

CATASTROPHE FOR THE CONSERVATIVES: THE COUNCIL ELECTIONS OF 1995

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INTRODUCTION

The Local Government (Scotland) Act of 1994 redrew the map of local government in Scotland, replacing the two-tier system of 9 Regions and 53 Districts which had been in place on the mainland since 1974 with 29 new unitary authorities. Elections for the new authorities were held on 6 April 1995 and those elected are to 'shadow' the old councils for a year before the new system comes into effect. The names of the new local authority areas (to date it has not been decided whether their generic title should be 'districts' 'councils' or whatever) and their relationship to former authorities are as follows.

New Authority	Former Authority/ies
Aberdeen	Aberdeen District
Aberdeenshire	Banff and Buchan District; Gordon District; Kincardine and Deeside District
Angus	Angus District; part of Dundee District
Argyll and Bute	Argyll and Bute District; part of Dumbarton District
East Ayrshire	Kilmarnock and Loudoun District; Cumnock and Doon Valley District
North Ayrshire	Cunninghame District

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South Ayrshire	Kyle and Carrick District
New Authority	Former Authority/ies
Borders	Borders Region
Clackmannan	Clackmannan District
Dumbarton & Clydebank	Clydebank District; part of Dumbarton District
Dumfries & Galloway	Dumfries and Galloway Region
East Dunbartonshire	Bearsden and Milngavie District; part of Strathkelvin District
Dundee	Part of Dundee District
Edinburgh	Edinburgh District
Falkirk	Falkirk District
Fife	Fife Region
Glasgow	Part of Glasgow District
Highland	Highland Region
Inverclyde	Inverclyde District
North Lanarkshire	Cumbernauld and Kilsyth District; Motherwell District; Monklands District; part of Strathkelvin District
South Lanarkshire	Clydesdale District; Hamilton District; East Kilbride District; part of Glasgow District
East Lothian	East Lothian District
Midlothian	Midlothian District
West Lothian	West Lothian District
Moray	Moray District
Perthshire and Kinross	Perth and Kinross District; part of Dundee District
East Renfrewshire	Eastwood District; part of Renfrew District
Renfrewshire	Part of Renfrew District
Stirling	Stirling District

Four of the new authorities are identical to former Regions - Borders, Dumfries and Galloway, Fife and Highland - with their component Districts being abolished; 12 are unaltered former Districts; 2 are combinations of entire Districts and 11 involve alterations to former District boundaries.

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As under the previous system, councillors were elected in single-member wards, and electoral arrangements for the new authorities - in other words the number, names and boundaries of wards - were, according to the Act, to be determined not by the independent Local Government Boundary Commission but by the Secretary of State. The task was actually delegated to a junior minister in the Scottish Office, Allan Stewart, and his decisions were published in a series of Directions. In late 1994, however, the Local Government Boundary Commission was coming to the end of its second statutory review of District ward boundaries and in almost all cases its proposals were simply applied to the relevant new authorities. There were some exceptions, however. Where District boundaries had been altered, the Commission's proposals had to be modified. In some cases - the adjustment of borders between Angus, Dundee and Perth and Kinross, for example - the modifications were slight. In others - the part of Glasgow transferred to South Lanarkshire, for example - the Under-Secretary of State's direction involved defining entirely new wards. Another exception was the Highland authority. In this case it was believed that the Commission's proposals would result in too many councillors for the unitary authority and so the wards and polling districts proposed by the Commission (and in the case of Caithness District - for no obvious reason - unrevised wards) were combined to form the wards for the new authority. In total, it would be fair to say that 94 of the 1161 wards in the new system were defined at the discretion of the Secretary of State and were markedly different from those intended by the Boundary Commission.

CANDIDATES, CONTESTS AND TURNOUT

There were good grounds for thinking that the new structure of local government would result in a decline in the number of people standing as candidates in Scottish local elections. The number of seats available (1161) is significantly smaller than the combined total under the old system (1611). On the other hand, the fact that there were more incumbent councillors than seats on the new councils meant that competition for seats would be more intense than normal and there were, in fact, more candidates (3513) for the new councils than there had ever been in a single round of elections under the old system. As table 1 shows, this was largely a consequence of the extensive presence of Labour and the SNP.

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Table 1
Number of Candidates in Scottish Local Elections

	Districts 1992	Regions 1994	Councils 1995
Con	615	349	586
Lab	845	341	935
Lib Dem	365	260	527
SNP	855	371	994
Ind	374	134	361
Others	126	67	108
Total	3180	1522	3511
N of Seats	1158	453	1161

Labour contested 80.5% of all wards, including every ward in 17 authorities, and made inroads (in terms of candidatures at least) into areas that were formerly characterised by non-partisan local politics. Thus, they fought 31 of the 70 wards in Dumfries and Galloway and 18 of the 72 in Highland. It is only in the latter, Borders (4 out of 58), Argyll and Bute (11 out of 33) and Moray (8 out of 18) that Labour contested a relatively small proportion of wards. The SNP performance in this respect was even more impressive. They contested almost 86% of wards, reaching 100% in 15 authorities and falling below 50% of seats contested in just 2 - Argyll and Bute and Dumfries and Galloway. The Liberal Democrats, like Labour and the SNP, fielded a record number of candidates but, indicative of a drop in morale, the Conservatives contested just over half of the seats (50.5%) and had fewer candidates than they had in both the 1992 and 1988 District elections.

One of the unmistakable trends in Scottish local elections from 1974 to 1994 was a steady increase in the number of women candidates and councillors. By the 1992 District elections women comprised over a quarter of candidates (26.7%) and more than a fifth of councillors (21.5%). Women were less well represented at Regional level, comprising 22.4% of candidates and 17.4% of councillors in 1994. Despite the increased competition for seats caused by the abolition of major Regions, the proportion of women candidates in 1995 was

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almost as large as it had been at the last District elections (itself a record high) and the proportion of women among members of the new councils (22.9%) is the largest ever.

A direct consequence of the large number of party candidates was that only 4.5% of wards were uncontested (excluding two where the election was postponed due to the deaths of candidates) as compared with 13.1% of District wards in 1992 and 6.4% of Regional divisions in 1994. Moreover, 92% of the genuinely uncontested seats were concentrated in just four peripheral authorities (Argyll & Bute, Borders, Dumfries and Galloway and Highland). It seems likely, especially if the parties continue to put forward a large number of candidates, that very few wards will go uncontested in future - but it is also likely that the very high proportion of contests on this occasion partly reflects a flurry of interest raised by the institution of the new system and the fact that there were more sitting councillors than there are new seats.

Table 2
Turnout in Scottish-wide Elections 1992-1995 (%)

General Election 1992	District Elections 1992	Regional Elections 1994	European Elections 1994	Council Elections 1995
75.4	41.4	45.6	37.9	44.9

Scottish voters could be forgiven if they were suffering from 'election fatigue' by the Spring of 1995. The general election in 1992 was quickly followed by the District elections. These were followed in 1994 by the Regional and European elections and then in 1995 came the elections for the new local authorities. In table 2 the turnout figure for each of these is given. Clearly elections other than general elections are regarded by the voters as 'second order' elections, but turnout in 1995 was greater than in the European elections of the previous year and was close to what has come to be normal for Scottish local elections. There was, of course, considerable variation in turnout at local authority and, even more so, at ward level. Three authorities had turnouts below 40% - Aberdeen (38.1%), Glasgow (38.2%) and Aberdeenshire (39.7%). On the other hand, the highest turnouts were recorded in South Ayrshire (54.6%), Stirling (53.4%), East Ayrshire (52.5%),

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East Dunbartonshire (51.7%) and Perthshire and Kinross (51.2%). In the last case turnout was probably boosted by the activity and publicity surrounding the impending parliamentary by-election, but the other four high-turnout areas were thought in advance of the elections to be likely to see close contests for control of the council.

PARTY SUPPORT

While the number of candidates put forward by the various parties, the number of uncontested seats and turnout trends are of interest to students of elections, they are not the stuff of media headlines. What most concerns the media and the general public is the performances of the parties - and local elections are widely interpreted as good indicators of the current standing of the parties among the electorate.

In advance of the elections it was obvious that the Conservatives were not going to do well - in Scotland in recent years they have clearly been in the electoral doldrums. Indeed, for what is supposed to be a major party their performance has been abysmal. In the 1992 general election and the District elections which followed immediately afterwards they made a (very) modest recovery from previous low points, obtaining 25.7% and 23.2% of the votes respectively, and might have begun to believe that they were on the way back. But the recovery did not last long and soon new depths of unpopularity were being plumbed. In the Regional elections of 1994 the Conservatives recorded their worst-ever performance with 13.7% of the votes and in the European elections a month later, when there were no complications in calculating vote shares arising from uncontested seats or support for Independents in rural areas, they received only 14.5% of the Scottish vote.

In the second half of 1994 and the first few months of 1995, as table 3 shows, there was no sign that the Tories were moving from this rock-bottom level of support. Indeed, on these figures it would be fair to describe the Conservatives as 'also rans' in Scottish electoral politics with Labour maintaining its long-term dominance and the SNP securely in second place.

The relative popularity of the parties suggested by the polls was broadly confirmed in the local elections. The distribution of votes in the elections, compared with the last rounds of District and Regional elections, is shown in table 4. Clearly, the Conservative share of the vote (11.3%) was abysmal -

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their worst ever in Scotland and well below their best recent performance (30.3% achieved in the Regional elections of 1978). Tony Blair's much vaunted 'new' Labour obtained 43.8% of the vote. This was an improvement on recent Scottish local elections and certainly solid enough, although it remained smaller than the Labour share in the District elections of 1980 (45.4%) and 1984 (45.7%). The Liberal Democrats' overall vote share was very much in line with their average performance in recent local elections, as was that of the SNP. Taking opinion polls and local election results together, the figures suggest that SNP support in the 1990s has stabilised at around a quarter of the Scottish electorate.

Table 3
Voting Intentions in Scotland, July 1994-March 1995

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP
1994				
July	12	51	9	27
Aug	12	55	8	24
Sept	11	51	9	29
Oct	13	47	10	27
Nov	12	55	8	25
1995				
Early Jan	11	57	9	22
Late Jan	12	54	10	23
Feb	11	52	10	25
Mar	11	53	9	25

*Source: System Three polls published in **The Herald**.*

Overall vote shares in local elections are, of course, affected by the number of candidates put forward by the parties and hence may be to some extent misleading indicators of party popularity. If there is no party candidate in a ward no votes for the party can be cast, and we have seen that Labour and the SNP had many more candidates in these elections than the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. One way of minimising this problem is to analyse voting trends in wards in which there were candidates of all four parties in successive elections. In this case, however, given that the elections were for

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new authorities and involved new wards, there are no directly comparable wards from a previous election. For the record, however, there were 281 wards in which all four parties had candidates. Given the relatively small number of Conservative candidates these wards are concentrated in areas of relative Conservative strength and the four-party shares of the vote were: Labour 39.2%, Conservative 20.9%, SNP 20.5% and Liberal Democrat 19.3%. Even in their relatively strong areas, therefore, where they were able and willing to field candidates, the Conservatives managed to gather only a fifth of the votes.

Table 4
Share of Votes in Local Elections 1992-1995 (%)

	District Election 1992	Regional Elections 1994	Council Elections 1995
Con	23.2	13.7	11.3
Lab	34.1	41.8	43.8
Lib Dem	9.5	11.9	9.7
SNP	24.3	26.8	26.2
Ind	7.4	4.2	7.6
Others	1.9	1.1	1.5

Further details of the pattern of party support are given in table 5 which shows the distribution of votes within individual authorities. As can be seen, there are no chinks of light for the Conservatives. They did not reach a third of the votes in any authority - the largest share they managed being 29.2% in East Renfrewshire - and in a whole string of authorities across central Scotland their vote share was well under 10%. To gain only 5.8% of the vote in a large and important authority such as Fife, and only 6.6% in Glasgow, is a truly dreadful performance. Labour, in contrast, topped 50% of the vote in 12 authorities and obtained 62.3% in North Lanarkshire and 61.5% in Glasgow. Only in very rural authorities was their support relatively weak. Support for the Liberal Democrats is more concentrated than is the case with the other parties. There are numerous authorities where they are very weak or even non-existent - in 12 they gained less than 5% of the vote. Where they have a record of local and general election successes, on the other hand, their

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Table 5
Share of Votes in New Authorities 1995 (%)

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	Ind	Other
Aberdeen	14.4	42.0	23.9	18.1	0.8	0.7
Aberdeenshire	10.8	6.3	24.0	33.1	25.8	0.1
Angus	18.6	15.5	6.9	53.4	5.4	0.1
Argyll and Bute	13.0	10.0	14.0	12.5	50.5	-
East Ayrshire	6.9	56.4	0.3	36.1	0.2	-
North Ayrshire	11.8	55.9	2.8	24.8	3.4	1.3
South Ayrshire	28.3	56.0	-	12.0	3.5	0.2
Borders	14.8	3.3	24.0	18.9	39.0	-
Clackmannan	3.0	54.1	3.9	38.5	0.6	-
Dumbarton & Clydebank	1.2	50.5	0.3	42.6	4.6	0.9
Dumfries & Galloway	10.2	25.2	10.9	14.7	38.7	0.4
East Dunbartonshire	19.3	40.8	23.8	16.1	-	-
Dundee	13.8	53.7	2.5	25.2	1.0	3.8
Edinburgh	23.3	40.7	18.1	17.3	0.1	0.5
Falkirk	3.6	52.0	0.1	36.6	7.6	-
Fife	5.8	46.5	20.1	21.2	3.1	3.2
Glasgow	6.6	61.5	3.4	22.8	0.3	5.4
Highland	0.9	12.2	6.7	17.4	61.2	1.6
Inverclyde	3.7	49.6	29.6	16.2	0.6	0.3
North Lanarkshire	3.9	62.3	0.2	30.2	2.0	1.4
South Lanarkshire	7.0	57.0	7.1	26.8	0.9	1.1
East Lothian	18.9	56.0	6.4	16.9	1.6	0.2
Midlothian	4.2	57.4	3.5	34.5	-	0.3
West Lothian	4.2	46.9	2.0	44.6	2.4	-
Moray	2.2	19.7	8.1	50.2	19.8	-
Perthshire and Kinross	24.8	14.3	13.0	41.0	6.7	0.1
East Renfrewshire	29.2	31.4	14.9	17.7	0.1	6.7
Renfrewshire	7.8	46.3	5.9	38.6	-	1.4
Stirling	25.4	49.1	4.6	18.9	1.4	0.5

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vote held up and they gained more than 20% in Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Borders, East Dunbartonshire, Fife and Inverclyde. In contrast, SNP support is relatively even across the different authorities. Their lowest vote share was 12.0% in South Ayrshire and they had more than half the votes in Angus (53.4%) and Moray (50.2%). A final point to note from table 5 is that there are now only six authorities in which Independents play a significant part in local elections - Aberdeenshire, Argyll and Bute, Borders, Dumfries and Galloway, Highland and Moray.

Although political commentators and party spokespersons now pay more attention to the details of votes gained in local elections than they used to do - one of the minor effects of the computer revolution is that estimates of party shares of the vote are now speedily available - the immediate impact of the results still derives mainly from the rather starker totals of council seats and councils won and lost. Table 6 shows the number of seats won by each of the parties in the 1995 elections as compared with the last elections under the old system.

Table 6
Council Seats Won in Local Elections 1992-1995

	District Elections 1992	Regional Elections 1994	Council Elections 1995
Con	204	31	82
Lab	468	220	614
Lib Dem	94	62	121
SNP	150	73	181
Ind	228	65	154
Others	14	2	7
Total	1158	453	1159

Note: In two wards the 1995 election was postponed.

Because of the way in which the simple plurality electoral system works, the Conservatives won only 82 seats (7% of the seats available) in the whole of Scotland - down from a total of 235 under the old system. They won none at all (out of 92) in Fife and in five other smaller authorities, and reached double figures only in Edinburgh (14 out of 58). Labour, in contrast, reaped a

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handsome reward. Under the old system they held 43% of all seats but in 1995 they won more than all other parties and categories of candidate combined (53%). The effect of the concentration of Liberal Democrat support, as shown by the figures in table 5, was that with 9.7% of the votes they won 10.4% of the seats, while the even spread of SNP votes meant that they took 15.6% of the seats despite having 26.2% of votes.

The consequences of these results for control of the new authorities are as follows:

Majority Labour Control (20)

Aberdeen	Dundee	South Lanarkshire
East Ayrshire	Edinburgh	East Lothian
North Ayrshire	Falkirk	Midlothian
South Ayrshire	Fife	West Lothian
Clackmannan	Glasgow	Renfrewshire
Dumbarton & Clydebank	Inverclyde	Stirling
East Dunbartonshire	North Lanarkshire	

Majority SNP Control (3)

Angus	Moray	Perthshire and Kinross
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Majority Independent Control (3)

Argyll and Bute	Borders	Highland
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No Overall Control (Largest parties in brackets) (3)

Aberdeenshire (Lib Dem/SNP)	Dumfries & Galloway (Ind)	East Renfrewshire (Con)
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Labour's dominance of Scottish local government is clear. They control 20 of the new authorities comprising 76.5% of the Scottish electorate. If there were any attempt by the Conservatives to gerrymander the boundaries of the new authorities to their own advantage - even if the aim was merely to secure a few islands of Conservative strength in the middle of the Labour sea - then it clearly failed miserably. Indeed, it is doubtful whether any change to the

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structure of local government in Scotland would make any difference to political control. No matter how the boundaries are drawn, the great majority of the population will continue to be governed by Labour at local level.

The Conservatives now control no local authority in Scotland, having failed to win a majority of seats even in affluent East Renfrewshire, which had the largest Conservative majority in Scotland at the 1992 general election. The restructuring of authorities has also robbed the Liberal Democrats of the councils that they previously controlled (North East Fife and Annandale and Eskdale were swallowed up into larger authorities) or could realistically hope to gain (Gordon) and they are not in a position to be optimistic about gaining control of any of the new authorities. The recasting of local authority boundaries has been kinder to the SNP, which won control of three small councils.

EXPLAINING THE CONSERVATIVE CATASTROPHE

Given the results discussed in the previous section it seems fair to describe the 1995 local elections in Scotland as a catastrophe for the Conservatives - and this was certainly how the results were interpreted in the national media. But to close observers of the Scottish political scene the outcome was not unexpected. Part of the problem for the Conservatives in Scotland is that they are widely perceived to be an English party, and this is compounded - or perhaps caused - by the fact that the Government appears to be unable to understand and respond to Scottish sensitivities.

A clear example of this is the way in which the new structure of local government itself was instituted. In the first place, the system was imposed with little in the way of consultation. In England there was also a review of local government boundaries in the shire counties during 1994, but in this case a Local Government Commission (the Banham Commission) was empowered to test local opinion, consult interested parties and make recommendations about changes (and in many cases, to the annoyance of the Government, decided to recommend no change to the existing two-tier structure). Scotland, in contrast, was treated rather like a colony, with the metropolitan government simply imposing its wishes by fiat. Moreover, the affront was compounded by the fact that the boundaries of the new authorities appeared to have been drawn to advantage the Conservatives. Despite ministerial denials, it was widely argued that the dismemberment of

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Strathclyde Region was simply a piece of political vindictiveness, and that the purpose of creating unitary authorities such as East Renfrewshire, Stirling and South Ayrshire was to give the Conservatives a chance of retaining a foothold in Scottish local government. **The Herald** and **The Scotsman**, influential mouthpieces of middle-class opinion, were outraged. When the Government announced the composition of the new authorities, **The Herald** (9 July 1993) argued in a hard-hitting editorial that the proposals 'demonstrated the Government's determination to carve up the Labour heartlands...and preserve Conservative enclaves' and that the new structure could have no lasting legitimacy. At the start of the 1995 local election campaign, **The Scotsman** (15 March 1995) commented that 'Ministers' refusal to establish an independent commission to draw up the new boundaries was a piece of arrogance for which there was no respectable case to make, and none ever made'.

Two other incidents - not directly the fault of the Conservatives - upset a much broader spectrum of Scottish opinion in the run-up to the elections. The first was the announcement by British Rail early in the year that the London to Fort William sleeper was to be discontinued. Despite the fact that most Scots would never use this line, and probably most had never heard of it, the proposed closure was interpreted to be a consequence of the unpopular Conservative policy of privatising the railways and yet another slight on Scotland. The second incident was the furore over the decision of the BBC to broadcast a lengthy interview with the Prime Minister on the Monday before the elections (see article by John MacInnes in **Scottish Affairs** no.12). This appeared to contradict normal practice and the requirement for partisan balance in broadcasting. It would almost certainly not have been considered in the week of the English local elections and the Opposition parties obtained a court injunction preventing the broadcast in Scotland. Yet again, with some justification, Scots could feel aggrieved. The London-based media, it appeared, were either simply ignorant of the looming elections in Scotland or else did not consider them important enough to apply the usual rules relating to political broadcasting.

Although the abject failure of the Conservatives in these elections can be explained in part as a short-term effect of these sorts of incidents and of extreme government unpopularity in Britain as a whole, there has also been a long-term decline in the number of Conservative councillors in Scotland. Table 7 shows that they had more than a quarter of all councillors in 1978 but now have only 7%. Moreover, having such a small number of councillors

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may have serious implications for the future viability of the Conservatives as a serious force in Scottish politics.

Table 7
Conservative % Share of All Scottish Councillors 1978-95

1978	1982	1986	1990	1994	1995
26.7	22.2	15.9	13.4	14.6	7.1

Local councillors form a key group of party activists. They have a clear personal interest in ensuring that the local party stays healthy so that it can campaign effectively when the time comes to defend their seats. They are likely to be more active than others in recruiting new members and volunteer workers in elections. In addition, councillors form a pool of experienced local politicians from which parliamentary candidates can be recruited (the Prime Minister himself being an example). Having an important presence on the local council is important to local parties in another way. The chance to become a councillor, or, for the less ambitious, to influence or get inside information about council policy through party activity, is an important incentive for joining and becoming active in a party. Where the party has little prospect of winning council seats the incentive to join and become active is correspondingly reduced. If a party has hardly any members on the council there seems little point in attending party meetings to discuss local political issues.

Local elections come round much more frequently than general elections and they provide a political (as opposed to social) focus for party activity. From a purely instrumental point of view, they allow the party to keep its election machine in shape by giving volunteers a chance to gain experience in the arts and mechanics of campaigning and by updating canvass records. Where a party does not seriously contest local elections this is lost and, perhaps even more importantly, electors may simply get out of the habit of voting for the party.

Bad results in local elections can, then, have a deleterious cumulative effect on a party's fortunes in both local government and parliamentary terms. In

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terms of Conservative organisational effectiveness, the effects of the 1995 results could continue to be felt for years to come. Good results in local elections have the opposite effect - an increase in the number of councillors will bring organisational benefits to a party - and this is also illustrated in the election results. Most obviously, the long run of Labour success at local level now sees them in total command of the central belt. In addition, however, both the SNP and the Liberal Democrats built on past successes and did well where they have steadily increased their local presence during the 1980s. Thus the SNP won control of Angus, Moray, and Perthshire and Kinross and now hold the parliamentary seats in all three. Although they did not win any councils, the Liberal Democrats won 17 of the 18 wards in the North East Fife constituency where they gradually advanced in council elections during the 1980s and won the parliamentary seat in the 1987 general election.

The Conservatives, then, have been in decline in Scotland for some considerable time and the outlook for them remains bleak. Even so, the 1995 elections saw a significant further slump in support and in the aftermath of the elections their spokesmen tried to find explanations. Michael Forsyth, now Secretary of State for Scotland, complained that the results were simply 'unfair' and Michael Hirst, Scottish Conservative chairman, said on television that they showed that Scottish voters were 'ungrateful', but the most common excuses put forward were that the party was failing to get its message across effectively enough and that divisions and squabbling within the party at Westminster were making it temporarily unpopular. This seems to reflect a refusal to face reality. On the Saturday after the elections the editorial of **The Herald** was much closer to the truth:

The vast majority of that large proportion of the Scottish electorate which voted for any party other than [the Conservatives] do not give tuppence for Tory divisions...What message is it that we have missed? The simple truth is that the Tories are electorally lost because the public understands their policies only too well...For the sake of sanity it is necessary to adapt a Democratic slogan from the last presidential election in the United states. For the Tories this morning it should read, 'It's the policies, stupid'.

September 1995