

A COMMENTARY

The Editor

In spite of the fact that there were no elections in Scotland, it has not been a good year for the Government in Scotland. Three issues promise to dog George Younger's footsteps in the year to come: the teachers' dispute has proved to be virtually impossible to solve within current Scottish Office policy; 'Gartcosh' has become a symbol of discontent, a rallying cry to a wide spectrum of Scottish opinion who see it as the bottom line of de-industrialisation; finally, the vexed question of the rates has merely been postponed, not solved.

In many ways it is only surprising that the Secretary of State for Scotland did not wobble on his tightrope before now. The year to come will see whether he falls off or not. George Younger's skill since 1979 has been to distract the attentions of his audience from his own high-wire performance by ensuring that squabbles and skirmishes have broken out among those watching. While the audience is keeping a wary eye on one another, pausing only to glance upwards now and again, Younger has striven to stay aloft while the ring-mistress in Downing Street threatens to move the circus elsewhere, or even sell off bits of the equipment to rival promoters.

Mrs Thatcher's major reshuffle of early September saw no change in the Scottish Office team. Younger himself must have been disappointed not to be given a more congenial portfolio, and exacted his own little revenge by giving Michael Ancram, who had covered himself in confusion rather than glory over the rates issue, a simplified job of looking after the local government brief. It is unlikely that this was a reward for brave endeavours on Ancram's part, more the St Andrew's House equivalent of writing a hundred lines of 'I must pay attention in class'. Certainly the rates row did not come as a total surprise to many within the Scottish Office, though judging by the reactions of the politicians, it did to them. It required some cashing in of credits by Younger at the Treasury to buy off the seething unrest among Scotland's Tories over rates. As a consequence, he found himself out-manoeuvred when Gartcosh had to be saved and when the teachers' dispute had to be solved. Well, the cabinet asked, are we really to believe that lightning can strike three times, or should we be asking if the conductor is faulty?

The outcome has been a somewhat battered Secretary of State, and an immobilised Scottish Office. The team of Younger, Ancram, Stewart, McKay and Gray looks battle-weary, but is condemned to at least another year or two in the trenches. Younger would dearly like to be rid of the teachers' dispute, but is boxed in by his southern colleagues. He has found the teachers' leaders astute and clever, for they have learned that planned skirmishes and tactical withdrawals are less wearing on the troops than frontal assaults with high casualty rates. The spectacle of militant dominies is bemusing to George Younger. Much easier to deal with orthodox armies of manual workers who fight battles according to the traditional manuals of warfare. Neither is his case helped by another under-secretary who, like his predecessor, is happier with his industry portfolio than his education brief. It will probably take a solution to the English teachers' dispute before the Scottish one is solved.

And that is Younger's problem. All his major headaches can only be ameliorated by action at Westminster. The teachers' question, the closure of Gartcosh, the rates issue are manifestations of central government's policies, and despite the 'liberation' rhetoric, control rests at the centre.

It is difficult to decide which of the three issues is most dangerous, but the closure of the Gartcosh steel mill promises to be among the most emotive. That it should happen so soon after the miners' strike is not a coincidence, but it has meant that the sympathy and fear which surrounded that dispute in Scotland has been displaced on to the Gartcosh issue. It has become the symbol of de-industrialisation in Scotland, and Younger has found himself on the same side of the barricades as Sir James Goold and Michael Forsyth for his comfort and protection. Donald Dewar's observation that George Younger had to be protected from his 'friends' probably caused the Secretary of State some wincing amusement.

At the grassroots too, all is not well for the Government as constituencies face the prospect of a rout in the Spring elections. MPs too begin to scan the pages of job adverts should the opinion polls prove correct in two year's time. The more immediate battle to be fought is over the rates, as the *English* Minister of the Environment has been charged with inventing a new scheme, and quickly, for the whole of the UK. War over rates may have broken out on the Scottish frontier, but battle will be waged from headquarters on the Thames.

In the 1986 edition of the Yearbook, we explore in depth the impact of privatisation in Scotland, and the impact of industrial change. Privatisation

sits uneasily on an economic and social system which has been built on state-driven investment and while Scotland has not suffered disproportionately from de-industrialisation, its ravages have nevertheless been deep and regionally specific. The loss of jobs in 'Silicon Glen' has taken the sheen off the new industrial strategy, and the battle is on to retain 'smokestack' Scotland as the country's economic base, one which does not have the glamour of the microchip, but which is undoubtedly more important in the Scottish economy.

The 1986 Yearbook also carries articles on the politics of local government and we have taken advantage of the absence of general electoral activity to examine in detail some social and moral issues in Scotland such as mental health policy, penal policy, and racism in Scotland. We hope that our readers will continue to find the Yearbook an invaluable guide to Scotland's condition – political, economic and social.

What of the year ahead? Apart from the three issues discussed, unsolved at the time of writing, the Spring regional elections will be especially interesting. Can the government hold on to Lothian, Tayside and Grampian, or will the combined forces of the opposition parties drive it from power or at least into minority control? Labour has had a disappointing year in Scotland insofar as it has not been able to coordinate its forces in the local authorities. The SNP has been trying to talk itself into its vitality and aggression of the early seventies without much success, and the Alliance is seeking appropriate channels for its diffuse electoral strength. The 1986 elections promise to be interesting as each party seeks to gain the high ground for an assault on the constituencies at the next general election. Meantime, the victors will have to revive COSLA, The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which has grown so fed up of being pushed around by St Andrew's House that it threatened to fold up its tents and go home. The Scottish Office, now in its second century, may decide that it needs COSLA more than COSLA needs it. Whatever happens, the Yearbook will report on these developments next year.

We are indebted to all our contributors and our readers, for without them there would be NO Yearbook. Our advertisers have given us a financial base with which to improve the quality of our product, and we thank them.

Our readers will notice this year that Martin Dowle has taken over from James Naughtie in our 'Year at Westminster' slot. We welcome him, and look forward to a long association. We could not let the occasion pass without a special thanks to Jim for his efforts over six years. We came to rely on him for our understanding of Parliament and its politics, and to enjoy his witty and elegant writing.

We should point out that all our contributors write in a personal

capacity, and not as representatives of the institutions, departments and organisations which employ them.

Finally our thanks go to the production team, to John Nimmo and his staff in the service unit who continue to put up with our demands, however outrageous.

The editor is especially grateful to Helen Ramm who as contributors and readers can testify is, quite simply, the Yearbook.

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