

**THE 1999 SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS:
FROM ANTI-TORY TO ANTI-NATIONALIST
POLITICS**

Peter Jones

The word 'historic' was greatly over-used, appearing in every television bulletin, every newspaper report. And yet it cannot be avoided. For 6 May 1999 was indeed a historic day: the first elections to the first Scottish parliament to sit for 292 years, and the first Scottish parliament to be democratically elected.

This was the day that was supposed to be the first Scottish general election, a description used not just by Alex Salmond, the Scottish National Party leader, but also by the leaders of the other parties. They meant that this was an election which should have been decided on purely Scottish issues - housing, health, education, and so on - without the intrusion of a British or international dimension. So, it was thought, it could be seen how the Scots would vote with nothing much more than the fate of Scotland at stake.

In such a context, lots of intriguing questions could be answered. Would the Scots surge to the SNP in an election where they did not have to worry about ending up with a Tory or Labour prime minister? Is the Scottish centre of political gravity really on the left of the political spectrum? Were the Tories just a political irrelevance or would they make the comeback predicted under devolution by many commentators? And so on.

But, in fact, it did not turn out quite like that and these questions were only partially answered. Two things over which the devolved Scottish parliament has no power played a significant role in the campaign. The first was that the UK went to war in the Balkans. Throughout the election, the news was dominated by pictures and stories of bombs and missiles falling on Serbia, of refugees fleeing from Kosovo and huddling in their tens of thousands in tented camps, and by stories of atrocities committed by Serbian troops and paramilitaries on Albanian civilians. In news priorities, the Scottish election came a definite second.

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The second was the budget by Gordon Brown, the Chancellor, on 9 March. As a Labour budget, it contained many things to cheer Labour supporters. Pensioners, through increases in the annual winter payment and other measures, got, on average, an additional £240 a year. Child benefit was increased and a flat-rate children's tax credit, designed to help poorer families, was introduced. Brown also introduced his long-hoped for new 10p starting rate for income tax.

If there was good news for Labour supporters, there was also good news for people likely to lean towards the Tories and the Liberal Democrats. Business taxes were cut. If there was a fly in all this electorally soothing balm, it was that fuel taxes were increased by 6%, twice the rate of inflation. It was a policy which was to cost Labour dear in rural areas, but this problem was initially obscured by a piece of budget theatre. At the end of his speech, Brown announced that, from April 2000, the basic rate of income tax would be cut by 1p to 22p.

Even without impending elections in Scotland and Wales, this was a considerable act of political showmanship. Here was a Labour Chancellor presiding over a period of low inflation, low interest rates, falling unemployment, and yet announcing increases in public spending and cutting taxes at the same time. Quite a feat, which in itself ought to have been enough to ensure the continuing popularity of the Blair government.

But it was also aimed at the elections, particularly the coming Scottish election. After Labour's woeful performance in the North-east of Scotland European by-election in November 1998 where Labour came a poor third behind the Tories, and the SNP increased their share of the vote, albeit on a small turn-out, and faced with a series of opinion polls which put the SNP hard on the heels of Labour, an alarmed Tony Blair had ordered Brown to take charge of the Scottish campaign.

Brown's objective was, almost exclusively, to reduce the Nationalist share of the vote. Part of that share, he reasoned, was actually an anti-Labour vote by former Tories. Therefore the Budget was aimed at showing Tories that they had nothing to fear from the Labour party, and even that a Labour government could deliver Tory economic policy rather better than the Tories.

This kind of strategy is much derided by Scottish political commentators as aimed exclusively at 'middle England' and nothing to do with Scotland, as though Scots, unlike any other electorate, want to pay more taxes. But in fact it is just as valid in Scotland where there is a big constituency interested in tax cuts. Even at the 1997 nadir of Scottish Tory fortunes, about 500,000 Scots voted Tory.

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The other half of Brown's strategy was to generate fear of the Nationalists as a separatist party which would impoverish Scotland. The main vehicle for this was the slogan 'divorce is an expensive business'. This was coined by Blair at a discussion in Downing Street as a replacement for 'separatist' which, it was felt, had become tired and over-worked.

The slogan was turned into a campaign image of a smashed picture and torn map of Britain adorning bill-boards and featuring in party political broadcasts by Philip Chalmers, an advertising designer who went to work full-time for the Labour party. Chalmers was responsible for perhaps the most negative party political broadcast of any Scottish political campaign - repetition of the smashed picture image amid black-and-white scenes of a bleakly desolate Scotland.

Thanks to Brown's Budget, the SNP leadership took a decision which reinforced the message Labour wanted to put out. In the days after the Budget, the SNP leadership feverishly debated whether to just accept the tax cut, or to pledge to use the parliament's tax-varying power and reverse it by raising basic-rate income tax by 1p. A fast decision was needed because the party conference in Aberdeen on 12 March would have to approve it.

The arguments against were that the SNP would be branded as the tax-raising party. Nationalist purists within the party argued that they were also playing the devolution game rather than concentrating on the independence goal. The arguments for were that the SNP could portray itself as honest against a Labour party which was bribing voters and that increasing public spending would be popular with voters who would be unaffected by the tax - about 45% of the electorate, a percentage which was far greater than had ever voted SNP before.

Alex Salmond, the SNP leader, who was for using the tax, won the day and carried the argument overwhelmingly at the conference in Aberdeen. Salmond's strategy was to focus the campaign on an agenda for a devolved Scotland rather than on independence, which became clear when the SNP, mimicking Labour at the 1997 election, produced a 10-point pledge card with independence bottom of the list. Salmond was almost certainly correct for, while the SNP's purists disagree, the evidence suggests that taxation and economics is easier ground for the SNP to win votes on than is independence.

This devolution agenda would enable the SNP to focus on the fact that, because of Labour's decision to stay within the spending limits of the previous Tory government in order to achieve economic stability, spending on public services in Scotland had actually reduced in real terms during the first two years of the Labour government.

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By raising £230 million a year through the tax-varying power, the SNP's claim that it would spend more on public services was easily made, hard to refute and outbid Labour's claim that it was increasing public spending by £165 million a year. Moreover, by portraying the Brown Budget as a tax bribe aimed at English voters, this would buttress the main thrust of the SNP's negative campaign tactic - that Labour is a London-led party espousing London rather than Scottish values.

The weakness in the SNP strategy was forced on them by the speed of the decision. The SNP was not able to say what it would spend the extra money on, beyond that it would be devoted to housing, health, and education, until some time after it had decided to raise the money. Lack of clarity confuses the voters and allows opponents to assert credibly that a party is economically incompetent when what voters want is evidence of competence.

This, then, was the main battle ground of the election campaign. Although there was much media comment that the campaign was dull, there were sharp and clear divides between the main protagonists. Labour was pro-Union and pro-tax cuts while the SNP was the antithesis. Labour was for student tuition fees and the use of private finance in public building projects, while the SNP would abolish tuition fees and claimed that Labour's use of private finance would result in the privatisation of education and health, borrowing a tactic which Labour used over pensions against the Tories in the 1997 election.

The odd feature of this debate was how the Tories, inventors of the low-tax orthodoxy, were side-lined in the argument. While they valiantly tried to promote claims that Labour had all sorts of hidden tax increase plans in its manifesto - on business rates, a tourist tax, road tolls - they failed to generate much media coverage. Where the Tories did score was on the use of gimmicks to illustrate the daily campaign message - billboard depictions of Salmond as a teletubby, a crushed car to dramatise the road toll claim, and so on. Thanks to the equal-time restrictions on broadcasters, these images featured almost nightly on television news, so ensuring that even if viewers did not hear or absorb the spoken commentary, an image would be conveyed. These were also attractive to newspaper picture editors. The Liberal Democrats, however, were not so image-conscious, and their campaign message was less noticeable as a result.

Although the media had more or less written off the Tories as also-rans before the campaign started, David McLetchie, the Scottish Tory leader and unknown to the public, gave them unexpected credibility. His performances on television, particularly during an early four-leader debate on Channel Four, surprised commentators by their polish and political ability. The party's

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Edinburgh headquarters was astonished to receive unsolicited messages of support from the public after McLetchie's appearances, the first time that any official working there could recall such a phenomenon.

But the main battle was between Labour and the SNP. Labour had two policy areas which caused it a lot of difficulty. One was student tuition fees where it faced a united call for abolition from the SNP, the Tories and the Liberal Democrats. Labour failed to convey its arguments that the poorer 50% of Scottish students do not pay the fees, or that they were introduced to pay for expanding the opportunity of higher education to many more school-leavers. Labour, possibly because the leadership was intent on wooing the Scottish middle classes, did not make the obvious point that tuition fees are in practice redistributive taxation from richer to poorer people.

Labour also had problems with the use of private finance in building schools and hospitals, to which the SNP and the Liberal Democrats presented vociferous opposition. So too did various trade unions, particularly Unison. A threatened revolt during the campaign at the Scottish Trades Union Congress annual conference in Glasgow was only headed off by a weekend of telephone twisting of trade union leaders' arms by Brown. Nevertheless, Labour did not win this debate.

What caught the SNP unprepared was the attitude of the media to them. Over the years, they have worked hard at building good relations with reporters who respect the party's professionalism. At general elections, SNP press conferences are generally good-humoured affairs mainly because that party is a side-show to the main event. This election was however markedly different, for the SNP was clearly a contender for power. The media pack was also much larger than usual as all the London-based newspapers had added Scottish political correspondents to their staff. The Labour party too pumped out a remorseless stream of attacks and critiques of SNP policy.

The media therefore put the SNP under much greater and deeper scrutiny than usual. Questioning at press conferences was critical and sustained. Party officials later admitted that they had been unprepared for this, or reporting which ranged from the sceptical to the outright hostile. This may have been why Salmond was not his usual genial self in the first weeks of the campaign but was obviously irritable. He also appeared to be not fully recovered from an operation to cure a painful back complaint. Speculation about this and alleged rows between himself and Mike Russell, the party's chief executive, became a story on its own.

The party's position in the media worsened after Salmond's broadcast on the war in Kosovo, allocated in reply to the prime ministerial broadcast made by

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Blair. Salmond broke the political consensus in favour of the campaign by describing NATO's bombing campaign in Serbia as being of 'dubious legality' and 'unpardonable folly'. The Labour party seized on the juicy morsel like a starving dog. Robin Cook, the foreign secretary, said that Salmond was 'the toast of Belgrade'. Although Salmond insisted that he took his stance out of principle rather than as an election tactic, the media concluded it was a mistake. Certainly, the other parties reported that Salmond's remarks had caused a great deal of offence and that long after politicians had stopped commenting on it, people kept raising it with canvassers.

After two weeks, Salmond and Russell decided that there little point in offering themselves up to be Aunt Sallies on a daily basis, and abandoned the daily press conference. From then on, if the media wanted to catch up with the SNP campaign, they would have to take to the road. To that, the SNP added the publication of a daily four-page newspaper which was distributed by party activists in an attempt to by-pass the media. The SNP say its circulation, which began at 50,000 copies, peaked at 120,000 on the Monday before polling day. These tactics appeared to halt and even to reverse the mid-campaign slump in SNP support evident from opinion polls.

But even under heavy media pressure, the SNP still managed to deflect some of the barrage against them. An example was the debate over Scotland's fiscal deficit, the balance between public spending and tax revenues in Scotland. Scottish Office calculations, supported by a good many independent studies, contend that more is spent than raised in taxation in Scotland, even when North Sea oil revenues are taken into account. Thus the Labour party insisted that an independent Scotland would be worse off, with taxes having to be raised and public spending cut, in order to bring the public sector budget into the kind of balance that would allow an independent Scotland to meet the Maastricht criteria for joining the single European currency.

Early in the campaign, the David Hume Institute of Edinburgh University published a study of this question. Essentially, it said that while there was a fiscal deficit, it was manageable, and went on to note the truism that there were more economic policy mechanisms open to an independent government than to a devolved administration. The SNP media unit seized on this and spun it to mean that a group of respected academics had declared that Scotland would be better off independent. Labour's media managers were unprepared for the report and were initially unable to obtain a copy, much to the fury of Blair who was campaigning in Scotland that day. By the time Labour got its interpretation out, it was too late - much of the media had accepted the SNP's interpretation. Thus when further reports came out later in the campaign supporting Labour's fiscal deficit case, the SNP were able to

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use the David Hume Institute report to rebut them. They used, in similar vein, pre-election comments by Andrew Hughes-Hallett, professor of economics at Strathclyde University, that an independent Scotland could survive economically in Europe.

The SNP was not off the hook however, for Salmond had always promised to publish an economic strategy for an independent Scotland. Labour issued daily reminders that he had not done so. The strategy was eventually published a week before polling day. The SNP attempted to manage the event by unveiling the document to an audience of supportive businesspeople, but it unravelled fast at the ensuing press conference.

The SNP had maintained throughout the campaign that Scotland does not have a fiscal deficit, that is that that Scottish tax revenues (including North Sea oil revenues) are equal to, or greater than, public spending in Scotland. But this document said next to nothing about the current situation, only that by 2002/3 Scotland would have a fiscal surplus. Reporters repeatedly demanded to know what the report said about the current position and eventually Salmond, and his economics spokesman Andrew Wilson, were forced to concede that there is a current fiscal deficit. Bizarrely, Wilson was compelled, quite literally, to calculate this on the back of an envelope. Embarrassingly, he got the sums wrong and had to correct the first figure, £1.7 billion, to £1.5 billion, within minutes. Gordon Brown, sitting in Labour's Glasgow HQ a few miles away from the press conference, gutted it within minutes and churned out a stream of attacks on it. But in the eyes of the media, the SNP slip up had already wrecked the credibility of the document.

This produces the first conclusion from the campaign. Until relatively recently, the SNP has always been on the back foot over the economics of independence. Opposing politicians have never had too much difficulty dismissing the nationalist case with a few adjectives such as 'fantasy'. However, the margin of difference between the nationalist and the unionist case over the Scottish economy has narrowed to the extent that as much depends on how parties present their case as on the case itself. This difference will become even narrower if Britain joins the single European currency which, provided the SNP remain committed to Euro-entry, will remove much of the costs-of-independence element from the unionist case. Also interesting is that devolution is liable to result in much better statistics about the Scottish economy and the public balance sheet. The current problem for economists, whether partisan or neutral, is that most of the figures in the public domain, especially on the taxation side of the balance sheet, are estimates. If

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devolution results in statistics which are harder to dispute, the economics argument should become much clearer.

Secondly, this was not an election determined by purely Scottish considerations. There probably never will be such an election for, apart from the clear intrusion of international issues in this campaign, the power of the UK government to influence a Scottish campaign is self-evidently still enormous. In that respect, elections to the Scottish parliament may not be that much different from local government elections, whose outcome is determined by whether the UK government is popular or not. This is a rather dismal thought, and a particularly challenging one for the Scottish Labour/Liberal Democrat administration.

That said, a third observation is that the Scottish campaign still had characteristics, apart from the nationalist dimension, which made it different from a UK campaign or a campaign fought mainly in England. The ferocity and the depth of the debate surrounding private finance in public projects and student tuition fees is hard to imagine in a purely English or even a British context. Allied to this observation is that neither the Scottish Labour Party nor the SNP were well-equipped for the campaign. Brown and his close friend Douglas Alexander, MP for Paisley South, rapidly took charge of Labour's campaign, while Donald Dewar, the Scottish Labour leader, was relegated to the role of the party's public face in television debates and on bus tours of the country. The daily diet being fed to the press was over-reliant on re-spun old news, and the pressure applied to the media by the party's press office, fortified by temporary imports from Millbank HQ, was at times counter-productive. The SNP was over-dependent on Salmond as its public face, and the strain of having to do everything - take press conferences, appear in television debates, supervise the strategy, and tour the country - took a clear toll on Salmond.

But perhaps the fourth and most important conclusion is that the nature of the Scottish debate has changed quite dramatically. Over the previous 20 years, anti-Toryism has been the dominant theme. The SNP has been part of that anti-Tory consensus, quite happily so during the 1997 referendum campaign and electorally profitably so in previous elections. It also carried much of that anti-Tory rhetoric into the Scottish parliament election campaign with its 'London Labour' sloganeering. Yet the anti-Tory mood in Scotland is dissipating, particularly now that there is a substantial Tory group in the Scottish parliament which is fast detaching itself in policy terms at least from the UK Tories.

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The election campaign showed signs, not least in the media, of a new Unionist consensus arising. Except for **The Herald**, which appeared to lose interest in the election in the last week, demoting it off the front page, and whose coverage had a distinct pro-SNP tinge, the press was hostile. **The Scotsman** declared for New Labour, as did to varying degrees the **Express**, the **Daily Record**, the **Mirror** and the **Sun**. The **Daily Mail** urged a vote for the Union

This line-up against the SNP contrasted with the position the SNP was in prior to the election. A good many commentators in a range of newspapers, seeing the opinion polls and the apparent warmth with which the SNP and Salmond in particular had been greeted, construed this to mean Scotland was en route to independence at a fast clip. This was a mis-reading of the public mood. All that had happened was that the SNP had come in from the cold margins of politics to a place where it was reasonable to think of them as being close to power. Thus all sorts of people who could have previously afforded to ignore the SNP now had to take them seriously. But that is quite different from support for independence.

The heat of the election appears to have caused a new consensus to arise, a Unionist consensus, from which the SNP are quite clearly isolated. Those who had previously tolerated the SNP as a part of the old anti-Tory consensus thus had to re-think their attitude to the SNP. And at the root of the evident discomfiture of the SNP during the campaign was this sudden transition from being part of a majority to being in a minority. The treatment of the SNP by the **Daily Record**, which even savaged the Nationalist icon Sean Connery, symbolises this transition. In truth, while many in the SNP thought the **Daily Record** was viciously unfair to them, this editorial imbalance was mild compared to the bilious way the newspaper used to attack the Tories.

Whether this mood does become the dominant theme in Scottish politics is arguably the most interesting feature of the next four years. Of course, events in the parliament, the coalition between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, relationships between Holyrood and Westminster, and how the Scottish Labour party develops its position within the UK Labour party will largely determine whether this becomes part of the new Scottish politics.

So too will the stance of the SNP. Will Salmond take it in the direction followed by many continental European nationalist parties and indeed now by the Welsh Nationalists - abjuring independence in favour of maximising regional autonomy? Or will the independence purists, nursing a grievance that this election campaign was a lost opportunity, hold sway?

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