

## **GALLANT CRUSADER OR CAUTIOUS PERSUADER? DONALD DEWAR'S ROLE IN SECURING SCOTLAND'S PARLIAMENT**

*Robert McLean*

On occasion, I was on the other side of a strategy debate from Donald Dewar, and I cannot claim to have been part of his circle. Over 20 years, however, I grew to value his political skills, wisdom, self-deprecating wit, and the foibles and eccentricities often associated with greatness. Above all, I respected his knowledge of, and love for, Scotland.

It is now a matter of months since Donald's death. In this appreciation I want to get beyond the homilies, and apocryphal 'Donald stories', and map the origins and development of his advocacy of Scottish devolution in the course of a political career spanning more than forty years. Was he a 'crusader' blazing a pioneering trail to Holyrood, or a patient persuader building on ground already won?

The Labour Party that Donald Dewar joined at Glasgow University in the late 1950s had completed its retreat from the historic commitment to Scottish home rule. In 1955, Labour Leader Hugh Gaitskell travelled north to tell his Scottish troops that national economic planning had rendered the old home rule policy obsolete, and by 1958 the Scottish Council of the Labour Party had adopted a formal position opposing 'legislative devolution to Scotland'. Coming from an insecure, and not always happy, childhood, Glasgow University proved to be a homecoming for Donald Dewar. He flourished in the atmosphere of the academic community, and threw himself into the activities of the University Labour Club and Glasgow University Union with its great debating traditions. Donald, in common with contemporaries John

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Smith and Derry Irvine, studied for an MA/LLB, a six year degree popular among aspiring student politicians<sup>1</sup>. The rounded education enjoyed by that generation of 'wannabes' provides an interesting slant on current debates on student financial support.

In the early 1960s, Glasgow University Labour Club was a nursery for aspiring Labour politicians promoted by Willie Marshall, the Secretary of the Scottish Council of the party<sup>2</sup>. Donald served as President of Glasgow University Union in 1961/62, and graduation did not break the ties between Dewar and Glasgow's West End, which had become Donald's village. Within months of qualifying as a solicitor, Donald Dewar was travelling north to contest Aberdeen South in the 1964 general election. He shook the complacency of Tory incumbent, Lady Tweedsmuir, reducing her majority to fewer than 4,000 votes. The national result pointed to another election soon, and Dewar was reelected by the local party. In the intervening two years, he continued to live in Glasgow, staying with members of the Aberdeen party during campaigning forays. During the 1966 general election former Lord Provost, Norman Hogg senior, had two additional lodgers, Alison Dewar and baby Marion<sup>3</sup>.

The young Dewar was already noted for the presentational style that would become his trademark. Journalistic observers recorded his delivery at '250 words per minute', and suggested that the fast talking Glasgow lawyer might be 'too slick' for the electors of Aberdeen South<sup>4</sup>. They were wrong.

The new MP for Aberdeen South made his name as an advocate of liberal reforms - divorce law reform, opposition to corporal punishment, more liberal abortion legislation, abolition of the not proven verdict - rather than constitutional change. Donald was a regular contributor to the **Glasgow**

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<sup>1</sup> *In discussion with Colin McKay, former Glasgow University Union luminary, Observer Mace winner and one of Scotland's longest-serving and most respected political commentators.*

<sup>2</sup> *In discussion with Alex Neil. Now SNP MSP for Central Scotland, Alex Neil was employed as Research Officer with the Scottish Council of the Labour Party from early 1974 to late 1975, and had an inside view of events in the critical summer of 1974. In January 1976, he formed the breakaway Scottish Labour Party with Jim Sillars and others.*

<sup>3</sup> *Press and Journal, 11 March 1966*

<sup>4</sup> *Press and Journal, 29 March 1966.*

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**Herald**, arguing his causes in the columns of its Standpoint feature<sup>5</sup>. At Westminster, he moved a private member's bill to abolish not proven, and clashed with Secretary of State Willie Ross over the lack of parliamentary time for Scottish divorce reform<sup>6</sup>. This public spat aside, Ross regarded Dewar as one of the brightest of the Parliamentary Labour Group, and a prime contender for promotion<sup>7</sup>. The genesis of Donald Dewar's commitment to devolution might partly be found in the frustration of fighting for Westminster time for Scottish reforms.

Addressing a party gathering at Kilmalcolm in June 1968, Dewar described the nationalist upsurge at Hamilton, and in the 1968 municipal elections, as 'partly a wish to change the administrative structure which has become remote and impersonal'. He warned that it would be 'short-sighted to ignore the wish for more immediate government in Scotland', but he cautioned:

Of course we should not rush to a hasty solution before such vital evidence, as the Royal Commission on local government is available.<sup>8</sup>

There were those in the Labour Party who took a less patient approach to the case for Scottish devolution. The most notable was John P. Mackintosh, academic and politician, who, as a young parliamentary candidate, came to the rostrum at Labour's 1958 Scottish Conference to oppose the reading of the last rites over Labour's home rule past. Mackintosh, who died in 1978, was something of a political loner. While his admirers argue that he would have achieved more than many of the 'grey men' who held office under Labour in the 70s, they also acknowledge that he was 'too much the loner, the unorthodox and openly impatient' to endear himself to colleagues<sup>9</sup>.

Meanwhile, Donald Dewar's tentative calls completely bypassed established home rulers in Labour's Scottish parliamentary ranks. When Donald was included among the Labour members on the newly created Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, in February 1969, longstanding home rulers Emrys

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see Dewar on corporal punishment, *Glasgow Herald*, 28 May 1966, p.4.

<sup>6</sup> *Glasgow Herald*, 6 February 1969, p.7.

<sup>7</sup> In discussion with Alex Neil.

<sup>8</sup> *Glasgow Herald*, Monday 17 June 1968, p.13.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Drucker (ed) *John P. Mackintosh on Scotland*, Longman, Essex, 1982, p.1.

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Hughes and Willie Baxter complained that the committee had been stuffed with 'committed opponents of devolution'<sup>10</sup>

The onset of the 1970s was a lowpoint for Donald, politically and personally: defeat in Aberdeen South, marital breakdown and the subsequent marriage of his former wife to University colleague Derry Irvine. Back in Glasgow, Dewar returned to practising law following a spell as the Reporter to children's panels in pre-reorganisation Lanarkshire. He kept himself in the public eye as the penetrating presenter of a political chat show on Radio Clyde.

'Players' in the Scottish Labour Party of the early 1970s were either MPs, senior figures in big trade unions or leaders of large local authorities, but Donald sought to maintain a profile in the Scottish affairs of the party as a member of the Scottish Council Executive, which was not generally regarded as a significant body. Things were to change.

In response to SNP advances, Prime Minister Harold Wilson established the Royal Commission on the Constitution in late 1968, declaring Scottish home rule a 'respectable' subject for discussion within the ranks of Scottish Labour<sup>11</sup>. The Commission reported in the autumn of 1973, and the new Wilson government had to decide how to respond. Wilson intended to implement elements of the Commission's recommendations but a major stumbling block was the opposition of his own 'basso profundo', Secretary of State Willie Ross. Ross was a champion of the post-1945 unionist settlement. He believed that it allowed Scotland to punch above her weight at Westminster, and feared that devolution, particularly a legislative assembly, would lead to a reduction in Scottish influence at Westminster. Governing without a majority, Wilson had to call another election in a matter of months

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<sup>10</sup> *Glasgow Herald*, Tuesday 4 February 1969, p.1. Tonyandy-born Emrys Hughes was married to Keir Hardie's daughter, Nan, and was a biographer of the Labour pioneer. He came to Scotland in the 1940s to take over the editorship of Tom Johnston's *Forward*, and was elected as the MP for South Ayrshire. Following Winnie Ewing's victory at Hamilton in 1967, Hughes was one of the two required sponsors at her presentation to the Commons. Hughes died in 1969 and was succeeded by Jim Sillars. Willie Baxter's West Stirlingshire seat was eventually inherited by Dennis Canavan.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism: Scottish Society and Politics 1707- 1977*, First Edition, George Allen and Unwin, 1977, p.247.

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and he intended to nudge Ross, and the Scottish party, towards devolution in the intervening weeks<sup>12</sup>.

The first step was the Scottish Council Conference in March 1974. The debate centred around a statement from the Scottish Executive, moved by Donald, and summarised by John Pollock. While Donald was at pains to stress the statement was a holding position containing no firm commitment to an Assembly, he added:

I personally believe that we have made mistakes. I think we have been so keen to man the barricades that we have perhaps swept aside the possibility of constructive reform within the framework of the United Kingdom, and I believe that now is the time to put that right and to look at the possibilities<sup>13</sup>.

The second step in Wilson's conversion strategy was a consultative document setting out five options based on the Kilbrandon recommendations. When the Scottish Council Executive met to discuss the document on Saturday 22 June 1974, its numbers were severely depleted. The total membership of the Executive was in excess of thirty, but only eleven members were present on that particular day. It is widely assumed that the absences were due to television coverage of Scotland's crunch game against Yugoslavia in the World Cup in Germany. While the meeting may have been technically quorate, it is surprising that those present were not cautioned against dealing with such important business when so many of their colleagues were absent. That role should have fallen to the Scottish Council's Secretary but there was no way the virulently anti-devolution Peter Allison was going to make such an intervention.

By a margin of six votes to five, those present voted to reject all five options. Both Donald and George Robertson voted with the minority.

Wilson looked to devolution minister Ted Short to advise on how to respond. Short convened a meeting at Westminster involving one of his own aides, Labour Party General Secretary, Ron Hayward, Alex Kitson, Deputy General Secretary of the Transport Workers Union and senior Scot on the National Executive Committee, and Alex Neil, the research officer for the Labour Party in Scotland. Anti-devolutionists Peter Allison, and Alan Campbell

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<sup>12</sup> *In discussion with Alex Neil.*

<sup>13</sup> *Quoted in **The Scotsman**, 23 March 1974, p.1.*

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McLean, Chair of the Scottish Executive, were excluded<sup>14</sup>. Hayward was concerned that London calls for the Scottish Party to reconsider could be exploited by the SNP. Neil and Kitson argued that doing nothing was a greater political risk. Short agreed. He reported to Wilson, and, on 24 July, the National Executive confirmed its support for a devolved assembly, and called on the Scottish Executive to reconsider its position. The invitation was accepted, and on 17 August the full Scottish Council of the Labour Party met in the Co-operative Halls in Dalintober Street, Glasgow. Crusaders, on both sides, had their say at Dalintober Street, but the day belonged to the fixers, with Alex Kitson ensuring that the major trade unions supported a devolved legislative assembly. Donald did not contribute at Dalintober. As a member of the Executive he may have felt bound by the conventions of collective responsibility. With victory assured, he may have decided to keep his powder dry.

To what extent was Donald linked with other pro-devolutionists in the Labour Party of the mid-1970s? The loneliness of long-distance home ruler Mackintosh has already been referred to, but in 1974, a new 'mini-cadre' of crusaders emerged in the shape of Jim Sillars, Harry Ewing and others. The Sillars/Ewing group were all MPs, and in purely practical terms, Donald was outwith their loop<sup>15</sup>. While Donald emerged from the Glasgow University nursery, Sillars and co's finishing school was the industrial wing of the movement. They were working class and, relative to the mostly social democratic Glasgow University recruits, on the left ideologically. The interal solidarity of those rival channels may have hindered the pro-devolutionists in both camps from making common cause<sup>16</sup>. Dewar's personal political fortunes turned when he contested the by-election at Glasgow Garscadden in April 1978. It was a brave decision. All of the local council wards in the constituency had been won by the SNP in May 1977, and most pundits predicted that the Nationalists would take the seat.

In a bruising campaign Donald and Labour were targeted by anti-abortion campaigners. Donald was an impressive performer. His stature, a decent but faux-pas-prone opponent, and growing disillusionment with the SNP performance at Westminster, and in the council chamber, combined to produce a stunning Labour victory. The departure of sullen SNP supporters from the counting centre was described by Bill Speirs, then an Assistant

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<sup>14</sup> *In discussion with Alex Neil.*

<sup>15</sup> *In discussion with Alex Neil.*

<sup>16</sup> *In discussion with Alex Neil.*

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General Secretary of the STUC, as 'the retreat from Flodden'. Those close to Donald during the campaign have suggested that the moral onslaught in Garscadden fashioned the resolve which stood firm over the Clause 2a affair in 2000<sup>17</sup>. On the other hand, the Garscadden experience may have inclined him to accept that abortion law should remain a reserved area. Garscadden propelled Donald Dewar from a middle-ranking party figure to Labour superhero, and champion of Labour's devolution proposals.

Given Donald's standing, he played a surprisingly low profile role in the official Labour Movement Yes Campaign during the 1979 devolution referendum. He preferred to intervene on the platform of Alliance for an Assembly, a group comprising Donald, Liberal MP Russell Johnston, Tory MP Alick Buchanan-Smith and STUC General Secretary Jimmy Milne. Described as 'not so much a campaign as a press release', what was the purpose of the group? Jimmy Milne was very clear that it was a platform for involving the popular Buchanan-Smith<sup>18</sup>. In the best Communist Party tradition of popular fronts, Milne was also a senior figure in the Labour Movement Yes campaign and Yes for Scotland, an honest if flawed attempt to build a united Yes campaign. Donald may have been attracted to Alliance for an Assembly as an embryonic cross-party campaign, but one which excluded the SNP and Jim Sillars' breakaway Scottish Labour Party. Perhaps Donald was simply wary of slugging it out in the trenches with a Labour Vote No campaign supported by several members of his own circle. The Labour Party actively discouraged loyal MPs from engaging with the Labour Vote No campaigners, so much so that the 'No Men' began to wonder where all the Labour pro-devolutionists had gone<sup>19</sup>.

Politically depressed by the events of 1979, Donald had to fight a personal political battle in his own backyard. Superhero status did not shield him from the internecine battles of the early 80s, and a serious attempt to de-select

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<sup>17</sup> *In discussion with Alf Young. Respected **Herald** columnist Alf Young was employed as Research Officer with the Scottish Council of the Labour Party from 1976-1979, and was centrally involved in both the Garscadden by-election campaign in April 1978, and in the management of the Labour Movement Yes Campaign in the March 1979 devolution referendum. He was also Chair of Garscadden Constituency Labour Party when attempts were made to de-select Donald Dewar.*

<sup>18</sup> *Quoted in Bochel, Denver and MacCartney (eds.) **The Referendum Experience, Scotland 1979**, Aberdeen University Press, 1981.*

<sup>19</sup> *Quoted in Russell Galbraith, **A Biography of Tam Dalyell: Inside Outside, The man they Can't Gag**, Mainstream, Edinburgh, 2000, pp.168/169.*

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him<sup>20</sup>. His political base secured, Donald was quickly promoted, leading Scottish Labour through a decade in which Mrs Thatcher remained dominant at Westminster while Scotland returned fewer and fewer Conservative MPs. The resulting frustrations and pressures led normally cautious Donald to live a little dangerously. He led a walk-out of opposition MPs in a Commons protest against the Tories' decision to dispense with the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs. More importantly, in October 1988, he decided to lead Labour into the proposed Scottish Constitutional Convention. Addressing an audience at Stirling University on Friday 21 October, Donald announced that:

The people must decide if they are prepared to live a little dangerously in order to achieve what they want.

More significantly he went on to say;

It means that the Labour Party must be prepared to negotiate and not simply seek to enforce the devolution package that we already have before the public<sup>21</sup>.

This apparently decisive leadership on Donald's part is partly qualified by the fact that COSLA, the STUC and the Liberal Democrats had already committed themselves to participating.

Donald relished the work of the Convention, building consensus around the detailed nuts and bolts of a new constitutional settlement which he and the other members of the 'Gang of Four' - Kenyon Wright, Campbell Christie and Malcolm Bruce - took to all parts of Scotland<sup>22</sup>. But Donald did not always lead from the front. The most significant challenge to conventional Labour thinking, the acceptance of proportional representation in elections to the new

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<sup>20</sup> *In discussion with Alf Young.*

<sup>21</sup> *Although the Scottish Executive of the Labour Party formally agreed to participate in the Convention two days after Jim Sillars' SNP victory at Govan, Donald Dewar revealed his intention to participate several weeks earlier. After issuing a typically cautious response to the launch of the 'Claim of Right' in July 1988, Donald chose the Andrew Williamson Memorial Lecture at Stirling University, on 21 October, to make his position clear. His inclination had been effectively signalled in an interview at the beginning of October, in which he told Ewan Macaskill that the search for common ground on the constitutional question was 'a prize of considerable importance'. See **The Scotsman**, 3 October 1988, p.1.*

<sup>22</sup> *Kenyon Wright, **The People Say Yes: The making of Scotland's Parliament**, Argyll, 1997, pp.149/150.*

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legislature, was mounted by a new generation of crusaders and fixers reprising the Mackintosh and Kitson roles.

Following the disappointment of the 1992 general election, John Smith switched Donald to the UK Shadow social services brief. Smith may have believed that his old friend needed a change of scene from the often fractious Scottish portfolio. Labour Leaders in opposition, however, have to live with the outcome of Shadow Cabinet elections, and the result of the November 1992 ballot limited Smith's room for manoeuvre. Whatever the reason behind the transfer, Donald impressed as Shadow Social Security Secretary, and enjoyed his watch as Opposition Chief Whip from 1995 to 1997.

From 1993 to 1995 it fell to George Robertson to lead for Labour in pinning down those areas of the Convention scheme which had not been fully fleshed out. Following the breakthrough of 1 May 1997, however, Tony Blair made the right decision in dispatching Donald to the Scottish Office. It is clear from the recollections of insiders that other Labour ministers regarded the Scottish Constitutional Convention scheme as a broad agreement on principles, and not a detailed blueprint to which the new government was committed. Much of the ground covered in the Convention had to be argued anew. The field of battle was the Devolution to Scotland Wales and the (English) Regions Committee, chaired by Lord Chancellor, Derry Irvine. We can only ponder on the relationship between the two men, but those close to the process maintain that Irvine's guilt was Scotland's gain. It is doubtful if any alternative Secretary of State could have presided over the production of the elegant, credible and sufficiently inclusive White Paper that provided the basis for the unified referendum campaign in the late summer of 1997<sup>23</sup>. Donald was one of the few figures 'big' enough to seek and secure the SNP's participation in the Scotland Forward organisation. Whatever Donald's private doubts at times, the united front succeeded in entrenching Scotland's parliament in the votes of her people<sup>24</sup>. Even Donald's political opponents acknowledge that his stewardship of events, from Labour's election victory on 1 May to the referendum of 11 September 1997, entitled him to the accolade of 'Father of the Nation'<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> *In discussion with Alf Young.*

<sup>24</sup> *Brian Taylor, **The Scottish Parliament**, Polygon, Edinburgh, 1999, p.135. Taylor claims that during the 1997 referendum campaign Dewar lapsed into periods of pessimism induced by the belief that the 'second' question, on the power to vary the rates of income tax within set margins, 'ran entirely counter to modern political thinking'.*

<sup>25</sup> *In discussion with Alex Neil.*

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Donald confided to friends that the official opening of the parliament, on 1 July 1999, was probably the happiest day of his life. He certainly made it memorable for countless others. His First Ministerial reply to the Queen is one of the great Scottish political speeches. Donald told the world that the occasion was about 'more than our politics and our laws'. It was 'about who we are and how we carry ourselves, a new stage on a journey begun long ago and which has no end'. The difference in tone from that struck by the cautious reformer of the late 1960s is a reflection of the changes in Scottish society, and Donald Dewar's perspective, over the past thirty years. While it can be argued that Donald's support for home rule was tentative and understated in earlier decades, he was the acknowledged champion of the broad Scottish consensus for change in the 1990s, particularly in the period 1997-1999.

The succession of difficulties which have threatened to engulf our new parliament and executive has prompted questions about Donald's abilities in government. Although he regularly reminded us that the Scottish Parliament was a means to an end, a political life led largely in opposition is not ideal preparation for developing the detailed policy priorities that can take us beyond warm soundbites about social justice.

Donald Dewar brought us to this point, he has gone and the responsibility for realising the potential of the new Scotland lies with others.

The White Paper that Donald was so proud of was endorsed by the referendum on the anniversary of the Battle of Stirling Bridge. As his troops prepared for a later battle, Wallace is reputed to have told them;

I have brought you to the ring. Dance according to your skill.

That is the challenge at the heart of Donald Dewar's legacy.

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