

A COMMENTARY

The Editor

The governance of Scotland is a mess. This is not to say that Scotland is inefficiently administered, for since the days of Tom Johnston we have had an enviable system of services coordinated through the Scottish Office, and as long as the local authorities did its bidding with a minimum of grumbling, it worked pretty well. This somewhat corporatistic system which had evolved from Johnston and Churchill through Secretaries of State, Labour and Tory, to meet the challenge of modernising an economy bequeathed by Victorian prosperity has broken down at last. Or at least, it has lost its legitimacy. The irony is that the attack has come from the Right not the Left, and with it the whole basis of the United Kingdom has begun to rock. Consider the facts. It seemed fanciful to imagine before the 11th June that the Tories would receive such a hammering at the election in Scotland. 'Doomsday' seemed to belong to leader-writers who always like to rumble up the readers over breakfast. And yet while the Tory vote did not fall too far, it slid in the wrong places, leaving ministers ashen-faced the morning after, and wondering how to make a living. It dawned on them and the rest of Scotland that an important threshold had been crossed, and Malcolm Rifkind saw it more clearly than most as he sought to gather the bits of wreckage together. For a few days, he was shell-shocked, and only found solace in the bosom of the Tories' English victory. Like the advocate he is, he recited the fact that the 'unionist' parties in Scotland had done well, but found uncomfortable the fact that proportional representation would have provided more lobby material in Westminster.

If things have gone quiet over the recess, it is because all parties are coming to realise that the ball-game has changed. None can take comfort from what has happened. The Tories have been pushed further into the Thatcherite bosom, and many of their own supporters, brave souls, realise that their party is wrong – at least over its anti-devolution stance. For the rest, Labour is feart; the Alliance is lost; and the SNP indulges in loud whistling in the dark.

Looking back over the last thirty years of Scottish politics, we can see more clearly the direction. It takes a major effort of memory to remember that once upon a time (it is almost a fairy story) the Conservatives took 50% of the popular vote. And only 22 years ago. Much has been made of the North-South divide, and much of it is misleading. Scotland's story is not simply to explained by geography, but by economics, and culture. It was the very success of the Scottish Establishment – the Lithgows, the Frasers –

which helped to alter the climate of opinion so that we Scots thought in a Scottish dimension. As the old Unionist and Imperial families were replaced by a managerial elite, so the Conservatives lost an empire and failed to find a new Scottish role. The SNP were the beneficiaries of the new Scottish focus in the late sixties, and while much, and while much, has been made of their distinctive contribution to Scottish politics, underneath it all the gap between the Tory success in England and the lack of it in Scotland simply grew. Labour likes to think that it has wooed the electorate to its way of thinking, and certainly it has unprecedented success, at least in terms of seats. But it would do well to remember that the 1987 result was, in terms of the popular vote, its 5th worst out of 13 elections since the war. Labour's advance in Scotland is far more uneven than the Tories' decline. At the four elections after the war, it did worse in Scotland than elsewhere, and between 1964 and 1974, this happened again. Its success relative to England only manifests itself since 1979, and there is a suspicion that it doesn't really know why this has happened. It is put down to a better organisation, or, somewhat negatively, to the lack of a 'loony left' on the London model. There are few things Scots enjoy more than lecturing recalcitrant brethren, and there has been plenty opportunity for this to happen now that the Scots represent one quarter of the Parliamentary Labour Party. Its unease with its mandate has led it into some curious moves. For the government (or at least the St Andrews House bit of it), it is all a bit of a joke, but they jest at their peril perhaps. Labour's impotence is ultimately structural – the result of virtually all power being vested in the government's hands, power which will not be given up easily. At least Mrs Thatcher realises that devolution of any sort means a loss of power in Whitehall. The arch-centralist of post-war politics is not about to allow a mere 10% of the population to take power away when she has been busily gathering it in from local authorities and any remaining sources of potential opposition.

And ironically, and dangerously for them, Thatcherism has provided the motifs for a new opposition north of the border. It shows quite remarkable ineptitude or blindness for Allan Stewart (who believes in these things anyway) and Michael Ancram (who probably doesn't but regales the Bearsden Ladies' Tea Club with them) to call for more 'standing on our own feet', 'resolution and independence'. The Nats can hardly believe their ears. If Scotland has become a side-show in British politics, it is one in which we are busily playing our own shadow game on the walls of the tent.

If we are gloomy about the state of governance in Scotland, it is not because we do not have good administrators, but because the problems of Scotland are not being, and probably cannot be, tackled under our ramshackle system of government, a system which suited both sides of the border in the first half of this century, but which has become more and more redundant. The fact that our political parties cannot agree to cooperate on even the most trivial of issues is a reflection that the electoral system is

outmoded. The problems of Scotland, whether it is our prison service, the system of local democracy, the funding of local services, as our contributors make plain, show no signs of solution. Stewart and Ancram are probably right; we have little resolution or independence; we cannot stand on our own feet; we have a 'dependence' mentality. But they will not like at all the political and economic means which will make us more resolute, more independent, more upright. These are interesting times.

In this issue of the Yearbook, we review the General Election and its aftermath, the new crises of our society – our prisons which fester, our local democracy which needs freedom, and our old problems of sectarianism. This year we are examining in detail the politics of the environment – our planning system, pollution, and nuclear power – and our Scottish economy – the impact of the North-South divide, local government initiatives, and industrial change. The editors are indebted to all our contributors who submit copy without reward (except in heaven) and more or less to time and length. Since its inception in 1977, we have relied on the concern of many people with Scotland's problems both to write for us and to read what we have written. These have not been rewarding times in which to study our system of government, although they have been interesting ones. Throughout the period we have been able to rely on our regular writers – to Chris Allen, Hamish Henderson, Allan Macartney and Richard Parry, and we owe them a considerable debt. My co-editor, Alice Brown, has helped to share the editorial task, and has brought fresh insights and enthusiasms to the Yearbook. Helen Ramm does all but write the Yearbook (and we are not sure that she doesn't from time to time), and without her it simply would not appear. A special thanks should go to our new printers who have made the transition so well that we have hardly noticed the change. Sheila Edgar is largely the reason why. Without our advertisers, we could not hope to produce such a moderately priced volume, and we have used their valuable support to increase considerably our readership. A special mention must go to Ferranti who have continued to support us even though there are so many claims made on them. To all who write for us, read our contributions, and help us in so many ways, our thanks.

David McCrone