

## **THIRD PARTY POLITICS IN A FOUR PARTY SYSTEM: THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS IN SCOTLAND**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Scottish Liberal Democrats are the heirs of the old Scottish Liberal Party and enjoy a tradition of independence within the Liberal organisation that goes back to the party's formation by the Scottish Liberal Federation in 1946. Over the last half century the party's fortunes have fluctuated in Scotland, as across Britain generally, but seldom come to the attention of academic observers. The literature on political parties in Scotland is notoriously thin and thinnest in relation to the Liberals and Liberal Democrats. However, the absence of literature belies the fact that the Scottish dimension to the Liberal Democrats has a number of important facets which have made Scottish Liberalism central to the development of third party politics in the UK since last century. In recent years, for example, Scotland has provided around one third of Liberal Democrat MPs in the House of Commons, without whom the party would lack political credibility at Westminster. The Scottish Liberal Party was also responsible for producing two prominent Liberal leaders in Jo Grimond and David Steel. In addition, the Scottish Liberal Democrats (SLD) play an important role within the federal organisation of the Liberal Democrats, a relationship subject to tensions between the two party organisations which is indicative of the anomalies of the party's federal

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structure. The Scottish and federal dimensions of the Liberal Democrats have been neglected areas of research in spite of the fact that the party is the only federal party organisation in Britain and offers a unique opportunity to study a system of intra-party politics which is conducted by a central party organisation and mediated by strong territorial units (Lynch 1997).

The role of the Liberal Democrats in Scotland is also important and has seen the development of third party politics in Scotland in a complex four party system, in which third party competition has been played out between the Liberals (and their successors) and the Scottish National Party. Whereas both Labour and the Welsh nationalists have managed to overtake the Liberal Democrats in Wales, the Scottish party has remained more competitive and capable of gaining a considerable number of seats from a relatively small section of the electorate. This level of success has been achieved in spite of considerable organisational and financial barriers which will be explored further below, particularly in relation to the Liberal Democrats' weak membership base and limited organisation in certain parts of Scotland.

### **THE STRANGE DEATH OF LIBERAL SCOTLAND**

Any study of the Liberal tradition in Britain is bound to present it as a tradition in decline in the twentieth century. However, though the decline of the Liberal Party has been examined in some detail in England (Dangerfield 1966), the party's decline in Scotland has gone largely uncharted. Political liberalism was at its height in the nineteenth century, when the Liberal Party achieved a level of electoral hegemony over its rivals, dominating Scottish politics in terms of votes and seats from 1832 until the second general election of 1910. The party gained such success through its ability to reflect and promote Scottish values and myths. However, these values and myths were no longer effective in the twentieth century when liberalism was challenged by both Socialism and a new Unionism which reduced the Liberal Party's appeal amongst both working and middle class voters (Kellas 1968, pp.179-87).

Divisions between Liberals and Liberal Unionists, free traders and protectionists, coalition and non-coalition Liberals and then National Liberals and Liberals all took their toll on the party in Scotland and across the UK in the twentieth century (MacIver 1996, p.3). By the 1920s, politics took a new shape through the growing electoral duopoly of Labour and the Unionists. Liberal organisation atrophied and the party was comprehensively overtaken by its rivals in the inter-war period, before being damaged a second time by

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the emergence of the SNP in the 1960s. Such developments left the Scottish Liberal Party in a weakened state after 1945, with a small number of votes and seats in Scotland and a chronic inability to contest seats in terms of candidates and campaigning which continued into the 1970s. The years from 1945 to 1979 may have brought occasional by-election successes, but the Scottish Liberals made little electoral progress. The party increased its seats in Scotland from 1 to 3 in the 1960s (and held these seats), but the major success of the party in these years was to gradually rebuild its organisation and finances and attempt to contest more seats at general elections. From contesting only 5 seats in 1955, the Scottish Liberal Party selected 26 candidates in 1964 and then 68 candidates in October 1974 (Parry 1988, p.4). However, it was only in the 1980s that the party began to contest all the seats in Scotland, regain respectable shares of the vote and win seats, often in areas which were former Liberal strongholds at the party's height in the nineteenth century (Kellas 1968, p.183). Such progress has enabled the Liberal Democrats to gradually re-establish themselves electorally across different parts of Scotland on a permanent basis from 1983 onwards.

#### **ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE**

Similar to the federal Liberal Democrats, the SLD has faced resurgence and decline in recent years. However, there are substantial differences in the level and pattern of Liberal support in Scotland and England which has tended to produce very different third party outcomes in the two countries. For example, at the 1964 general election the Liberals gained four MPs on 7.6% in Scotland. In the same year, the party gained only three seats but 12.1% of the vote in England. This pattern has continued long after 1964. In recent years the Alliance and Liberal Democrats have gained proportionately more Scottish than English MPs, even though the party's electoral support in Scotland has mostly fallen significantly below that attained by the party in England. The Liberal revival in February 1974 reached a high point of 21.3% in England but only 7.9% in Scotland. The gap in support between Scotland and England was only remedied with the creation of the Liberal/SDP Alliance which enabled the parties to gain relatively identical levels of support in Scotland (24.5%) and England (26.9%) in 1983. However, consideration of the pattern of election results in 1987, 1992 and 1997 makes the 1983 general election appear as a unique experience, as the party has returned to performing considerably better in England than in Scotland in terms of shares of the vote (see table 1).

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The creation of the SDP and the subsequent merger of the Alliance parties were significant factors in the development of the Liberals and Liberal Democrats as a third-party force in Scotland. Before 1983, the Liberals had great difficulty in contesting seats in Scotland, reflecting an historic organisational weakness in the post-war period. In February 1974 the party only contested 34 of the 70 Scottish constituencies. This level of competitiveness improved to 68 out of 71 constituencies in October 1974, but slipped back to only 43 seats in the 1979 general election. The emergence of the Alliance enabled the Liberals and SDP to mount a third-party challenge across all of Scotland which has been maintained in subsequent elections. Clearly, before 1983, Liberal electoral support was consistently understated by the failure to contest seats. Perhaps more significantly, the failure to contest a large number of seats meant that Liberal organisation and electoral support collapsed in many areas and provided the space for the SNP to emerge as a third party force.

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**Table 1**

**Comparison of Liberal, Alliance and Liberal Democrat Electoral Support at General Elections in Scotland and England 1955-1992**

Election	Scotland		England	
	% votes	seats	%votes	seats
1955	1.9	1	2.6	2
1959	4.1	1	6.3	3
1964	7.6	4	12.1	3
1966	6.8	5	9	6
1970	5.5	3	7.9	3
1974 (Feb)	7.9	3	21.3	9
1974 (Oct)	8.3	3	20.2	8
1979	9	3	14.9	7
1983	24.5	8	26.4	13
1987	19.4	9	23.8	10
1992	13.1	9	19.2	10
1997	13	10	17.5	36

*Sources: Kellas (1989) and The Times (1992).*

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The fact that the SLD and its predecessors have had to face a third party competitor is a major constraining factor over its electoral performance in Scotland, but it does not seem have damaged the party's ability to win seats. At the general election of 1983 the Alliance gained eight seats on 24.5% of the vote whilst the SNP gained two seats on 11%. Since then SNP support has risen substantially with only a marginal increase in parliamentary representation, whilst Liberal support has markedly declined without any corresponding loss of seats. However, even at its electoral peak in 1983 the Alliance was not as well placed as the SNP in its impact upon the party system in Scotland. Though it managed to replace the SNP as the third force in Scottish politics in 1983, it only received twenty-eight second places compared to the SNP's forty in October 1974. The distribution of second places also showed a marked difference in the impact of the two third parties: eighteen of the Alliance second places were against Labour and ten against the Tories whilst the SNP managed thirty-five second places to Labour in October 1974 with a greater likelihood of overturning the electoral balance in Scotland (Baur 1984).

The most significant thing about the electoral role of the Alliance and Liberal Democrats in Scotland is that they have managed to reverse the third party dilemma faced by their English counterparts. Whilst English Liberal Democrats often managed to gain a substantial level of electoral support, it has tended to be spread so thinly across the country that it doesn't create the geographical concentrations necessary to win seats. This situation was only remedied in 1997. However, in Scotland, with the exception of the 1983 election, the Alliance and Liberal Democrats have clearly benefited from geographical concentration rather than any dispersal of support. At the 1987 election, the party won nine seats with 19.2% and managed to retain all of these seats in 1992 even though it declined to 13.1% of the vote. The SLD's success in 1997 offers further evidence of the party's ability to win seats through electoral concentration.

Local elections have been an important focus for the Liberal Democrats, though the party has not made anything like the impact in Scotland that it has in England; this is partly due to the fact that it started from a much lower base of support in Scotland. Liberal Democrats have traditionally viewed local government as an important arena of political activity for two reasons. First, there is the tradition of community politics which identifies local government as an important sphere of political activity and social service (Cyr 1977, p.270). Second, there is the political strategy of using local elections as a step towards winning individual target seats. However, compared to England, local elections have not been such a successful

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electoral arena for Liberals and Liberal Democrats in Scotland. This is not to deny that the SLD has increased its local authority representation and used local elections as part of an effective targeting strategy for Westminster seats, but the party has been constrained in Scotland by the dynamics of a more complex party system. While Paddy Ashdown can talk about the local strength of Liberal Democrats in England, with over 5000 councillors and control or joint control of a substantial number of local authorities, the SLD has had a comparatively lesser role in Scottish local government. Even in 1982, when the Alliance was riding high in the regional elections with 18.1% of the vote in Scotland, the party only picked up 25 councillors out of 441 (Parry 1988, p.124).

Though the party has managed to increase its electoral representation at the regional and district levels in spite of a declining share of the vote - a sure sign of electoral efficiency - it has not been able to emerge as the second party of local government as in England. In terms of share of the vote, the party has been the fourth and even the fifth party within Scottish local elections, often falling behind the independents as well as the other three main parties. However, the party has managed to increase its share of council seats at each local election since the 1970s. In terms of political control, the SLD gained control of two of the fifty-three District councils in 1992 and joint control of only one of the nine regional councils in 1994. Unfortunately for them, all of these councils disappeared with local government reorganisation in 1995. However, the unitary elections themselves brought considerable success for the SLD, with a large increase in Council seats and a role in six different local authority administrations since the 1995 elections (Denver and Bochel 1995). The unitary elections also saw the SLD gain more council seats than the Conservatives, an achievement mirrored by these parties' contrasting fortunes at the 1997 general election.

The SLD has had three main difficulties in achieving a greater impact in local elections than it has in England. First, Scotland did not have the same swathes of Conservative-held local government that there was in England. All parties have gained from the decline of the Conservatives in Scottish local government, but this decline has been more gradual than in England, so that the SLD has not been able to make the dramatic gains enjoyed by Liberal Democrats in the South and Southwest of England in recent years. Second, there is the fact that some of the SLD's strongest areas of support at general elections are also those characterised by an independent tradition in local government which has reduced the potential number of SLD councillors. The Highlands and the Borders are clear examples of the independent phenomenon which has kept SLD local authority representation artificially

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lower than it would be. Third, the SLD has suffered in local elections from a lack of candidates. At the elections for the new unitary councils in 1995 the SLD managed to improve its number of candidates to participate in 528 of the 1161 contests in Scotland. However, this compared rather badly with the other parties. The Scottish National Party fielded 998 candidates in 1995, Labour had 955 candidates, whilst the Conservatives had 582. There were also some council areas in which the SLD performed extremely badly. For example, the party fielded only 3 council candidates out of 30 in East Ayrshire, 1 out of 22 in Dumbarton and Clydebank, 1 out of 36 in Falkirk, 4 out of 69 in North Lanarkshire and fielded no candidates at all in the 25 council divisions in South Ayrshire. However, where the SLD does contest and target effectively it tends to do well, which has been the key to its success at Westminster and local elections. But the party's lack of candidates has damaged its share of the vote. The SLD's difficulty in contesting seats at local elections is partly attributable to the low membership of the party compared to its competitors (see below) and a marked reluctance amongst candidates to put themselves forward in areas where they have not been active campaigners. In contrast, the SNP and Labour have been particularly adept at selecting a high number of local government candidates to boost their national share of the vote in Scotland, an achievement which the SLD has not attained with negative consequences for its share of the vote.

Whilst local elections have enabled the Liberal Democrats to increase representation in local government and gain a growing role in Scottish politics, European elections have been a constant source of disappointment. The strength of both the Liberals and the Alliance in the Highlands and Islands continually fuelled expectations that the largest constituency in Europe would supply the party's first elected member in the European Parliament. In 1979 and 1984, the Liberals selected local MP Russell Johnston as the candidate for the Highlands and Islands. However, despite the fact that the Alliance had won the majority of Westminster seats in the region in 1983, Johnston was strongly defeated by the SNP's Winnie Ewing. Similarly, in 1989, when the Alliance had won six of the seven Highlands and Islands seats at the 1987 general election the SLD vote collapsed to 8.3% in the Highlands seat and only 4.3% in Scotland overall because of the post-merger crisis. The SLD ended up in fifth place in the seat despite the fact that it was a target constituency and an area of substantial Liberal Democrat support. The 1994 European elections produced only a slight recovery for the SLD. It achieved a marginal increase of support to 7.2% but remained in a very weak position across all eight of Scotland's European constituencies (Lynch 1994).

## **PARTY ORGANISATION**

The independent tradition of the Scottish Liberal Party and the federal structure of both the Liberals and the contemporary Liberal Democrats have had profound effects on the party organisation in Scotland. The Scottish Liberal Democrats are very much a party within a party in organisational terms. The SLD has its own headquarters in Scotland and a range of policy-making and organisational structures which govern it and preserve its autonomy within the national structure of the Liberal Democrats. The Scottish party has control over membership, finance and rules. It can hire its own staff, set the membership fee in conjunction with the federal party and determine the size and functions of local parties. Members join the SLD directly (rather than the federal party) and the party in Scotland possesses its own computerised membership list. In addition, the SLD has policy-making autonomy through its two annual conferences and organisational bodies such as the Scottish Executive and Scottish Policy Committee (Scottish Liberal Democrats 1993). The level of organisational autonomy enjoyed by the SLD is considerable when compared to the Scottish Labour Party. Labour in Scotland cannot appoint staff without reference to Walworth Road and the National Executive Committee, it is financially dependent on the British national party, and the party leader in Scotland (Lynch 1996a), the Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, is appointed by the Labour leader whereas the SLD elects its own leader and other senior office-bearers through a postal ballot of Scottish party members. The net result is that the Scottish Liberal Democrats enjoy a considerable degree of political and organisational autonomy and will find it very easy to adjust their organisation and structure to suit the creation of a Scottish parliament.

Even though Scottish party organisations are reluctant to reveal their membership figures, the SLD has been very public about its membership levels. Before the merger in 1988, the Scottish Liberal Party had around 10,000 members compared to 2000 for the SDP, though it is difficult to assess the reliability of these figures because there was no centralised membership list and local parties were responsible for membership. At the merger in November 1988, this figure declined to a more definite 7250 members, with the party responding by launching 'Operation 8000' in 1989 to push up its membership (**Scottish Democrat**, February 1989). However, there seem to have been considerable losses in members since 1989, partly through the post-merger problems that affect the Liberal Democrats across Britain but also through the party adopting a more formal approach to membership itself rather than the looser approach to membership taken by constituency parties, Liberal clubs and branches before 1988. Since the

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merger, SLD membership has stood at 5441 by December 1992, before rising slightly to 5852 in December 1993, 6054 in 1994 and then falling slightly to approximately 5933 members in late 1995 (Scottish Liberal Democrats 1995, 1996).

The small size of the party membership in Scotland creates two problems. First, there is a lack of funds within the SLD. The party is dependent upon its members for finance and the size of the membership has placed constraints on the party's budget. Existing members appear to contribute generously to the party, but its organisational and financial position would markedly improve with an increase in membership. Despite financial constraints, the party has managed to increase its Scottish staff from three to four full-time members at Clifton Terrace in Edinburgh, along with three part-time staff and a number of volunteers, partly through financial support from the federal party. In addition, there are a number of local staff working within the constituency parties, especially attached to local MPs. Second, the total size of the SLD membership indicates the organisational weakness of the party across Scotland, with an average of 82 members per constituency at the end of 1995. Since SLD membership is likely to be well above average in the seats held by the party, it is probable that many SLD local parties are very small indeed and functioning at a minimal level. The fact that the SLD constitution allows local constituency parties to be composed of a minimum of thirty members is suggestive of a low level of membership in many areas (Scottish Liberal Democrats 1993, p.4). In addition, local parties can represent more than one constituency (Ingle 1996, p.115) often due to groupings of Westminster constituencies which have merged to take account of local authority boundaries. Currently, the SLD has 55 local parties in Scotland, which includes one each for Orkney and Shetland (see their web site at <http://www.scotlibdems.org.uk>).

### **THE AUTONOMY OF THE SCOTTISH LIBERAL DEMOCRATS**

Organisational autonomy is a vital issue for the Scottish Liberal Democrats. The old Scottish Liberal Party was proud of its level of independence within the British party, and Liberal members sought to preserve the constitutional relationship between the Scottish and federal parties during merger negotiations in 1987-88. In the years before the merger of the Alliance parties, the Liberal Party operated a loose federal structure which allowed a substantial level of independence for the Scottish Liberal Party, which had its own organisation, party headquarters, membership, conference and policy-making mechanisms and the ability to adopt policies in any area of its

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choosing (Scottish Liberal Party 1986). The Social Democratic Party (SDP) was a different case entirely. It was characterised by organisational centralisation, the limited autonomy of its Scottish Party Council and the dominance of the party leadership. Therefore it is not surprising that one of the difficulties of the merger process was the reconciliation of a decentralised Liberal Party, in which funds, membership and policies were controlled in Scotland, with a highly centralised SDP, in which finance, membership and policies were controlled by the central organisation in London.

Despite the different organisational traditions of the two parties, the process of merger was a relatively smooth affair in Scotland and did not substantially undermine the autonomy of the Scottish party within the British party organisation. Many leading Social Democrats in Scotland favoured merger, though the membership had no separate Scottish ballot in which to express this view. The SDP in Scotland was somewhat distanced from the Owenite faction in England, in both ideology and attitudes to merger, and tended to seek an accommodation with the Scottish Liberal Party (SLP) rather than rely on British-level negotiations. Agreement on merger between the SLP and SDP in Scotland was facilitated by attitudes to Home Rule and the necessity of retaining an autonomous party organisation in Scotland. The British national level of the SDP also placed few obstacles in the way of an SDP/SLP merger in Scotland that fitted into a decentralised UK party structure, particularly after lobbying from Scotland, the SDP vote in favour of merger in August 1987, and the departure of David Owen.

The real problem in the merger of the two Scottish parties was the attitudes of Liberals in England towards federalism. Before merger, the autonomy of the Scottish Liberal Party had been accepted, but the constitutional proposals that evolved through the merger negotiations sought to redefine this level of autonomy to place constraints on Scottish autonomy in policy-making. The SLP's merger negotiators were prepared to sacrifice some autonomy in policy-making in order to achieve a new federal structure, but the party's membership was not wholly behind this proposal, particularly because there was concern that the new federal party structure would be superior to the party in Scotland through giving the federal conference a predominant role in policy-making (**Scottish Liberal Bulletin**, November 1987, p.7). There was also concern that the Scottish organisation would lose its ability to adopt policies on non-Scottish issues such as defence and foreign affairs in a new federal structure which acted to centralise policy-making. Despite these losses of autonomy there were also gains for the Scottish party in the merger negotiations. The new constitution offered the prospect of structured Scottish participation in the new federal organisation, with Scottish representatives on

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key bodies such as the Federal Executive, Federal Conference Committee, Federal Finance and Administration Committee and Federal Policy Committee.

Whilst the new federal structure has functioned reasonably effectively, there have been problems with its operation that have created difficulties for the SLD. The organisational weakness of the English Liberal Democrats (ELD) has tended to undermine the federal nature of the party organisation itself. Indeed, aside from Scotland and to a lesser extent Wales, the party organisation is federal in name only. None of the regional parties in England has developed a very strong identity and sought to obtain status as a 'state party' similar to Scotland and Wales (Ingle 1996). The English regional parties and the ELD have essentially remained organisationally subordinate to London and the federal party and, in the sphere of policy-making, they have tended to utilise the federal conference to the detriment of their own structures. This practice has been a cause of some tension within the federal party. Members of the Scottish Liberal Democrats have been critical of ELD members for treating the federal conference as if it were an English party conference rather than a UK body. This situation has been seen to create two problems. First, the federal conference has shown a tendency to debate issues which are purely English matters and are really the business of the ELD. Second, the SLD has been conscious of federal encroachment on its policy-making autonomy as a result of the weakness of the English party.

Rather than debating purely federal matters which are the constitutional responsibility of the federal organisation, the federal conference sought to debate issues like education which are actually the formal responsibility of the state parties. Government policy-making in the sphere of education is divided between Scotland and England, with the Scottish Office responsible for Scottish education rather than Whitehall - a pattern adopted within the federal policy-making structure of the Liberal Democrats. Despite this situation, there were frequent occasions in which local parties in England and Wales tried to have education debated at the federal conference. Such efforts led to conflict in the Federal Conference Committee as SLD representatives sought to veto motions on education and demonstrated a general dissatisfaction with the way in which the federal conference was being hijacked by the ELD and English regional parties. The conflict over federal/state policy-making capabilities was not resolved until the constitutional amendments of 1993, which produced a solution to the problem. Whilst the Federal conference still deals with issues which are the formal responsibility of the state parties, and therefore isn't really a federal

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conference at all, the conference agenda now distinguishes between motions which are actually federal and those which apply only to England and Wales.

### **THE LIMITS OF THIRD PARTY POLITICS**

Liberal Democrats in Scotland have faced a number of electoral constraints as a result of their third party status. The SLD has been disadvantaged by its low levels of finance and core support in a similar fashion to the Federal party. However, the SLD has managed to deal with the problem of a geographical dispersal of support that has afflicted the Liberal Democrats across many parts of England. The party's effective targeting and community politics approach has meant that it began to benefit from geographical concentration in the 1980s, winning seats on relatively low thresholds of the vote in Scotland. The 1997 general election is a good example of this phenomenon with the SLD winning ten seats from only 13% of the vote whilst the SNP collected only six seats from 22% and the Tories received no seats despite gaining 17.5%.

Before the 1997 general election the performance of Liberal Democrat MPs in Scotland was constrained by the need to operate as diligent constituency MPs in the community politics tradition, whilst also heavily involving themselves in Westminster and federal party politics. The functional constraints on SLD MPs were particularly strong because the Scottish members of the party had to hold UK portfolios at Westminster which distanced them from Scottish politics. From 1992-7, Scottish MPs held a wide range of responsibilities as parliamentary spokesmen - Charles Kennedy was parliamentary spokesman on Europe; Menzies Campbell dealt with foreign affairs, defence and sport; Malcolm Bruce was responsible for Treasury issues and the Citizen's Charter; Russell Johnston dealt with foreign affairs and Eastern Europe; Archy Kirkwood was Chief Whip, shadow leader of the House and dealt with health and social security; Bob MacLennan covered National Heritage, the constitution, arts and broadcasting; and David Steel was responsible for foreign affairs and defence. The distribution of parliamentary portfolios left only two SLD members, Ray Michie and Jim Wallace, the SLD leader, dealing with Scottish affairs at Westminster. In addition, SLD MPs often held senior posts within the federal party. Charles Kennedy was federal President from 1990-94, and Robert MacLennan was elected as his successor in October 1994, whilst SLD MPs and office-bearers are also active in federal committees and policy-making bodies that draw them away from Scotland. These factors limited the MPs' ability to advance the party's identity in Scotland, with the SLD often unable to use its MPs to

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boost the party's presence in the Scottish media and help to build the party organisation.

However, the 1997 general election has markedly altered this situation. Whereas from 1992-7, Scottish Liberal Democrat MPs were a large component of the Liberal Democrat contingent at Westminster, the recent election success has transformed the party's position at Westminster. The party's increase in seats in 1997 - from 26 to 46 - has enabled the Liberal Democrats to field an extensive team of frontbench spokespersons across most policy areas for the first time for decades. This situation has also brought benefits for the SLD, as it has been able to appoint a full Scottish frontbench team comprising Jim Wallace, Ray Michie, Donald Gorrie and Michael Moore. Not only will the SLD gain a higher profile from its ability to allocate Westminster portfolios more comprehensively, but the collapse of the Scottish Conservatives has opened the door to the SLD's emergence as the main opposition party to Labour in the House of Commons and the Scottish Grand Committee. Exploiting this situation lies within the hands of the party itself both in Scotland and at Westminster.

One obvious electoral difficulty for the Liberal Democrats in Scotland is that they are not the only third party in Scotland. In England, the Liberal Democrats are often able to gain support as an attractive alternative to Labour or Conservative, but in Scotland this is not so simple. The presence of the Scottish National Party (SNP) acts as a substantial barrier for the SLD. It was the SNP which was responsible for undermining the Liberal revival of 1974 in Scotland, and the progress of the Alliance in 1983 was also constrained by the nationalists. Indeed, in Scotland it has been the SNP rather than the Liberal Party or its successors which have been able to make most use of by-elections, with the exception of Glasgow Hillhead in 1982 and Kincardine and Deeside in 1991. The SNP also seems capable of eclipsing the SLD in terms of setting the political agenda and making an impact on the media and electorate. Though the SLD has some support amongst the quality press in Scotland, mostly notably **The Scotsman**, it rarely receives wider press coverage. The SLD's efforts to promote Home Rule are a case in point of the party's weak media role. In January 1995, the party introduced a private members bill on Scottish devolution in the Commons but its efforts were drowned out by press coverage of the conflict between Major and Blair over devolution and the SNP's ability to gain British national media attention for independence through holding a successful press conference in London. However, the SLD's elevated profile given its emergence as Scotland's opposition party and the appointment of a Scottish frontbench team are likely to improve the party's media profile significantly.

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Where the Scottish Liberal Democrats have attempted to play a more forceful role as a third party has been in discussions with Labour over constitutional change in Scotland since 1989 through the medium of the Scottish Constitutional Convention. The fact that the SLD was the only other major political party in the Convention gave its representatives considerable leverage over Labour and made the SLD politically relevant through its role as a pressure party within the Convention (Sartori 1976). Initially, the SLD seems to have mishandled this opportunity because it lacked a coherent strategy for dealing with Labour and tended to view Labour as a monolithic party which could dominate Convention negotiations rather than as a party of factions and conflicting interests. The STUC, Scottish Labour Women's Caucus and Scottish Labour Action were part of Labour's coalition which favoured proportional representation and the creation of a sizable parliament with tax-raising powers (Lynch 1996b). It seemed to take the SLD some time to realise that its agenda was shared by important actors within the Labour Party.

The SLD's policy on a Scottish parliament evolved from 1989-1995, as a result of consensus politics and compromises with its Convention partners in two significant areas. First, the negotiations led to the adoption of an additional member system similar to the German model rather than the Single Transferable Vote (the SLD's favoured option) for elections to a Scottish parliament. Second, the SLD was seldom able to use the occasion to make the case for federalism, but it found itself discussing and supporting 'unilateral' devolution. These measures both reversed SLD policy to some extent (Scottish Liberal Democrats 1989), though SLD members would argue that devolution and federalism are not incompatible. However, more importantly, the party did make some important gains in the Convention over the size of the parliament and the number of seats to be elected by the additional member system. The most significant gain for the SLD was to move Labour unequivocally away from support for the first past the post electoral system. However, the manner in which the Labour leadership abandoned the Convention in 1996 in order to announce its own unilateral proposal for a two-question referendum on devolution and tax-raising powers also demonstrated the weakness of the SLD and the other Convention partners.

The ideological location of the Liberal Democrats within the British party system has often been problematic for the party, and there is evidence of strategic conflicts arising from the party's position in Scotland and England. At the 1992 general election the SLD was supportive of the idea of sustaining a minority Labour government in power to achieve Home Rule, whilst

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Ashdown and the federal Liberal Democrats were opposed (Ingle 1996, p.129), producing the opportunity for a split within the party as substantial as those of the 1920s and 1930s. The party has also faced difficulties in mapping out a coherent political strategy in relation to its competitors and determining whether it saw itself on the left or the right of politics. Indeed, party strategy has created anomalies for the party in both Scotland and England. The party's attempts to view itself as the replacement party of Labour in the 1980s and seek a realignment of the centre-left faced clear difficulties in Scotland. Given Labour's strength in Scotland and the Conservatives' electoral decline it was always unrealistic to expect a political realignment which would see the Liberal Democrats emerge as the main opposition party to the Conservatives. However, this was the strategy pursued by the party at the federal level (MacIver 1996, p.174-5). After the 1992 general election, Paddy Ashdown's adoption of a policy of 'equidistance' was an attempt to resolve the problem of the party's ideological placement and attitude to its competitors, through asserting the Liberal Democrats' independence from both main parties. However equidistance faced a mixed reception in Scotland. On the one hand, the notion of equidistance was completely untenable in Scotland as the SLD had effectively created a political alliance with Labour through the Constitutional Convention. The political demonisation of the Conservatives in Scotland made equidistance equally problematic. However, on the other hand, there was a perception that over-identification with Labour had brought electoral damage to the SLD in rural areas and marginal seats and encouraged its electorate to defect to the Conservatives in 1992. If equidistance could distance the SLD from Labour then it had some political merit, but the SLD leadership showed little enthusiasm for the notion of equidistance in Scotland and the abandonment of the strategy by Paddy Ashdown removed the need for any awkward balancing act within the party.

### **THE 1997 ELECTION SUCCESS**

Despite operating in a complex four-party system with limited resources and a restricted media profile, the Alliance and the SLD have largely succeeded in winning seats in Scotland through achieving concentrated local support. Indeed, the party managed to improve its success at targeting and electoral concentration at the 1997 general election despite its vote remaining static compared to 1992. The party's prospects at the 1997 election were difficult to predict given its electoral and opinion poll performances, though the SLD was confident of making advances. Opinion poll support for the SLD hovered either side of the 10% mark from 1992-7 with intervening electoral

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performances demonstrating few signs of revival. In 1994, the SLD only gained 12% at the regional elections and 7.2% at the European elections. Meanwhile, at the first elections to the new unitary councils in April 1995, the SLD only gained 10% of the vote. However, such orthodox measures of party success seem to offer very little in the way of explaining Liberal Democrat performance, when support for the party is so concentrated in key constituencies rather than spread across Scotland.

In some senses the party was fortunate to hold all of its nine seats in 1992, in face of a strong challenge from the Conservatives in many areas. Five of its nine seats from 1992 were marginal, with majorities under 3500, and two seats had majorities in the hundreds. The fact that two MPs, David Steel and Russell Johnston, retired at the 1997 election created additional difficulties. Boundary changes in Gordon and Kincardine and Deeside also placed question marks over the party's ability to repeat its performance of 1992 in the 1997 election. However, in retrospect, using the 1992 election as a predictor for the 1997 election was a flawed approach. In reality, it was the 1995 unitary elections which offered the best prediction of what would happen to the SLD at the general election. In essence, any Tory recovery which could threaten the SLD's position never came and the party was able to benefit from the Tory's collapse in 1997 in common with the other opposition parties. Ironically, the real electoral threat to the SLD in 1997 came from Labour and the SNP in Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber and also clearly from Labour in Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale. In 1992, the Conservatives frequently emphasised that they were holding on in Scotland and would do well, but no one listened to them, hence the surprise at the result. In 1997, the SLD were also bullish about their prospects but were also treated with scepticism by the media and academic commentators (including this author). The SLD's emergence as the second largest party in Scotland has therefore given the party considerable satisfaction and a new role in Scottish politics. The great irony for the SLD is that, though they are pledged to introduce a fairer voting system, they are actually the party which knows how to play the first past the post system to best effect in Scotland, much more so than the supporters of the current voting system themselves.

### **THE FUTURE OF THE SCOTTISH LIBERAL DEMOCRATS**

The Scottish Liberal Democrat's success and the Conservatives' demise in the 1997 general election has given the SLD an unprecedented political opportunity as the main opposition to Labour. In addition, the political opportunity structure of Scottish politics seems set to change quite

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dramatically with the referendum and establishment of a devolved Scottish parliament. How the Liberal Democrats respond to these challenges will have a substantial impact upon the party's fortunes in Scotland. In a sense, the next two to three years may see the SLD changing from its recently acquired role as Scotland's opposition to developing a role in Scotland's devolved government. The party's constructive role in the Constitutional Convention and its power-sharing role in a number of Scottish local authorities suggest that the SLD is already well-versed in the type of co-operative politics that will be useful in the next context of Scottish devolution. Such factors would indicate that a politically mature SLD is ready for coalition and co-operation in very different ways to Labour and the SNP.

The results of the 1992 election study indicated that public awareness of the SLD's policies had improved and that the party had begun to shed its former public image as a party with obscure policies (Bennie, Brand and Mitchell 1997, p.149). The party's identification with constitutional change, proportional representation and education over the last five years have probably improved the party's policy profile even more. The party's strength in the House of Commons and its potential role in a Scottish parliament will provide it with opportunities to improve its policy image even more with campaigning on education, health and local government. Therefore to a certain extent the party's future lies in its own hands. The party needs to consolidate on recent gains at the 1997 election, something which Liberal Democrats have been very effective at in the past, but also begin to reach out of the party's heartlands to develop its organisation and support in new areas. The proposed electoral system for the Scottish parliament will reward broad levels of support in addition to geographical concentration, and so the SLD has to reach out of its strongholds to build support in new areas. If it manages to do this, then the party might begin to see the rebirth of Liberal Scotland in a more significant way than achieved at the 1997 general election.

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