

INTRODUCTION

David McCrone

Since the Second World War, there have been perhaps four 'big' elections in the UK - that is, elections which marked significant shifts in the political agenda of the state. We might say that, after them, politics was never the same again. Nineteen forty five, for example, ushered in the welfare state which set the agenda for the next two decades. The Opposition could only play variations on the theme set by that Labour government. In 1964, the re-election of a Labour government after 13 years of Conservative rule ushered in a period of social liberal reform with a focus on matters of personal morality - censorship, abortion and so on. The third 'big' election was in 1979 when the first Thatcher government swept to power to 'role back the state' and extend market principles, which have been largely accepted by its Labour successor.

Why, then, does the election of 1997 fit the description of being a 'big' election? Firstly, the majority of 179 enjoyed by the new government - albeit on 44% of the vote in Britain - was the largest in post-war British politics. Secondly, the Conservatives ceased to be a British party, and were reduced to a southern English rump representing mainly rural and suburban England. Thirdly, it was plain that while there was little to separate the major UK-wide parties on economic policies, they were undoubtedly different in their approaches to constitutional questions. Labour was committed not only to devolution for Scotland and Wales, but to reform of the House of Lords, the possibility of a Freedom Information Act, consideration of electoral reform for Westminster and other elections, and a more positive attitude to the European Union.

The conference which is reported here took place in Edinburgh in November 1997 as the annual conference of the Centre for Research on Elections and Social Trends (CREST). It represented the first opportunity to present the findings of the 1997 British and Scottish Election Studies, which are funded

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by the Economic and Social Research Council. The conference was hosted by the Unit for the Study of Government in Scotland at the University of Edinburgh, which is indebted to BT for its financial support in helping to run the event. We were fortunate in having Donald Dewar, Secretary of State for Scotland, give the opening address to the conference which was ably chaired by the journalist and broadcaster Joyce McMillan. The conference organisers are also indebted to the British Academy for agreeing to allow us to host its annual lecture, given by Neil MacCormick, and for permission to publish the lecture in this volume.

Since the general election in May 1997, the government has pursued its agenda for constitutional change. In September, it asked for and got a mandate for setting up a parliament in Scotland - with a substantial majority - and an assembly for Wales (by a hair's breadth). Subsequently the parliamentary bills for each have been published, and, at the time of writing, the Scotland Bill is making its way through the Westminster parliamentary process. A site for a Scottish parliament has been chosen at Holyrood in Edinburgh's Old Town, and Donald Dewar, currently Secretary of State for Scotland, has intimated that he intends to stand for the parliament, with the strong probability that he will be its First Minister. In his paper to the conference, he stated his intention that he will encourage cooperation, and that he has a preference for a more consensual parliamentary process, reflected in a horseshoe-shaped chamber rather than a confrontational arrangement as in the Westminster House of Commons.

If Scotland (and rather more haltingly, Wales) has scooted off down the prescribed tramlines of constitutional change, the overall agenda for UK is much more unclear. As the smoke has drifted away from the political battlefield, a degree of pessimism or caution has descended. Tom Nairn argues in this volume that what is on offer is 'virtual' liberation rather than the real thing, as he sees little evidence that the central sovereignty of the British state is being undone by the new government. Scottish Home Rule derives from the demand of the Scots to be treated as constitutional equals, and yet it has the capacity to destabilise the UK state's very conception of itself as sovereign.

Something of the reason for this lukewarm attitude to constitutional change is explored by John Curtice and Roger Jowell who show from the various election surveys that 'constitutional reform' is not all of a piece. While some issue like reforming the House of Lords and setting up a Scottish parliament have widespread support among British voters (if anything, support for a Scottish parliament has grown in England - so much, it seems, for an English backlash), attitudes to electoral reform for Westminster and extending the

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power of the European Union are less fulsome. Pippa Norris confirms the conversion to constitutional change among Labour MPs, but establishes that Conservatives are very strongly opposed. It remains to be seen whether Labour's conversion will be sustained while in office.

Using the Scottish Election Study data, Paula Surridge and her colleagues show that what drove Scottish electors to want a parliament was not matters of identity or ethnicity, but issues of social and economic welfare. A parliament was viewed as a means of generating welfare benefits, and higher taxes were seen as the means to pay for them. While those who felt Scottish were certainly in favour of a parliament, there was little evidence that those who either felt British or even English were much less in favour. The relation between nationality and political attitudes is explored by Anthony Heath and James Kellas who show that the relationship between state (British/UK) identity and national (Scottish, English, Welsh) identity is complex, and not necessarily at odds.

The conference was brought to a fitting end by the British Academy lecture given by Neil MacCormick. He argued that the introduction of a Home Rule parliament will replace the system of managed quasi-federalism, which has been in place since 1707, with a system of democratic quasi-federalism. Whereas the old anomaly was of Scotland being institutionally autonomous within the unitary British state underpinned by an essentially English constitution, the new anomaly will be much more visible. Whatever the future will look like, we can be assured that it will not much resemble the past.