

**SEMANTICS, SECTARIANISM, SEA-FISH AND SHEEP:
THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT IN THE RUN-UP TO A GENERAL
ELECTION**

Eberhard Bort

The first three months of this year have highlighted time and again the novelty of the political process of devolution. Around every corner lurk new challenges and nearly everything the Scottish Parliament does, it does without recourse to precedent.

In January, it was a first for a Scottish Government Minister (Angus MacKay) to be denied making an executive statement in the Chamber. The content of the statement had been readily available in the press before, and so the Presiding Officer, Sir David Steel, was determined to teach the Government a lesson: Parliament comes first – the MSPs have a right to hear ministerial statements before the media are briefed. In February, the Presiding Officer was, for the first time, called upon to use his casting vote, and he voted with the opposition.

Did I say a Government Minister? I surely meant Executive? What a wee stushie about semantics we had at the beginning of January! First Minister Henry McLeish had, purposefully, used the word 'government' to describe his cabinet, obviously to distinguish it from the civil service (which, confusingly, also sails under the monicker Scottish Executive). Labour in London was not amused – notions of grandeur north of the Border? Derogatory remarks were flying right, left and centre. In the end, some politicians had to be reminded that the term government is not reserved for the UK level – after all, there is local government, so what's the big deal about having a Scottish government. Or did Fife Council ever challenge the sovereignty of Westminster?

But it was not all about semantics. There is a clear indication that the McLeish administration is aware of the fact that it will be judged on its Scottish performance, i.e. whether it has 'made a difference' for Scotland,

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stood up, if and when necessary, to centralist intrusions from London, and found 'Scottish solutions for Scottish problems'. This had already been demonstrated by the repeal of Section 2a (28) – the article was finally struck from the Statute Book at the end of March – and the change in student funding (the Graduates Endowment Bill passed its third reading on 28 March), as well as the agreement on teacher pay and conditions of work, following the McCrone Report. Justice Minister Jim Wallace published his draft Freedom of Information Bill on 1 March, promising greater access to and availability of data in Scotland than south of the Border, yet falling short of the provisions the Irish Freedom of Information Act offers, on which Wallace's bill is partly modelled. On 25 January, the Parliament continued its making a difference and adopted the findings and recommendations of the Sutherland Report (free care for the elderly), after a majority of Labour MSPs had indicated being in favour of the measure and the coalition partner, the Lib Dems (as well as the SNP and the Tories), had put pressure on the Government.

Transport Minister Sarah Boyack came under fire, particularly from the SNP, for privatising trunk road maintenance contracts worth up to £350 million – which had been the responsibility of local councils, now threatening to lay-off large numbers of council workers. On 22 February, the Scottish Executive launched its draft for the Land Reform Bill, which is to open up access to Scotland's countryside for everyone and give rural and crofting communities the chance to buy their land when put up for sale.

The February commotions were provided by an MP (MPs have faced an uphill struggle to get their names into the papers since the Scottish public's interest refocused on the Mound): Frank Roy, Labour Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, put the spanners into a planned private visit of An Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. The Irish Prime Minister was supposed to visit an Old Firm Match in Glasgow, and afterwards to unveil a Celtic Cross memorial to the Famine migration of the nineteenth century from Ireland to Scotland. Frank Roy rang the alarm bell – the security of Bertie Ahern could not be guaranteed. Bigotry and sectarianism could disrupt the ceremony planned at Carfin Grotto, in Roy's constituency. Although it was not an official visit, the Executive and the Parliament were shocked. This was not the image of the 'new Scotland' they wished to convey. The affair gained a further political dimension, as both Helen Liddell, the new Secretary of State for Scotland, and Dr John Reid, who had been moved from that post to replace Peter Mandelson as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, had (or had not?) been consulted by the Labour MP (who was also Helen Liddell's Parliamentary assistant). Moreover, Roy's fears seemed far-fetched. The

police did not corroborate any concern for the Taoiseach's security. Roy had to resign as Liddell's PA, the Taoiseach called off the visit (not before the Irish Consul General in Edinburgh, Dan Mulhall, had been dragged into the melée, accused by Frank Roy of having leaked a letter to the press...). A disgraceful little affair, but Scottish-Irish relations, not least due to the solid foundations Dan Mulhall has helped to lay down, will no doubt overcome that unfortunate hiccup.

After semantics and sectarianism, it was sea-faring men in March. In an unprecedented shambles, the government lost, on 8 March, a vote in Parliament on a £27 million long-term aid-package for the beleaguered Scottish fishing industry. Contrary to demands by fishermen, the package did not contain compensation for short-term tie-ups of fishing vessels. The vote was a tie, as many Labour MSPs had already left for the Labour Party's conference in Inverness (and others just missed the vote!), and a handful of Lib Dem MSPs ('unwhippable' back benchers) voted against the bill. The outcome depended on the casting-vote of Sir David Steel, the Presiding Officer – and, as indicated above, he voted both against Westminster convention and against the Government. The opposition demanded that First Minister Henry McLeish and his Cabinet should accept the parliamentary will, and honour Scottish democracy. But the Government treated its first defeat in the Chamber rather as an annoying and utterly unnecessary accident, re-introduced the subject a week later and gained a comfortable majority.

As we edged closer to decision-making time for the calling of a UK general election, the ever-increasing number of cases of foot-and-mouth disease superseded most other issues. Scotland's share of the plague was limited to Dumfries and Galloway and parts of the Borders, but the effect on the farming industry, tourism and attendant businesses was felt all over the country, and conjured up doom-and-gloom scenarios for the future. By the end of March, Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Minister Wendy Alexander announced a £13.5 million rescue package for farming, tourism and small businesses affected by the crisis.

Wendy Alexander's alleged skirmishes with the Civil Service focus on another issue: the role of the Civil Service in the new political dispensation. There were further disputes about the role of leading civil servants in the handling of the fisheries debate. The same Wendy Alexander apparently caused tensions within the Government by refusing to take on the water portfolio when Sam Galbraith resigned from his ministerial post for health

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reasons (rather than replacing Sam Galbraith, Henry McLeish decided to redistribute his portfolio among existing ministers).

The general election, widely expected for 3 May (along with the English and Welsh local council elections), is now supposed to take place on 7 June. This, too, is a first for the Scottish Parliament and the political system. All parties face a complex task of synchronising their general election campaigns with their involvement in the Scottish Parliament. Labour and the Lib Dems are in a coalition in Edinburgh but on different sides of the house in Westminster. The Conservative MSPs have come to enjoy devolution and consensus politics, while their Scottish party base, let alone the UK-wide party, still grapples with the concepts. And the SNP, developing a full range of policies in the Scottish Parliament as the largest opposition party (and, as many believe, a potential government in waiting), stand for Westminster as the old single-issue independence movement. Tensions, and repercussions for the working climate on the Mound, will inevitably be mounting as the election date looms nearer. Yet another test for the 'new politics' in Scotland.

April 2001