, MP for Falkirk West, and those of their colleagues, like Bob Hughes, MP for Aberdeen North, and Norman Buchan, MP for Paisley South, who winced at the very mention of mandate, and shrank from an argument they believed to be hopelessly misguided. Brown, apart from the advantage of being a newcomer to the group was also able to use his power base as Chairman of the Scottish Council of the party to give weight to his argument.

The Brown-Godman plan was put to a long and sometimes ill-tempered meeting of the group at the Commons on a warm summer's evening. It concentrated less on a heady campaign of disruption, in the Commons and outside, than on a painstaking effort to pull suspicious English colleagues into the devolution camp and to ensure that a broadly-based movement for change can be achieved in Scotland. This last aim is fiendishly difficult for a party which knows that perhaps its main task between now and the next General Election is to try to undermine the credibility of the Alliance, and to stop its advance once and for all. In Scotland, they are natural allies on devolution. The Brown-Godman paper suggested a range of tactics for the Commons to press home their case: a plan, in effect, for tactical manoeuvres without the millstone of the grand mandate argument

dangling dangerously behind. With a few minor changes (their plans for the Scottish Select Committee were partly unacceptable to Bruce Millan, the Shadow Scottish Secretary) it was approved. Perhaps the most significant speech of the evening came from John Smith, the former devolution Minister, who threw his weight behind it, to the surprise of some of his colleagues. Thus the mandaters were outflanked, though neither side would put it like that. Millan, nervous of the Foulkes-Maxton-Canavan group, to put it at its mildest, could live with it and there was an outcome as near consensus as can ever be achieved in a gathering of Labour MPs.

It means that the soul of devolution in Labour's ranks is preserved, but that the practical difficulties of reaching agreement on a workable scheme are recognised. Labour MPs are now committed to a steady campaign to keep the subject in the public mind (they are conscious - and how could they be otherwise - that in the election campaign itself the question of devolution was on almost no-one's lips) and to try, by stealth rather than by force, to pull their reluctant colleagues aboard. The party has many a problem to solve before devolution becomes the priority again, but out of the frustration there seems to have emerged a reasonably acceptable compromise between those who wanted to storm the citadel and those who wanted to look the other way. The next important development, as the new Parliamentary session began to gather pace, seemed to be the likely publication of an Assembly Bill to publicise the case.

Not surprisingly, the Alliance were considering a similar tactic on PR. Alongside the national "Campaign for Fair Votes", with a PR petition as its centrepiece, there were plans for a Bill to be introduced in the Lords, with the hope of a substantial amount of cross-party support, perhaps even a majority. It held out no immediate hope, though, of help for the Scottish group who faced the problem familiar to all minority parties. Their ranks were livened up by a crop of apparently-able newcomers and it will be one of the most fascinating aspects of the next year in the Commons to watch the attempts by the Alliance to challenge the undisputed position of Labour as the official Opposition, with all strength given it by the rules of the place, and indeed its physical characteristics. Malcolm Bruce, Liberal MP for Gordon will lead on Scottish affairs for the two parties and he faces a tough time. From the Government front bench,

and the Shadow Cabinet, comes one message: stop the Alliance. For both the major parties the Alliance offer the greatest threat in the next election - the Conservatives look at the number of seats where Liberal and SDP candidates achieved good second places, and Labour consider, with sinking heart, how many constituencies there are where the party has to leap from third place to hold out hope of forming a Government. So Bruce and his colleagues, many of them inexperienced in the funny ways of the Commons, will find it depressingly difficult to make a consistent impact. They will have to show a mature grasp of tactics, in Parliamentary debate and in organising publicity, if they are to turn their brave talk of "moral opposition" into any kind of power base for the future.

But at least they have the scent of something in their nostrils. For the SNP there is nothing. The lonely two, Donald Stewart and Gordon Wilson, plod on, isolated in the devolution arguments by the party's commitment to independence and unable to claim that they alone will bring any power back to Edinburgh. They seem, in this Parliament, to have little awaiting them.

Mrs Thatcher is in command, unmistakably. Her legislative intentions in Scotland will not be frustrated by the Opposition unless Younger demonstrates a wholly uncharacteristic lack of common sense, something Labour and the Alliance cannot expect. Their task must be to organise their moral case, and its practical implementation, for their next appeal to the country, which now seems so distant. They can do it by harrying Ministers at every opportunity and taking advantage of the snail's pace of the economic recovery; they can do it by campaigning effectively outside Westminster to gather support; but most of all, over the next year, they must organise themselves. Labour must give shape to their "Scottish dimension" and the Alliance must find a way to break through the conventions of the Commons. Until they do, all the Government has to do is to govern. The Conservatives won less than a third of the votes at the election, but the foundations of the Scottish Office have not yet begun to tremble.