THE YEAR AT WESTMINSTER

Peter MacMahon

It had been intended to be the year in which the government completed its radical policy programme for Scotland and began the process of consolidation in an extended run-up to the next general election. The Scottish Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, planned to put the controversies over the community charge and self-governing schools behind him and concentrate on issues which he believed would attract broad support throughout Scotland.

Rifkind used his speech to the Scottish Tories at Perth in May – rather than a parliamentary occasion at Westminster – to set out the conciliatory approach which he hoped would woo back the voters who had deserted the Conservatives in 1987. To policies like the creation of Scottish Enterprise and the equalisation of business rates with England he enigmatically added a call for a debate on constitutional reform. Once again Rifkind had raised the spectre of his pro-devolutionary past in a move which was seen as a response to the revival in the calls for home rule or independence sparked by Jim Sillars' remarkable victory in the Govan by-election in November 1988.

However, Rifkind appeared to have miscalculated the Prime Minister's almost instinctive rejection of conciliation or consolidation. In her own speech at Perth, Mrs Thatcher immediately quashed any idea of re-thinking the established policy of providing her form of devolution to the people through home and share ownership rather than through constitutional change.

It was also the Prime Minister who ensured that what Rifkind had planned to be the year in which he rose above the political battle to play the Scottish statesman became the year in which one of his junior ministers stole the political limelight.

Michael Forsyth, the MP for Stirling, was appointed the chairman of the Tory Party in Scotland by the Prime Minister against the wishes of Rifkind who had backed Glasgow solicitor Professor Ross Harper. The Prime Minister had exerted her authority to put someone who was, in her now famous words "one of us" into the key Party job in Scotland. Party officials in London made it quite clear that the message was that although the people of Scotland may not like the Prime Minister personally they liked her policies. A standard bearer for Thatcherism was needed to make

sure there was no diminution of radical zeal North of the border.

Forsyth, although technically a junior minister, was now mentioned in the same breath as Rifkind by those close to the Prime Minister – with a clear implication of enhanced status. For Forsyth, the Under-Secretary of State with responsibility for health and education, it was a reward for his long-standing advocacy of the type of Conservatism espoused by Thatcher but about which Rifkind has private reservations. His appointment to the Tory chairmanship led to Forsyth giving up responsibility for education with the reallocation of the portfolios amongst the Scottish Office ministers. Industry minister Ian Lang took on education, passing responsibility for local government finance, including the poll tax, to Lord James Douglas-Hamilton. Forsyth retained responsibility for health and sport.

But his departure from education did not take place before he had ensured another radical step forward in the reforming ideals which have made him one of Thatcher's favourite and trusted ministers. Forsyth had been able to announce that he was bringing forward the Self Governing Schools (etc) Bill to allow Scottish schools to opt out of local authority control and become "self-governing" in the latest phase of his plans to shake up the educational establishment and give more powers to parents. He was also at the political sharp end in dealing with the Scottish aspects of the health service reforms.

Within weeks of Forsyth's appointment as the young right-wing face of Scottish Conservatism the former Secretary of State for Scotland, George Younger, left his cabinet post as Defence Secretary to return to the backbenches and announced he would not be seeking re-election in his Ayr constituency which he held with the wafer-thin 182 majority in 1987. Younger had been the Secretary of State most identified with fighting Scotland's corner in the old paternalistic tradition. He announced that he was joining the board of the Royal Bank of Scotland and was tipped as an eventual chairman. As "gentleman George" who had argued for government intervention to save the likes of Ravenscraig took his final curtain call, the new breed in the shape of Forsyth – to whom state intervention is anathema – moved centre stage. It was a typically bold move by Thatcher and one which is likely to have a more profound effect in the long term on Scottish politics than even Sillars' stunning victory at Govan overturning a Labour majority of more than 19,000.

By the time another by-election was called in the neighbouring Glasgow Central constituency on the death of the sitting Labour MP, Bob McTaggart, the Labour Party had recovered sufficiently from the shock of Govan and retained the seat. A rising tide of nationalism had once again been damped down but not without a great deal of soul-searching and not a little acrimony within the Scottish group of Labour MPs. It was events such

as Govan – happening in Scotland itself – which even more than previous years set the tone for the political debate at Westminster. Scottish MPs from all sides spent an enormous amount of their time attempting to draw lessons from the political events occurring North of the border as opposed to reacting to developments in United Kingdom politics and their implications for Scotland. Apart from the threat to Labour and the other parties posed by the SNP, there was the related issue in the creation of a Scottish Constitutional Convention to formulate plans for an assembly or parliament as well as the continuing controversies arising out of the implementation of the Community Charge (now universally known as the poll tax whether the government likes it or not).

The political season had begun with changes in the Labour Party's front-bench team of shadow ministers. Shadow Scottish Secretary Donald Dewar brought in two younger MPs from the talented intake in 1987 to join the already appointed neurosurgeon-turned-MP, Sam Galbraith, who had taken on the health portfolio earlier but was of the same "vintage". Central Fife MP Henry McLeish took on the education, industrial training and employment portfolio, leading the opposition to the schools bill, and Cunninghame North MP Brian Wilson took on home affairs, transport, agriculture, rural affairs, the media, arts and sport, and led the opposition to the bus privatisation measures. McLeish had made his name as an assiduous backbencher, always well-briefed, but he found Forsyth more than a match as they slogged it out into the small hours in the schools bill committee stage.

Two of the ten Scottish Tory backbenchers, Kincardine and Deeside MP Alick Buchanan-Smith and Dumfries MP Sir Hector Monro opposed the bill, arguing that there should be a period to allow the setting up of the school boards which the previous year's education bill had introduced. Forsyth solved the problem of the numerical lack of Scottish Tories to man the committee (and opposition from the two Scottish Tories – a fifth of his backbenchers) by bringing in some of his right-wing allies who represent English constituencies. This provoked the fury of all the opposition MPs who claimed to be defending the traditions of Scottish education against an alien measure which would give parents, on a majority vote, and with final approval of the Secretary of State for Scotland, the right to opt their school out from local authority control, although they would remain state schools. However, the majority prevailed with the English Tories demonstrating not only hastily acquired knowledge of Scottish education but also a taste of the bitterness felt North of the border over a proposal which was being pushed through by a party with only ten MPs out of seventy-two in the country which the measure affected.

The Bill, which also contained measures to set up technology Academies, survived largely unscathed despite Buchanan-Smith and Monro's failure to support it – registering their protests by abstaining on the

second reading debate in March 1989. Buchanan-Smith was put onto the committee but played only a limited role in its debates, such was his opposition to the measure. Its successful passage through parliament against sustained opposition earned the Tory Whip who worked on it, the Scottish born MP for Penrith and the Border in Cumbria David Maclean, promotion to a junior ministerial post at the Department of Agriculture. The Bill was eventually guillotined after Labour changed tactics and decided to fillibuster rather than concentrate solely on the arguments of principle which they had originally said would be their approach. It had seen well over one hundred hours of debate through Easter into May.

The Self-Governing Schools Bill had been the highlight of the second half of the parliamentary session but it was events in Scotland which set the tone for the parliament which met in the autumn of 1988. Sillars had been away from parliament since he lost his seat in 1979 after breaking away from Labour to form the Scottish Labour Party. His triumphant return after Govan had a profound impact on the constitutional debate within Scotland, awakening emotions which had died with the defeat of the devolution proposals in the late 1970s. This reawakening, which perhaps Rifkind was responding to in his Perth speech, had a serious effect on the atmosphere when Scottish affairs were debated at Westminster. As both Labour, Tory and the Democrats realised their seats could be under threat either directly or through the complex electoral arithmetic of four-Party politics, they turned their fire on the nationalists. It was not uncommon to find both Dewar and Rifkind launching attacks on Sillars and criticising his advocacy of an independent Scotland within Europe – a strategy which he had largely been responsible for forcing the SNP to adopt in a move away from its previous anti-EC attitude. The theme had been hammered home at Govan, allowing the SNP to be free of the long-standing charge of isolationism, and it became a source of fierce debate within the Commons chamber often when the official subject for debate was something else entirely.

Sillars had arrived at Westminster in his by-election battle-van, supported by his three colleagues from Scotland and the three Welsh Nationalist MPs from Plaid Cymru. As he spoke to a small but enthusiastic group of followers gathered outside St Stephen's entrance to Parliament he promised that the SNP were only at Westminster temporarily until they had achieved Scottish independence. It was a remark that was later revived by Labour MPs when the SNP failed to win Glasgow Central and began to decline in the spring and summer from their strong post-Govan position as the second party behind Labour in the polls. The belligerantly articulate Sillars also pledged to disrupt the proceedings of parliament if necessary to get over the SNP case that Thatcher had no mandate to impose her policies on Scotland. The SNP disruption of Parliament in the end amounted to forcing the speaker to give the Self-governing Schools Bill committee chairman power to expel non-members of the committee after Sillars, Banff and Buchan MP Alex Salmond and SNP chief Whip Andrew Welsh

had taken places on the committee of which they were not members. In another move, Sillars attempted to delay the Chancellor's budget in March by moving the writ for the Central by-election but he was outflanked by Labour combining with the government to allow Neil Kinnock to take precedence by asking for the budget as a private notice question. Sillars was expelled by the Speaker after he refused to desist in his challenge to the manoeuvre and later denounced the Labour Party for playing the Tories' Westminster game.

There were few other occasions where the SNP's promised Parliamentary guerilla action materialised but Sillars's victory provoked a bitter debate within the Labour party, with nationalist-leaning MPs like George Galloway and Dennis Canavan advocating a tougher line with disruption of the Commons and reviving calls for a possible partial withdrawal from parliament to stress the government's lack of a mandate in Scotland. The atmosphere in parliament worsened in the weeks following Govan and in December Galloway was involved in a tussle with a Tory MP. In an unprecendented move, the normally cautious Dewer led the entire complement of opposition MPs including SNP and Democrats out of the chamber in a protest at the government's refusal to set up a Scottish Select Committee. There was little doubt that Dewar, rarely given to gesture politics, would have taken this step had he not come under intense pressure from his own backbenchers in the wake of the Govan result. Government ministers were clearly surprised by the walk-out but recovered to brand it an unholy alliance, a charge which struck a worrying chord with many Labour MPs. However, when MPs returned after Christmas the atmosphere had cooled somewhat and a longer term strategy more to Dewar's liking was agreed as Labour conducted a thorough post-Govan inquest.

Before Govan Dewar had given a cautious welcome to the proposal for a Constitution Convention based on the Claim of Right document published by the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly. Now the Labour Party threw itself into the Convention and allowed one of its most experienced and senior backbenchers, Falkirk East MP Harry Ewing, a former Scottish Office minister, to go forward as a co-convenor along with the former Liberal leader, David Steel, the MP for Tweedale, Ettrick and Lauderdale. Dewar spent much of his time at Westminster consulting with colleagues and the Labour leader Neil Kinnock on the right approach to politics in Scotland but, having come fifth in the annual shadow cabinet election in October, he was in a strong position to guide policy towards a more devolutionist position (or home rule as most preferred to call it for fear of dragging up memories of the late 1970s devolution defeat) overcoming the traditional objections of MPs from constituencies in the North of England.

To this end Labour included a section in its policy review document, ordered in the aftermath of the 1987 election defeat, to put forward a plan

for UK-wide constitutional reform. A Scottish Parliament or Assembly would be guaranteed as part of a package of reforms which would include the abolition of the House of Lords to be replaced by an elected Upper Chamber and the creation of regional assemblies throughout England and Wales. The plan was put forward at the review stage by the Edinburgh Central Labour MP Alistair Darling another of the 1987 intake, who had been given a job on the Party's home affairs team under the Shadow Home Secretary Roy Hattersley. It gave a guarantee that the Scottish Assembly or parliament would be protected from abolition by the House of Commons through a mechanism that would in effect force any government to take the measure through two parliaments.

In tandem with this policy development Dewar made a series of speeches in which he set out his vision of the powers of a Scottish parliament. With the SNP obviously in mind he came up with the idea of an 'independent Scotland within the UK', a concept which brought charges from both the Nationalists and the Tories that it was meaningless. Dewar also floated the idea that the Assembly would reverse the old process of the UK Exchequer funding it, with the possibility of taxes being collected in Scotland and a "reverse block" grant going back to England to pay for areas like defence which would still be administered by the UK Parliament.

Neil Kinnock, in his speech to the Scottish conference at Inverness in March, gave an unequivocal commitment to the setting up of a Scottish Assembly, making amends for his performance the previous year when he had not even mentioned the subject or any issues connected with Scotland. Many MPs attributed this new commitment to Kinnock's newly appointed Parliamentary Private Secretary, East Kilbride MP Adam Ingram. In his role as Kinnock's parliamentary aide Ingram proved both effective and influential, marking him out as a future Labour Chief Whip.

As Labour developed its thinking, the SNP made what was judged to be a major mistake which contributed to its eventual failure to capitalise on Govan. In March it rejected an invitation to join the Constitutional Convention, fearing that the in-built Labour majority would just lead to devolution by another name. It was a decision which opinion polling showed that the Scottish people disapproved of and led to a considerable boost in the morale of the other parties.

Alongside these policy developments, Dewar made sure that the party machine was ready to respond to another challenge along the lines of Govan and, when it came in the shape of Glasgow Central, Labour fought off the SNP challenge. The SNP had pinned its hopes on adding to the one European Parliament seat it already held and taking Central as the by-election and European elections were held on the same day. Although they came close in the North-east of Scotland Euro-seat, coming second to Labour, the Nationalists failed to make the crucial breakthrough and poll

evidence going into the summer of 1989 revealed a tailing off in their support. This wain in the SNP's fortunes was reflected at Westminster when an attempt to raise the independence within Europe concept through a full parliamentary debate towards the end of the session, held in the wake of their electoral setbacks, fell rather flat with none of the passion or emotion which there had been in the immediate wake of Govan.

In what was a tense year of constitutional debate during which Labour had little to gain and much to lose, it was to Dewar's credit that he indulged in canny and sophisticated crisis management which in the end saw Labour emerge with interesting proposals on the constitutional question whilst the SNP appeared to be in decline.

Dewar's already high standing among his colleagues in parliament, including those with whom he had little in common, was further boosted by his competent performance over the year. As tempers cooled and some of the passion went out of the constitutional debate, the government went about the task of reminding the other parties that while they opposed ministers proposed – implementing a series of policies which actually had an immediate effect on Scotland and the Scottish people. Brian Wilson, when he was not mounting savage attacks on the nationalists, led the opposition to the Transport Bill which privatised Scottish buses. Compared to the Self-governing Schools Bill, the Transport Bill went through relatively smoothly and received Royal Assent in July.

The controversy over the poll tax continued unabated, with Labour and the other opposition parties keeping up their attack by citing examples of anomolies. Issues such as people being sent poll tax bills for trivial amounts of money and the plight of those suffering from Altzhiemers Disease were raised with ministers, but to little avail. Towards the end of the session, however, the government did give way to pressure from its own side as well as the opposition and concede that second homes would not be liable for the full amount per person but instead be included under the non-domestic community charge. Local authorities were also given greater discretion to tackle in particular cases where a house is unoccupied because the owner has to live with friends or relatives as a result of illness.

Scottish opposition MPs watched with wry amusement as English Tory MPs suddenly began to protest at the impact the safety net might have on their local poll tax payers in a scheme similar to that in operation in Scotland where, in general terms, the rural areas paid more to cushion the urban areas from the huge increase that would have been necessary with a one-off introduction of the charge. They had raised little or no such protest about the legislation for Scotland, Opposition MPs noted with pleasure, as some Tories contemplated the electoral effects of a large poll tax bill increase in their constituency.

The other piece of legislation which had major effects on Scotland was the privatisation of the electricity industry. Scottish Office ministers once again made great play of the differences between the privatisation arrangements North and South of the border. In Scotland, the privatised industry would be based on an integrated approach as opposed to the creation of two generating companies in England and Wales. The Hydro Board and the South of Scotland Electricity Board (SSEB) would be transformed into two vertically integrated companies with a single Scottish company responsible for the operation of nuclear power stations. This would mean a lessening of the competition within Scotland compared to the two generating companies in England and Wales. However, Rifkind and his ministers hailed the privatisation as another example of the government's form of devolution – devolving power to Scottish shareholders in the continuing thrust towards creating a shareholding democracy.

Another slogan often heard alongside shareholding democracy is the governmnent's aim of creating a property owning democracy. To this end there were two significant announcements with the creation of Scottish Homes out of the Scottish Special Housing Association and the Housing Corporation in Scotland. Housing Minister Lord James Douglas-Hamilton announced that Scottish Homes would be the national agency for housing and the environment with powers to take over houses from other landlords. It would also bring in new funding systems using more private sector money. Opposition MPs again attacked the proposal, arguing that it was designed to reduce the influence of local authorities, a charge which the government did not really deny although ministers proclaimed their wish to increase choice in the housing market.

A related announcement timed to coincide with the Scottish Tory conference, was a scheme to allow housing association tenants to convert their rents into mortgages. In the usual way it acquired an acronym, RTM, and was seen as a further effort to boost home ownership in Scotland which, partly as a result of starting from a larger base of publicly owned housing, still lagged behind England and Wales. Ministers were careful to make RTM less attractive than the generally successful right to buy programme but claimed the scheme was another move to give ordinary people the right to acquire some capital assets.

Housing was also a major issue in the decision to wind up the development corporations of the five Scottish new towns. Ministers again made it plain that they did not want the remaining housing stock to be taken over by the local authorities, despite good quantitative survey evidence that the tenants at least wanted this as an option. As with much of government policy the wind-up proposals linked in with the final major government announcement of the year on the creation of the training and development body Scottish Enterprise in a merger of the Scottish Development Agency

and the Training Agency. The new towns had substantial development responsibilities which, the government announced in the statement on Scottish Enterprise, were likely to be given to the private companies running the scheme.

The proposals were formulated at Chequers last summer by the Prime Minister along with Bill Hughes of the Scottish CBI, subsequently appointed deputy chairman of the Scottish Tories, who had the original idea. Scottish Enterprise, with an overall budget planned at some £500 million again relied on the private sector to provide two-thirds of the board members to run the local schemes. Ministers attempted to meet fears over the continued role of the SDA by stressing that its central role in strategic development and attracting businesses to Scotland would continue. The Scottish Enterprise idea with its decentralisation of training and development met with a generally sympathetic response in Scotland as a whole with the STUC broadly welcoming it but with reservations, particularly about the predominance of businessmen. Many Labour controlled councils gave it a cautious welcome but again with reservations about their lack of control and the fact that they, like the trades unions, would have no automatic entitlement to sit on the local boards. Labour in parliament, however, continued to oppose the idea in principle with Dewar sticking to the concept of separate development and training functions although there were signs in the late summer that this policy might change.

Scottish Enterprise, however, was the perfect example of the type of initiative Rifkind had hoped he would be seen making in the run up to the general election. He had begun to get a positive response on a range of issues from organisations like the STUC and the Labour dominated Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) to whom he made a notably conciliatory speech in the spring which was given a cautious welcome by local authority leaders. Those who had been his implacable enemies were beginning to take up these positions where they agreed to differ but were prepared to work with the Scottish Office. There seems little doubt that new cooperative spirit will not completely disappear with the Forsyth appointment, but such a clear indication that there would be no turning back (to borrow the slogan used by his right wing group in the party) means that Scotland as a whole will be more suspicious of the motives and intentions of the government.

Next year the Scottish Enterprise proposals will provide the major focus for the debate at Westminster. Let us hope, however, that there will be no repeat of a parliamentary occasion that reminded everyone concerned that politics is not always as important as it seems. The Lockerbie air disaster just before Christmas in which 270 people died on Pan Am flight 103 brought local MP Sir Hector Monro close to tears as he made a brief statement in the Commons. It was a poignant moment when the cut and thrust of politics did not matter any more. Wilson the next day

paid justified tribute to Monro as a man clearly in touch with his constituents. Rifkind offered Dewar a space on the plane which took him to the disaster area and it was refreshing to see that, for a brief moment at least, there were some things left in life which did not provoke the enmity and venom that is the norm in the political rough-house of Westminster.

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