

## **OPINION POLLS IN SCOTLAND JULY 1994-JUNE 1995**

*David McCrone*

In the last twelve months, three organisations have largely been responsible for opinion polling in Scotland: System Three for **The Herald**, ICM for **The Scotsman**, and, a newcomer to the scene, Market Research Scotland Ltd (MRS) which carried out a monthly poll for **Scotland on Sunday**. Whereas **The Scotsman** commissioned one general poll (in February 1995 to coincide with its 'Great Debate' between George Robertson for Labour and the SNP's Alex Salmond), **The Herald** commissioned a number of in-depth polls from System Three, in addition to its monthly survey of voting intentions. In this regard, it is good to see a locally-based company taking over the main responsibility for opinion polling in Scotland, and System Three have a good prediction record when it comes to actual elections. Both ICM and System Three (twice) carried out opinion surveys in the Perth and Kinross by-election in May 1995.

### **VOTING INTENTIONS**

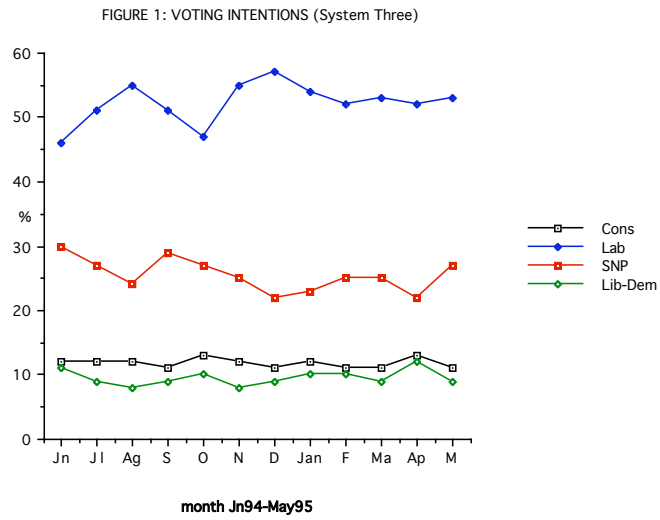
System Three's monthly polls show that Labour continues to outstrip its opponents in Scotland with an average of 52% (46% in the previous year), that the SNP has marginally improved its standing from 24% to 25%, and that the Conservatives have fallen back from 15% in 1993-4 to just under 12% in 1994-5 (figure 1). The Liberal-Democrats have also slipped from 14% in the polls to just under 10%. Scotland had one set of elections, those for the new shadow councils, in April 1995, in which Labour took 44% of the vote, the SNP 26%, the Conservatives 11.5%, and the Liberal-Democrats

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10%. Independents and others took 8% and 1% respectively. All in all, the opinion polls provided a fairly accurate reflection of Scotland's voting intentions.



Nevertheless, polling companies are now seeking to adjust for under-reporting of Conservative voting (see John Curtice's article in the **Scottish Affairs** no. 10). ICM's February 1995 poll provided adjusted as well as stated voting intentions based on reallocating 'don't knows' and 'won't says' according to 1992 voting behaviour. Thus, stated voting intention in February 1995 for the Conservatives was raised from 11% to 17%, Labour's from 45% to 48%, the SNP's from 19% to 22%, and the Liberal-Democrats' from 7% to 12%. The increase in the Tory vote is largest because fewest of their supporters had been willing to indicate their voting intention in the first question.

The SNP continues to do less well among women voters than among men. The ICM poll found 22% of men and only 16% of women opting for the SNP, a larger differential than that for age and for social class. The gender gap did diminish somewhat in the Perth and Kinross polls, where Roseanna Cunningham was the front-runner, but the SNP, uniquely among the parties in Scotland, continues to appeal less successfully to women than to men.

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The polls (ICM, February 1995) show massive dissatisfaction with the government's performance in Scotland, with 87% criticising the way in which it runs the country (48% of Conservatives are also critical). The prime minister does marginally better with 78% dissatisfied, and a small majority of Tories (55%) are satisfied with his performance. Tony Blair scores 54% satisfaction, with both Alex Salmond and George Robertson on 43% and 39% respectively. It is interesting to note that Robertson scores much better than his predecessor Tom Clarke as Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland. Two-thirds of Scots are dissatisfied with Ian Lang's performance as Secretary of State for Scotland, and his support is concentrated among Conservatives.

Most ominously for the Tories, Scottish public opinion judges them to be a divided party (83%) compared with scores of between 23% (Liberal Democrats) and 32% (Labour) for the other parties. Even a majority of Conservatives find their party to be divided.

Much is made in debates over the constitutional question of the fact that it does not figure at the top of peoples' political agenda. Issues like unemployment, the health services, and pensions continue to be cited more often than Devolution and Independence. For example, the February 1995 ICM poll and the January 1995 System Three poll both placed the constitutional issue well down the list of priorities with only 14% and 15% respectively forefronting it as the main issue. Even SNP supporters place unemployment (59%) and the NHS (40%) higher up than Independence (38%). It is clear, however, that this is not a deterrent to voting SNP, because the System Three March poll carried out in Perth and Kinross showed that only 18% of intending SNP voters placed the constitution at the top of their voting agenda. The message is that trying to rank issues in this way pays no attention to the complex interactions in voters' minds as to which party and which constitutional arrangement are most likely to effect change in 'social' issues.

The System Three poll in January 1995 tried to gauge the importance of self-government in another way by asking respondents to assess its importance in determining how they voted. Eighteen per cent said it was the most important issue in terms of choosing which party to vote for, 39% that it was important but not the main issue, 22% that it was not very important, and 15% that it was not important at all. Half of SNP voters said it was the most important issue, while Labour and Liberal-Democrat supporters mainly rated it important but not paramount. Thirty one per cent of Conservatives put it in

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the top two categories, reflecting the commitment of a significant minority to the issue of Home Rule.

## THE CONSTITUTIONAL QUESTION

The 1994-5 period was notable for certain events which highlighted the constitutional question. In February 1995 **The Scotsman** ran its 'Great Debate' in New Parliament House in Edinburgh, and highlighted its ICM poll alongside. The government also helped to forefront the constitution by a series of critical speeches on the issue by John Major and other senior ministers. Opinion polls at this time provide interesting insight into Scottish views.

System Three's January 1995 poll carried a reprise of previous polls on the issue (table 1).

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**Table 1**  
**Constitutional preferences, 1985-95**

	1985	1986	1988	1989	1990	1991	1993	1995
a completely independent Scottish Parliament, separate from England	29	34	33	33	33	35	31	29
A Scottish Parliament with substantial powers, but within the framework of British Government	44	46	42	46	44	43	50	47
No change from the present system	21	15	20	17	18	18	16	20
don't know	6	5	6	3	4	4	2	3

*Source: System Three; for details of sampling, see technical note at end of this article. The sample sizes were all around 1000.*

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It is the consistency of opinion which is most obvious in these polls, and the February 1995 ICM poll is very much in line, with 31% for Independence, 47% for a Scottish parliament within the UK, and 21% for the status quo. This poll and the System Three poll of January 1995 also agree on the differential support for constitutional change. Hence, men are more likely

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than women to support Independence (by between 6 and 8 percentage points), young people more than older people (around 10 percentage points), and working class (DE) more than middle class (AB, or ABC1) by between 10 and 20 percentage points. In like manner, both polls show considerable minority support within the three biggest parties for the non-party line. Around 25-30% of Tories claim to be in favour of Devolution; between 25-30% of Labour supporters want Independence; and 30-35% of SNP supporters prefer a Scottish parliament within the UK.

The System Three poll introduced the issue of higher taxes into a supplementary question on Home Rule, and found that support for Independence stood firm at 28%, that support for a Home Rule parliament fell by 10 percentage points, and support for the status quo rose from 20% to 30%. Attrition was greatest among middle class people where support for the status quo rose by 12 percentage points, Liberal Democrats (17 percentage points) and Conservatives (13 percentage points). It was lowest among working class people (7 percentage points) and Labour and SNP voters (8 and 6 percentage points respectively).

The ICM poll of February 1995 carried a series of questions on the constitutional issue. In reply to the question, 'If Scotland were to stay part of the United Kingdom but have a Scottish Parliament, do you think this would improve or worsen social and economic conditions for people like yourself?', over half (52%) said 'improve', 15% 'worsen' and 27% that it would make no difference. Interestingly, the responses by middle class people (ABC1 category) were in line with these results.

A follow-up question asking about Independence rather than Devolution showed that the largest number (39%) still thought that social and economic conditions would improve (with 35% saying they would worsen), and 17% that it would make no difference. More middle class respondents, however, thought that they would worsen than improve (43% to 35%).

There was strong support in this poll for a referendum on constitutional change (60%), and, if one took place, 61% claimed that they would support changes introduced by a Labour government, with 20% voting for no change. In a referendum on Independence, 39% said they would vote against, and 36% in favour, with 24% undecided. With regard to attitudes on a referendum, views seem to follow party support, with only Conservatives voting against change. As regards Independence, 30% of Labour voters would be in favour, and 47% against.

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The ICM poll for **The Scotsman** also asked whether the creation of a Home Rule parliament within the UK would lead ultimately to full Independence. A majority, 52%, thought it would, and 35% that it would not, although the problem with such questions is their ambiguity. It is not possible, for example, to separate out the predictive from the normative. Thirty six per cent of Conservatives think Devolution would lead to Independence, something most of them would abhor, whereas 75% of SNP voters agree, and presumably they would approve.

Respondents are evenly divided as to whether full Independence would lead to unnecessary conflict with England (44% think it would, and 46% that it would not, with a clear party split between Conservatives - 73% to 21%, and Nationalists - 25% to 70%). Having a separate Scottish armed services has no strong support, even among SNP voters.

Given the debates about gender balance in a Scottish parliament, it is interesting to note that more people (46%) are in favour of a 50/50 gender quota than are opposed to it (38%), with the strongest support from SNP and Labour voters.

The political flurry in the early months of 1995 was followed up by System Three whose January poll was set against the NOP poll in England in the same month. The question was as follows:

John Major has said that the setting up of separate Assemblies for Scotland and Wales will ultimately lead to a break up of the United Kingdom. What are your views on England, Scotland and Wales becoming separate countries, each governed separately?

The results are in table 2.

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**Table 2**  
**Attitudes to 'England, Scotland and Wales becoming separate countries'**

<i>percentage in column</i>	Scotland	England
very much in favour	26	8
slightly in favour	21	17
neither in favour or against	13	23

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slightly against	14	18
very much against	21	26
don't know	4	9
<i>sample size</i>	<i>1016</i>	<i>1559</i>

*Source: NOP; for details of sampling, see technical note at end of this article.*

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In England, the opposition to Scottish Independence was regionally varied, with a ratio of 'very much in favour' to 'very much against' of 1:2 in the north, and 1: 4 in the south. As regards the setting up of regional assemblies in England, and national ones in Scotland and Wales, opinion in England is more evenly balanced, with 35% in favour and 39% against. English regions in favour of their own assemblies are the North, the East Midlands, and West Midlands, with more people against in the North West, Yorkshire and Humberside, East Anglia and the South West. In broad terms, however, the issue of national and regional devolution is not a prime one for English voters with only 26% saying it is very or quite important, and only 7% of voters south of the border saying that they are more likely to vote Labour because of its devolution policy, and the same percentage for Conservatives because of their opposition to it. In this regard, John Major does not seem to have struck much of a chord in England, middle or elsewhere.

### EUROPE

Debates about national identity which were opened up in early 1995 raised the interconnections between Scottish, British and European identities. The System Three January poll confirmed that most people in Scotland saw themselves primarily as Scottish, then as British, and European after that (table 3).

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**Table 3**  
**Identity in Scotland**

<i>percentage in row</i>	Scottish	British	European
First	78	19	2
Second	16	71	10



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SNP 48%, 23% to Labour, 20% to the Tories and 9% to the Liberal Democrats. The May poll boosted the SNP to 53%, with Labour on 23% and the Tories on 15%, while an ICM poll for **The Scotsman** the week before the by-election gave the SNP 55%, Labour 21% and the Conservatives 14%. The actual election results gave the SNP 40% of the vote, Labour 23%, the Tories 21%, and the Liberal Democrats 12%.

The ICM poll was carried out on 501 respondents, which raised the possibility of sampling error to plus or minus 6 percentage points. In an interesting follow-up, ICM re-contacted 100 of the 193 respondents who had indicated that they were going to vote SNP, and found that 69 had actually done so, 14 had not voted, 7 refused to say, 5 had voted Labour, 3 Conservative and 1 each for the Liberal Democrats and another party. The pollsters concluded that support for the SNP was fairly shallow and that some did not turn out to vote because the SNP was so far ahead of the other parties.

In a constituency in which the SNP had taken 36% of the vote in the 1992 general election to the Tories' 40%, it was always likely that the Nationalists would become the tactical vehicle for anti-Tory voters. The ICM poll showed that the SNP was able to hold on to much of its 1992 vote and draw enough (14%) from Labour's 1992 vote and from the Conservatives (11%) to make winning the seat likely. Only 30% of 1992 Tory voters intended to vote for that party in the 1995 by-election, compared with 83% of SNP voters, and 50% of Labour. The ability of the SNP to mobilise tactical opposition without 'converting' voters to Independence was reflected in the fact that 49% of those who intended to vote SNP in the by-election preferred Devolution to Independence (supported by 43%). A similar split occurred in the earlier March poll which System Three conducted where the figures were 45% and 46% respectively.

The strength of the SNP, as reflected in these poll data, is that it is able to mobilise support among those who do not share its goal of Independence. Its weakness is that such support is likely to be tactical, and dependent on the judgements of the political day.

### **MARKET RESEARCH SERVICES**

A relative newcomer to the political polling scene is MRS, a Glasgow-based company. It ran a series of monthly polls on topical questions for the

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newspaper **Scotland on Sunday**. These included religious conflict in Scotland (October 1994); the monarchy (November); Christmas/Hogmanay (December); Northern Ireland (January); Scottish self-government (February); corporal punishment for children (March); European currency (April); and religious intolerance (May). The sampling sizes are in each case over 1000, which puts them on a par with System Three and ICM.

The findings they generate are broadly in line with expectations - opposition to denominational schools, modest support for the monarchy, sceptical optimism about the Northern Irish peace-process, support for constitutional change, and allowing parents the right to chastise children. It is, however, difficult to know what to make of a question such as 'Do you think that marches tend to encourage religious intolerance in Scotland?' which comes fairly close to the classic question-begging enquiry 'When did you stop beating your wife?'

#### **TECHNICAL NOTE**

System Three carried out the following polls for **The Herald**:

- The Monarchy: 1044 adults at 40 sampling points throughout Scotland between 27 October to 1 November 1994.
- Scottish Self-Government: 1016 adults at 39 sampling points throughout Scotland between 26-31 January 1995.
- Poll on Europe: 1053 adults at 40 sampling points throughout Scotland between 5-10 January 1995.
- Perth and Kinross Constituency Poll: 1022 adults at 78 sampling points throughout the constituency on 11 and 12 March 1995.
- Perth and Kinross Constituency Poll: 1047 adults at 80 sampling points throughout the constituency on 20 and 21 May 1995.
- System Three/NOP on The English Perspective on Devolution: 1559 adults throughout England between 25-31 January 1995.

ICM interviewed 1046 adults in 52 randomly selected constituencies throughout Scotland on 6 and 7 February 1995; and 501 adults in 30 randomly selected enumeration districts throughout Perth and Kinross constituency between 19 and 22 May 1995.

MRS interviewed between 1017 and 1042 adults in its monthly polls. No other details are provided.

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The **Scottish Affairs** editors are grateful to the polling organisations and their respective sponsors, **The Herald**, **The Scotsman** and **Scotland on Sunday**, for permission to use these polls.

*June 1995*