

THE YEAR AT WESTMINSTER

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THE SCOTSMAN

One of the most interesting statements made by George Younger as Secretary of State for Scotland in 1984 was not made to the Commons, but to his party conference in Perth. With the Prime Minister about to head north to address the traditional, unchanging, ecstatic rally and to affirm her faith in her style of government, Younger decided to be bold (an attitude which, his critics say, does not come naturally to him). He spoke about his conduct of business in the Scottish Office and drew a clear distinction – and one he had never before made in these specific terms – between the business of government in Scotland and at Westminster.

Bold? Certainly. The assertion that, as he put it, Scotland was run from Edinburgh and would continue to be so as long as he was Secretary of State, was a quite calculated message to his party and those outside it, not to mention Mrs Thatcher herself. Such displays of independence – even those that turn out to be purely rhetorical – have been known to presage removal from the Cabinet, and always to bring a new frost to relationships with Downing Street. Yet here, a few months before a Government reshuffle in which he hoped for a move to a UK Department, Younger was arguing publicly on the centre of the stage at his own party conference that Scotland had special problems which needed to be assessed and tackled from Edinburgh, not from London. It is hardly a revolutionary view, of course – indeed the point could hardly be more obvious after the latest round of industrial closures and troubles, but the significance was in the timing of Younger's speech and in the confidence with which he disassociated himself publicly from the prevailing mood in the Cabinet. At a time when the cry "Whitehall knows best" was echoing again around Westminster (particularly in relation to Mrs Thatcher's problems with local authorities which refused to do the Government's bidding), Younger was saying openly: "Edinburgh knows best".

Sceptics – cynics, indeed – noted at the time that Younger’s speech had the air of a valedictory about it. His opening passage in which he said that this was the fifth time he had addressed the conference as Secretary of State sounded like a groan, albeit a polite and gentlemanly one. It was known to everyone in the hall who was interested that he wanted out: a successor, in Malcolm Rifkind, was now “ready” in the way these things are managed in Whitehall, and all that was now needed was a suitably senior Cabinet post to be made available to the long-serving, loyal and decent George. So, the argument goes, his tiredness induced some indiscretion: why not boast about the independence of his regime at St Andrew’s House and take head-on the criticism (familiar to any Scottish Secretary in a Tory Government) that he was an insignificant figure in Cabinet discussions. The evidence about Younger’s approach to politics suggests that is a naive approach. It was a quite careful speech.

Politically, the Government has used the growth of new industries in Scotland to try to take the sting out of the Opposition’s attack on employment: arguing, in effect, that all prosperity would flow from Silicon Glen. This fragile argument was not very well analysed, at least publicly, by the Opposition. Still concentrating (naturally) on the defence of jobs, it seemed difficult for Labour in particular to turn its attention fully to the dubious assumptions and forecasts in Younger’s argument about the growth of high-tech industry and its potential benefits for Scotland. But it was his great theme, and it was a key element in the Perth speech. He tried, as politically he had to, to portray the Scottish Office as a bastion of fairness and commonsense, holding off the worst effects of the recession and turning its attention to building for the future. Never mind that the evidence of good times ahead was patchy, to say the least – sounds of confidence from Ministers were to be the keynote of the Scottish Office’s defence. So, Younger began to argue not simply that the picture was brighter than the Opposition was suggesting but that the reason for it was that in St Andrew’s House there were none of the blinkers which were so prominent on his colleagues south of the border.

It was splendid stuff for the party, of course. The *amour propre* of the Scottish Tories in being worthy defenders of Scotland was reinforced (and more effectively than by some of the gimmicks they have employed in recent years – the only question about most of them being whether they were more embarrassing to the public at large or the party itself). On the Right-wing fringe, however, there was unhappy muttering. The Scottish Office was incurably “wet” they said, indeed the “wettest” in Whitehall (an interesting Freudian slip – or was it? – from one of Younger’s critics at the

conference, in private). And what was the evidence? Principally, the urge to intervene imbedded in the newly-named Industry Department for Scotland. Younger, though operating within financial restraints imposed by a Treasury team faithfully implementing Mrs Thatcher’s view, had a different *approach*. Though his willingness to claw back grant from “overspending” authorities – even when the mechanics, and some of the results, became politically embarrassing – was welcome enough to the Right, his industrial strategy was not.

In looking at the Scots at Westminster it is the Younger approach that is the key in 1984. The legislative programme, though it had its moments of party conflict and its embarrassments for the Government from time to time, was not the main battle waged across the Commons chamber. The industrial scene cast its shadow again. First, there was the Scott-Lithgow affair.

The crisis, with thousands of jobs at risk in the threatened closure of the yard, had all the familiar ingredients – the prospect of social disaster in a wide area dependent on the yard, the strange behaviour of the head of a nationalised industry (in this case Graham Day of British Shipbuilders), the accusations of Scottish Office complacency from the Opposition benches and the battle with Whitehall to win approval for “oiling the wheels” of a rescue operation. No-one involved could have felt anything but an acute sense of *deja-vu* as the saga unfolded, with a hopeful sign one day, a setback the next, and finally a solution which, though it was hailed by Ministers as proof that private enterprise could save jobs where the public purse could not, was hardly a triumph.

Throughout the weeks of negotiation, with the Opposition pressing hard for a Government “initiative” and Scottish Office officials (desperately, most of the time) juggling figures with potential purchasers and with British Shipbuilders, one of the mysteries was the attitude of Norman Tebbit, the Trade and Industry Secretary. Not for the first time he was assuming the guise of the Hard Man, the Wrecker. In short, the forces of darkness concentrated in one man. He was believed anxious to restrict the Government’s involvement in any rescue deal, for political reasons. He wanted a private rescue about which he could boast and which he could use as evidence of the failure of public stewardship and the ever-ready strength of the private sector to save jobs which would otherwise disappear. But Tebbit was playing a clever game. He knew better than most that the Government had a huge financial commitment, whether it liked it or not, and that what mattered from his point of view was the rhetoric, and the way the “rescue” of at least part of the yard was presented. One of the most

fascinating aspects of Tebbit's performance at the Trade and Industry Department has been the contrast between the public style and his willingness to sign cheques which, at least in his speeches to party conferences and even in the Commons, he would previously have denounced, perhaps for not being what Mrs Thatcher likes to call "honest money".

The contrast with Younger was marked. Where Tebbit was (a little) more co-operative behind the scenes than in public, Younger had to fight off political criticism on every television programme and in every newspaper week after week. He had to display enthusiasm for intervention at every turn, even if it was the sort of intervention deeply unsatisfactory to the Labour Party. In terms of the Thatcherite lexicon it was still a word to be regarded with some suspicion, but it had to be used. It was a rough patch for Younger. The attack from Labour and the Alliance over the future of the Clyde, and the evident unease among many Scottish Tories (Anna McCurley, the new MP for Inverclyde and Renfrew West, was well aware of the social consequences of complete closure at Scott Lithgow), was pressed home effectively, with Donald Dewar leading his troops as Shadow Scottish Secretary with considerable style and force, and Ministers appearing bogged down in a sea of industrial troubles – no sooner had Ravenscraig won a little more time than Scott Lithgow was teetering on the brink. The miners' strike was still to come.

In the end, the rescue of some jobs could be presented by Younger as a triumph (but only because the landscape in most of the rest of Scotland was so bleak, and dark). The episode demonstrated his strengths and weaknesses well. First, he was certainly inhibited by the prevailing philosophy around the Cabinet table which allowed more Government intervention than some Ministers liked to admit but always insisted that it be accompanied by an overwhelming sense of guilt, as if it was never to be regarded as anything other than a painful act of last resort. The Government's handling of the Scott Lithgow affair could be dressed up as merely the exercise of Ministerial influence to facilitate the injection of substantial private funds into an unemployment blackspot and therefore defensible: in fact it was much more. The Scottish Office was engaged in an old-fashioned piece of industrial intervention, without the cash. The style – the approach to the problem and the establishment of a specialist team in St Andrew's House to examine every option for a rescue – was exactly the same as before. Younger can admit such things go on – indeed, he has to – Tebbit can not. It is always bound to be an uneasy contrast between the public face of Government in Whitehall and in Edinburgh.

There was another scare a little later on, when a threat was revealed to the operation of the Locate in Scotland Bureau's activities, working with the Scottish Development Agency and the Scottish Office as an engine for investment from overseas. There is no doubt that the leak – of an impending Whitehall battle – was useful to Younger, once again portrayed in Scotland as being *contra mundum*, fighting for his rights. Once again the dark figure of Tebbit was seen on the horizon, complaining about the cost of LIS and its alleged "unfairness" to other parts of the UK. Whether it was the public row that saved LIS we don't know – but it certainly helped. The Opposition's outcry in the Commons was in a sense less important than the near-unanimous cry of pain from the Tory side at the prospect of the end of the bureaux overseas. The old scene was staged again: Younger pressed from all sides to defend Scotland against the Whitehall barbarians and, after an agonising week or two, being seen to have survived yet again.

The question hovering behind it all is this: has Younger made a difference or has he done what any reasonably competent Minister would have done in the same circumstances? There is no doubt that any Tory Secretary of State, faced with the party's limited support in the Scottish group at Westminster, is susceptible to peculiar pressures which his colleagues in the Cabinet sometimes find it hard to understand. To that extent, anyone in Younger's position would have to defend publicly attitudes not normally adopted by the Tebbits. The policies, dictated centrally (whatever Younger says), restrict his room for manoeuvre. The Scottish Office budget does not float freely according to the whim of the Secretary of State. But within the framework established by the Prime Minister and the Treasury there is some elbow room, particularly in the matter of style. It is that which has been Younger's most valuable asset. Though he has been consistently accused of complacency, he has succeeded in presenting the image of a Secretary of State willing to tussle with Cabinet colleagues – and even Mrs Thatcher – to get as much as he can for Scotland. It is not a bogus image: he has had rough times, and severe disputes with colleagues and it is largely because of them that he has won the respect of Tebbit and others who may not like the style of the Scottish Office but recognise that Younger can be a feisty opponent.

One of the factors contributing to the successful presentation of Younger, and little-known outside St Andrew's House, has been the arrival as head of the Scottish Information Office – the Scottish Office's PR and information unit – of Fred Corbett, one of Whitehall's shrewdest information officers. He came to Edinburgh from the Northern Ireland Office, where the business of public relations is fraught indeed. Corbett, a genial Ulsterman, has been a vital influence in presenting the Scottish

Office's case on issues like the Scott Lithgow affair and his influence on Younger (with whom he has a trusting relationship) appears to have been considerable. Certainly, the Scottish Office's efforts to present an independent image – to the extent, for example, of organising high-powered lunches in London for editors and executives of Fleet Street newspapers to meet Younger and hear his views – have had some success. As a by-product, Younger's own profile has become sharper.

From the Opposition point of view, naturally, that picture is false. They see the last year as one of disaster in Scotland, principally on the industrial front – and that has been their main concern in the Commons. The seemingly endless string of redundancy announcements – with such disasters as Bathgate standing out – provided them with plenty ammunition. Dewar led Labour with flair and dedication. (His capacity for work is enormous: perhaps it leads him to delegate too little to his colleagues and it is something many of his friends have warned him about.) Jim Craigen, one of his lieutenants, was a particularly diligent committee man, in a rather earnest way, giving a bit of weight to their arguments over some legislation which was hardly earth-shaking but which needed scrutiny. On the Alliance benches there was evidence of a much more vigorous challenge to the Government than has ever been seen from the Liberals alone.

Malcolm Bruce, Jim Wallace and Archy Kirkwood, as the new Liberals, were very active (with Bruce leading them) and on the SDP bench Charles Kennedy showed a forceful style which belied his unfortunate title as the Baby of the Commons (he was only 23 when elected in Ross, Cromarty and Skye). So they had a bit of fire in their bellies, though their inexperience showed from time to time, as was inevitable.

One of the reasons for a better Opposition performance during the year was the state of the Government front bench. Younger's stature – paradoxically, in view of the economic developments in Scotland – increased. The same cannot be said of his Ministerial colleagues. Lord Gray of Contin (the scalp claimed by Kennedy in the general election) was not a great success in his new role. And Younger's junior Ministers in the Commons were not as powerful a team as he would have liked, either. John Mackay showed again that he has a sharp political eye, and tongue (MacTebbit, his Tory colleagues call him) but Michael Ancram and Allan Stewart dealing with local government and home affairs, and industry and education respectively, were less successful at appearing confident in the presentation of their case. Ancram, faced with local authorities now well-used to the annual ritual of grant claw back and all the ritual posturing that

goes with it, gave him a rough time. Stewart's role as Industry Minister was largely usurped by Younger, at least in the public eye.

Ancram's major piece of legislation was the Rating and Valuation Act, giving Younger new powers to control rate levels. There was less fuss – outside the Commons committee room, at least – over this measure than over the English and Welsh ratecapping proposals, largely because since 1981 the Scottish Office's controls over local government spending had become an established part of the scene. It made it no less horrendous a measure to the Opposition, but it took some of the steam out of it. The Tenants Rights Etc. (Amendment) Act extended the right to buy council houses and included exceedingly controversial measures on right-to-repair grants which provided the Opposition forces with one of their main targets of the session.

The Inshore Fishing Act, the Roads Act and the Tourism (Overseas Promotion) Act provided moments of controversy, but hardly touched on the central political questions of the year.

It was the running of the Scottish economy, as usual, that seemed most important to MPs of all persuasions, as unemployment remained high, the number of closures increased, and the search for overseas investment continued. Younger had some success in staving off some of the worst consequences – but it was against a gloomy background. It says much for his resilience as a politician that he survived it all, despite the constant attack. He had little good news – only some news that was better than it might have been. The world of Scottish politics allows a Secretary of State to present himself as Scotland's fighter in the Cabinet, and this he did.

His critics would say it was a false claim. But his Cabinet colleagues would accept it is an accurate description. His confidence clearly increased, despite the gloom and doom. That was the background to his speech in Perth, where he asserted that element of independence. It brought scornful denials from the Opposition who pointed to the bleak industrial landscape and denounced it as a confidence trick – but it was the culmination of a five year stint in St Andrew's House in which he can justly claim to have won some victories. That may not be much in the sweep of history when it comes to be written, but without him it might have been worse. A backhanded compliment? Certainly, but a compliment nonetheless. Thanks to Younger, some nightmares never come to pass.