

A COMMENTARY

The Editor

Nineteen eighty six was not a year of miracles. Scotland slid further into the pit of economic recession, unemployment climbed inexorably, the end of deep-mining in Scotland grew more likely, and the new industries of oil and 'hi tech' suffered in the global slump. Readers of *Scottish Government Yearbook* should not be surprised that the new dawn has been slow to happen, for our contributors have been pointing out throughout the 1980s that Scotland has little control over its economic affairs which are ruled from the boardrooms of multinational companies or from the inner recesses of Whitehall. The failure of the much-vaunted 'Scottish lobby' to influence the Guinness shareholders is proof of that. The role of the Scottish Office and its agencies is too often to provide some trimmings and garnishing at the edges. And now even the limited powers of the SDA are threatened by Treasury cuts.

What impact does this economic gloom have on the governance of Scotland? Since our last edition, Scotland has a new Secretary of State in Malcolm Rifkind. He too has found it an uncommon bed of nails much like his predecessor genial George Younger who has at last been allowed to move to the gentler world of the Defence Ministry. Rifkind is an Edinburgh advocate and well versed in that breed's professional capacity to argue a threadbare brief. He has little to work on, for most of the problems of his successor he has inherited, and they show a stubborn refusal to go away. Of the three issues we identified last year, none has been resolved. The teachers' dispute smoulders on and is given piquancy by the threat that the England and Wales teachers might strike a better bargain than their Northern colleagues. The schools are entering their third year of discontent, and it will take a major reversal of political philosophy to grant the teachers what they would settle for. Public sector workers do not figure much in the Thatcherite pantheon. Ravenscraig too remains a threatening shadow over Scotland's industrial base and over Rifkind's credibility, but it is probably safe until after the next general election. Only the rates issue has been tackled head-on, and there is a suspicion that the cure might be worse than the disease. The solution, the euphemistically sounding 'community charge' or 'poll tax', is a creature of its time. It is hard to imagine that such a regressive piece of taxation would have been introduced ten or twenty years ago, for it is an unashamed appeal to the pockets of the middle class owner occupiers who have been deserting the Tories in droves in Scotland. It may be too late to stop them, and there is the possibility that the government will encounter great difficulties getting it through on the current parliamentary

timetable.

Being a Tory Secretary of State is a thankless task. The lack of a political mandate, and, more importantly, of a political base in Local Government, makes it probably an impossible job even for so skilled and consummate a politician as Malcolm Rifkind. In the recent round of ministerial musical chairs, there has been a redrawing of responsibilities, and the freshening of Rifkind's team with new and unfamiliar faces. It seems the belief that there is nothing wrong with government policies that 'presentation' will not cure has ushered in a team of smooth, pin-striped youngish men. And yet the Tory decline in Scotland is more deep-seated and longer term.

Why should this be so? Malcolm Rifkind used to be fond of pointing out that only the Tory Party has ever received 50% of the popular vote in a general election in Scotland (in 1955). This remarkable event has become an embarrassing boast to a party which got all of 17% in the Regional Elections in May, and who struggle to reach even that in the opinion polls. The general election in 1983 when the party got 28% of the vote begins to look a very good result, for since then the Tories have managed to get 20% of the opinion polls only once in the last 15 months. While the talk of the party being exterminated in Scotland makes good journalistic copy, it is unlikely to happen. What cannot be denied is that since 1955, the fortunes of the Tories in Scotland have slumped dramatically while in England they culminated in 1983 in the re-election of a Thatcher government with a landslide majority. It was this election which saw the greatest divergence between Scotland and England with regard to the fortunes of the Tory Party. As Hutchison has pointed out in an important political history of Scotland* published recently, the Tories' support in Scotland was quite stable between 1924 and 1955. Even the historic victory of Labour in 1945 saw the Tories receive a greater share of the vote in Scotland (41%) than in the UK as a whole (36%). Nineteen fifty nine saw a reversal of this trend and the beginning of Labour hegemony. Gradually the gap between Conservative performance in Scotland and in the rest of the UK has grown so that in 1983 it stood at its widest margin of a 14 percentage point difference.

It might seem straightforward enough to see this as the corollary of the rise of the SNP which took off after the famous victory of Winnie Ewing in Hamilton in a 1967 by-election. We would be mistaken, for the SNP did none too well in 1979 and 1983, while the gap between Tory support in Scotland and the rest of the UK has grown. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to claim that there was no relationship. It simply is more complicated than a siphoning away of Tory support to the SNP (or the Alliance for that matter). The success of the SNP seems to have fed off the rising expectations of the relatively young and socially mobile at the end of the 'long boom' in the early 1970s encouraged by North Sea oil and

amplified by the media in Scotland. Its success in achieving 30% of the popular vote in October 1974 has not been repeated, and is unlikely to be in this form, for much of that depended upon a belief in the post-war period that the state could deliver the economic goods. Thatcherism is both a creature and a cause of the death of this belief. As Thatcher has confronted public spending, so a new pessimism that the state (be it a British state or a Scottish state) could create economic development has grown. It is an irony that her government has used powerful state machinery to drive down expectations and in so doing has resorted to an increasingly nationalistic ideology fed off the Falklands debacle. At each turn of this Thatcherite ratchet, so Scotland is more alienated for two reasons. Firstly, it has a higher level of state-driven investment in economic and social infrastructure, and secondly, as John Mackintosh pointed out so perceptively, Scots have two national identities, British and Scottish, which allows them to opt out of the former as pride (and pay-off) wanes. This thesis of dual nationalism was confirmed by a poll carried out in July 1986 for the *Glasgow Herald* which showed that 39% of respondents regarded themselves as Scottish not British, 30% more Scottish than British, and 19% equally Scottish and British. Only 4% felt themselves to be more British than Scottish, and 6% British not Scottish. This commitment to 'Scottishness' is fairly evenly distributed among supporters of all parties, even Conservatives. Only 20% replied that they were more British than Scottish, or simply British, compared to 6% of Labour supporters, 10% Alliance, and 5% SNP (exactly why they should vote SNP is a puzzle).

We should be careful, of course, in jumping to conclusions about these data, because how they are tied into political and social identities is very unclear. They provide the raw materials around which identities are constructed, rather than the finished political articles. Similar observations can be made about opinion poll data, particularly on constitutional options which are outlined by Allan Macartney in this issue. The February 1986 MORI poll findings have been seized upon to show that around one third of Scots want 'independence' and a further 47% want an assembly. Such data are being bandied about to show that home rule is round the corner. Careful scrutiny of the questions should council caution. 33% replied that they wanted a 'completely independent Scottish assembly separate from England', a cunning fusion by the pollsters of 'separatism' and 'devolution'. We cannot simply read off the conclusion that one third of Scots want independence, although to say that around three quarters are dissatisfied with the 'status quo' is nearer the mark. Such a conclusion receives support from the fact that SNP support bobs along at around 15-20%, considerably short of the magical 'third'.

What does seem more of a conundrum, is that the SNP should do so badly given these straws in the political wind, given the English flavour of Thatcher's government, and the inability of Labour to do anything about it. It is the failure of the SNP to exploit economic and political conditions

which run in their favour which is much more interesting than the jump in the polls of 1 or 2 percentage points. After all, in fully 37 opinion polls taken in Scotland since the 1983 election, the SNP have taken 4th place on 31 occasions, making it undoubtedly the fourth party. Labour came first in every poll with between 40 and 52% of support, the Tories second in 23 polls and third in 11 (all in the last 15 months), and the Alliance, the dark and ignored horse of Scottish politics, second in 16 polls and third in 20. The SNP, of course, protest that their support in the polls underestimates their true electoral standing. Did they not come second in the popular vote in the Regional elections in May 1986, their leader has pointed out? Well, not really. To be sure, the SNP took 18% of all votes cast in the regional elections of May 1986 but this reflected the number of seats it contested as Bochel and Denver show. Taking only *contested* seats, the SNP (with 19.8%) was pushed into a narrow *fourth* place behind the Tories and Alliance (at 22.5% and 20% respectively), a result closer to its opinion poll position. The fact remains that Scotland has a political system in which Labour dominates both elections and polls with around 45%, and the others three parties contest the remainder of political support.

The Tory Party in Scotland resembles a once-stately airplane (one is tempted to label it 'British Imperial Airways') which once dominated the skies. Now it bumps and scrapes its way along the runway in search of former glory, but succeeds only in digging itself further into the sand. There is more than a suspicion that its lack of flight derives from inappropriate instructions from the control tower. The SNP is a much lighter and more modern contraption which launches itself down the runway at fairly frequent intervals with much skirling and commotion, and then fails to get very far in strong, prevailing winds. Why Labour in Scotland flies at all is a bit of a mystery to theorists of political flight. Its crew don't seem to do much at the controls preferring to try to gain influence with the control tower. Nevertheless, it outflies all the others, and seems at times to be held together merely by its own weight. The Alliance in Scotland is an almost ghostly machine which has gained flight before anyone has really noticed, although its destination is a bit of a mystery. It has a fairly old and well tested Liberal wing, and a new fangled and smaller SDP one which threaten now and again to flap out of unison. Above all, for all parties there is the suspicion that flying at all is a remarkable feat in skies over which they have little control, and while they receive instructions from the ground which threaten mid-air collision or encourage self-destruction.

The next twelve months may see a general election, although the polls will have to run more strongly the Tory way for Mrs Thatcher to take a chance. A minority government led by her and seeking support from smaller parties does not accord with her political instincts and is not an attractive proposition for the leaders of these parties. Whatever happens, Scotland will stand on the sidelines as the key skirmishes are fought out elsewhere, particularly in the English Midlands. It will take another party

to break the log-jam of Scottish political expectations which have built up over Home Rule, and then we may be entering a more exciting and exacting form of politics.

The 1987 edition of the *Yearbook* analyses unemployment in Scotland and local responses to it; and the media which has played such a key role in Scotland's political distinctiveness. The politics of education remains a central importance. How Scotland copes with government legislation is an important theme, and we focus on rating revaluation, social security, and transport policy in remote areas. Neglected areas of Scottish governance, notably police complaints procedures and political education in Scottish schools, are examined, as well as Scotland's electronics industry upon which so many expectations rest. Party politics in Scotland are described and analysed both with regard to happenings at Westminster and in the Regional elections of May which confirmed the weakness of the government in Scotland to an unprecedented degree.

All our contributors have given freely and generously of their talents and time, and we are indebted to them. Our regular writers continue to provide a unique and invaluable service. The editor is particularly grateful to Helen Ramm who manages to cope with our ridiculous timetable with efficiency and good humour. Our readers make the whole exercise worthwhile, and we hope that the *Scottish Government Yearbook* continues to expand its readership as it has done in the last few years.

*I G C Hutchison, *A Political History of Scotland, 1932-1942: parties, elections and issues*, John Donald, Edinburgh, 1986.

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