

PLAYING THE WESTMINSTER NUMBERS GAME

Peter Jones

LANG TRIUMPHANT

On 27 July, the last day of the 1992-93 parliamentary session, the Secretary of State for Scotland, Ian Lang, issued a press notice announcing that five of the UK's 24 seats on the proposed EC Committee of the Regions would be allocated to Scotland. This allocation had been negotiated with other Cabinet ministers, and the press notice did not stint the self-congratulation: 'This is an excellent outcome for Scotland. Five seats gives Scotland substantial representation ... It is more than twice Scotland's population-based share of the 24 UK seats and reflects Scotland's relative importance in this Committee.' (SOID 1993)

This announcement brought to an end a political controversy which blew up apparently out of nowhere, but led to some of the stormiest scenes over Scottish politics at Westminster since the 1970s, and had a profound impact on political activity in Scotland. Before considering the lead up to, and the consequences of, the incident which provoked the whole row - the vote by the three SNP MPs with the Government against Labour's Committee of the Regions amendment to the Maastricht Bill - it is worth noting some implications of announcement itself.

*Peter Jones is Scottish political editor of **The Scotsman**. This article is an expanded and up-dated version of 'How the SNP struck a deal that cost it dear' by Peter Jones and Joanne Robertson in **The Scotsman**, 4 June 1993. Other reports in **The Scotsman** from which this article has been drawn appeared 24 Sept, 17 Nov, 18 Nov (all 1992) 9 March, 10 March, 15 March, 16 March, 17 March, 18 March, 19 March, 6 May, 7 May, 4 June, 5 June, 7 June, and 28 July. (all 1993).*

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It casts considerable light on how Lang views his role as Scottish Secretary. Through the publication of the 'taking stock' Command Paper in March (Scottish Office 1993), Lang had secured the Government's recognition of Scotland's distinctive status as a nation within the United Kingdom, and hence his right as Scottish Secretary to apply distinctive policies in Scotland, whether by Acts applying uniquely to Scotland, or by modification of, or exemption from, UK legislation. The next step, to use that position to bargain for more than pro-rata entitlements from the UK pot, was demonstrated by the announcement. On this evidence, it can be argued that Lang has made the most of his meagre political inheritance and markedly increased the stock of the Scottish Secretary within the Major government well beyond the weight justified by having only 11 Scottish Tory MPs.

Indeed, the rather brassy way he had said he was going to be negotiating with his own government on behalf of Scotland, and then announced his own victory, was suggestive of a Scottish Secretary acting in a way that has not been seen since the days of Willie Ross in the 1974-79 Labour government. One other action by Lang on 27 July was certainly reminiscent of Ross at his Nationalist-baiting best. Lang held no press conference that day, but nipped out from Dover House to the Westminster BBC studios for a lunchtime news interview with BBC Radio Scotland. Asked by interviewer John Milne if he had not in fact failed to obtain the six to eight seats he had been aiming for, he said: 'I certainly hope that the Nats are going around Scotland saying sorry to the people of Scotland for having blown the deal which might have got us six seats.'

Here is a political role-reversal of a fairly breath-taking nature - a Conservative and Unionist Scottish Secretary accusing the SNP of having sold Scotland short. The angry denial from the SNP, accusing Lang of trying to use them as a scapegoat, was the cry of the out-manoeuvred.

THE GOVERNMENT NEEDS ALLIES

It was a fascinating twist to a political row which had mushroomed explosively. The fall-out came in four main ways: to destroy the admittedly slender chances of the three major Opposition parties getting together either their strategy or campaigning activity against the Government over the constitutional issue; to put the SNP on the defensive and give Alex Salmond his first serious party rebellion since he became leader; to give Labour the best propaganda weapon against the SNP since Nationalist votes helped to bring down the Callaghan government in 1979; and to give the Conservatives the comforting sight of a divided Opposition. The great irony is that none of

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these consequences were foreseen by any of the key players, including Lang, who was the biggest winner.

The background bears marked similarities with the 1970s. A Government with a smallish majority was struggling to get through a major constitutional bill against opposition from its own MPs. In this circumstance the Opposition parties can do more than just make speeches of opposition; they can trade their votes for concessions. It is a skilled political game, one that the Opposition parties have not been able to play since 1979, and, to some extent, the inexperience showed.

On the Government side, the main players were the chief whip, Richard Ryder, and the whip in charge of the Bill, Boothferry MP David Davis. The vote at 7 pm on 8 March was particularly tricky. It was on a Labour amendment requiring that the UK members of the Committee of the Regions be elected councillors. The Government was opposed, wanting to nominate non-elected people like the Scottish Council chief executive Hamish Morrison. But the 26 hard-core anti-Maastricht Tory rebel MPs cared nothing for the issue, just wanting to inflict a defeat on the Government to ensure the Bill would have to go through a Report stage, thus delaying ratification. There were potentially another 25 Tory abstainers, angered by some heavy-handed Ministerial attempts to encourage loyalty. The only way to counter the threat was to do a deal with the 21 Liberal Democrat, the four Plaid Cymru, and the three SNP MPs. The bargaining tools were, firstly, how the seats on the Committee of the Regions could be allocated to the different UK territories, and secondly, the nominating powers that might be given to the parties. Ryder and Davis were interested only in securing votes, Ryder telling an opposition MP at one stage: 'Frankly, I couldn't give a fuck who sits on the Committee.'

SNP NEGOTIATES

Though news of the SNP-Government deal burst like a bombshell with Salmond taking most of the blast, the negotiating was all done by the parliamentary leader Margaret Ewing who had declared her negotiating intentions in public in advance. On September 23, at a press conference on the opening day of the SNP's annual conference in Perth, she said that she and Welsh Nationalist MPs would be meeting the Prime Minister to discuss a deal on the Maastricht Bill in which the Nationalists were seeking a referendum on Maastricht and the domestic constitutional issue. On Monday 16 November 1992, at a press conference in Glasgow, she announced that she and the Plaid Cymru president Dafydd Wigley would be meeting the

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Prime Minister the following day. Her statement to the press conference left little doubt that both parties' votes were on offer: 'The seven Plaid Cymru and SNP MPs could well have a crucial influence on many close votes during the Committee Stage of the Bill. We will continue to adopt a constructive approach toward Maastricht - but, equally, we shall not hesitate to use our votes in the peoples of Scotland and Wales best interests.'

She also said the negotiating points 'will include

- i the Government's plans for defining subsidiarity in advance of the Edinburgh Summit;
- ii our unhappiness at the UK opt-out from the Social Chapter of Maastricht;
- iii the distribution of Cohesion Funds to peripheral areas of the Community;
- iv the extension of democracy within the European Community, including the structure, role and local democratic basis of the proposed Committee of the Regions.'

The statement also said these matters had been discussed with the Foreign Office minister for European affairs, Tristan Garel-Jones, making it absolutely plain that contacts with the Government were regular and to a serious purpose (SNP 1993).

In John Major's room at the Commons, Ewing later recalled, 'he made it clear the Social Chapter was not up for discussion, it was sacrosanct. The same went for a referendum which was a point I had added in. But they were prepared to negotiate and discuss with us the Cohesion Funds and the Committee of the Regions'. Thus an avowedly Unionist Prime Minister cleared the way for negotiations with the Nationalist parties in order to save his European Union treaty from defeat by his Tory nationalist rebels.

LANG NEGOTIATES

At the same time, Lang was doing his own negotiations within Government. He believed that the Committee of the Regions was likely to be an EC institution of importance to Scotland, and wanted a large number of seats on it. Fortunately for him, the Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd, generally sympathetic to Scottish matters, was receptive to his argument that the composition of the UK delegation should reflect the composition of the UK. Thus in a speech in St Andrews on 23 November, Lang said of his objective:

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I can assure you that I am bidding high, conscious of the fact that precedent in the Community suggests that when it comes to determining the representation of the component parts of the EC, the smaller units have invariably had more representation than the larger, in a bid to compensate for their smaller scale. The four parts of the United Kingdom must be strongly represented on the new Committee. (Lang 1993).

The ground was thus well prepared for Ryder and Davis in the run-up to the 8 March vote. The people with whom they were negotiating, Sir Russell Johnston for the Liberal Democrats, Dafydd Wigley for Plaid Cymru, and Margaret Ewing for the SNP, were familiar enough. Their parties' support had been regularly canvassed for various technical motions to keep the Bill on track. Voting for such motions was no great problem for the SNP as they were pro-Maastricht. Seats on the Committee of the Regions would divide, on a population basis: 2-3 for Scotland, 1-2 for Wales, 1 for Northern Ireland, and 18-20 for England. But on the political basis Lang and the other territorial ministers had discussed with Hurd, the rough arithmetic was 2 for Northern Ireland, 3-4 for Wales, 6-8 for Scotland, and 10-13 to England.

In the heat of negotiations, numbers began to get confused. A Scottish Office minister later commented: 'Things were getting pretty ridiculous. At one stage, we seemed to be talking about nine seats for Scotland, I don't quite know why.' Ewing also recalls a lot of confusion: 'I had five different versions from five different people. So I demanded a meeting with Ian Lang.'

Lang was not entirely pleased with the idea of a deal with the SNP. It meant that they, and not he, would take the credit for getting the four or more seats he believed were in the bag. It could mean losing some control over choosing the members to fill the seats. Because he was bidding for more than four, the SNP stance of a minimum of four seats was not particularly helpful as other ministers could argue that was the maximum that needed to be conceded. News of the deal could also undermine the publication of the much-leaked but still important 'taking stock' document due on 9 March. Intended to buttress the Unionist position and erode the devolution and independence options, the fact that the Government had relied on Nationalist votes and done a deal with the SNP the night before could hand a big propaganda weapon to Labour. But he thought that the shadow Scottish Secretary Tom Clarke would not be quick enough to spot the opportunity, particularly as he believed, more or less instinctively from his own days in the Whips office, that the deal would remain secret. The big plus point was that if a deal was struck over, say, six seats, the Foreign Office would be duty bound to deliver

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the required seats to Scotland and ignore the Department of the Environment which was pressing for England to get the lion's share.

EWING DOES A DEAL WITH LANG

On the Wednesday morning before the vote, Ewing met Lang in his Commons office. No-one else was present and it was not a long meeting. Ewing recalls that Lang had no great objection to the SNP's demands over seats, which included the four main political parties' having some nominating rights. According to one Government source, that is unsurprising: 'Lang had already fought his corner and fought it well. He had asked for seven seats and got six.' Scottish Office sources say that while there may have been a general understanding between Lang and Hurd, there was no commitment. But whatever importance the numbers had to Lang, it was secondary to the pressure from No 10 and the Whips for a deal which would ensure the SNP presence in the Government lobby not just for this vote, but for other votes to counter-balance the Tory rebels. 'It was about their votes, otherwise we would not have been consorting with them,' a Scottish Office minister said later.

There was a discussion about future voting. Ewing said later: 'I made it clear that in any discussions we had with the Whips on technical motions, we would always discuss them on merit.' She pointed out to Lang that the SNP had consistently voted with the Government on a range of technical motions covering debate closures because, as she put it: 'Who wants to listen to another five hours of Bill Cash and Teddy Taylor rantings.' She said she made it clear that 'in no circumstances could we support the Government over the Social Chapter. I made it clear they could not make the automatic assumption they could count on our votes.'

Lang insists there was a deal on votes; Ewing is equally emphatic there was not. Certainly there was nothing put in writing. It seems that Lang, steeped in the Commons traditions of verbal and secret understandings, took Ewing's points and all her caveats as an agreement. If so, it is not one that would stand up in a court of law, but not a lot of things that happen in the Commons would meet that standard. Ewing did insist that Lang should put his offer in writing. She always intended, but did not tell him, that the correspondence would be published. Lang assumed it would remain confidential.

From the SNP's point of view it all looked very promising. The MPs assumed that, in normal circumstances, Scotland would get the short end of the stick. But under these compelling circumstances, it looked like Lang was being

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forced into a big concession. The party would be able to claim that the SNP trio had wrung more than Labour's 49 MPs had been able to do. Even better was that the Labour-dominated Convention of Scottish Local Authorities had fallen into line with the English local authority associations, and agreed a joint submission to the Foreign Office which would have given Scotland only three seats. Better yet was that COSLA had suggested six names (three members and three alternates or substitutes) of whom five were Labour and one Independent. If Ewing's plan was accepted by Lang, the SNP could claim to have acted in the wider interest by ensuring political plurality on the Committee. This plurality was spelled out in Ewing's letter to Lang, written on Thursday 4 March after consultations with her colleagues Alex Salmond and Andrew Welsh, both of whom agreed the prospects were good. The full text of her letter was:

Dear Ian,

Many thanks for meeting with me to discuss the composition and numbers of the Committee of the Regions. I think it would be helpful if I now re-emphasise to you the most crucial aspects of the SNP's viewpoint and these are under-noted.

1) We would prefer between 6 and 8 members and alternates to represent the Scottish regions. To ensure that each party is fairly represented, four members and alternates should be selected from lists of elected councillors submitted by each of the four political parties from Scotland which are represented in the House of Commons. This proposal would guarantee each party a minimum of one member and alternate on the Committee and is non-negotiable.

2) These lists should be in clear order of party preference and should contain no more than five names. Should the Secretary of State veto the stated preference, the second name shall be accepted with the third listed member serving as the alternate.

3) Any additional members and alternates who are not elected councillors will be nominated by the Secretary of State for Scotland on a non-party political basis with a view to geographical balance where possible and after consultation with the other three Scottish party leaders.

Yours sincerely, ...

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THE DEALS UNRAVEL

Meanwhile, the Welsh Secretary David Hunt was reaching a deal with Plaid Cymru. Though neither side has yet revealed the correspondence, it seems the deal involved guaranteeing three seats for Wales, nominating rights for the Conservative, Labour and Plaid Cymru parties, and discussions about setting up an all-Wales forum of MPs, MEPs, and councillors to whom the Welsh Committee members would report. After right-winger John Redwood replaced the left-winger David Hunt as Welsh Secretary in May 1993, this last point seemed unlikely to be implemented. But there was certainly an understanding over future Maastricht Bill votes.

But in the negotiations with the Liberal Democrats, the Whips came unstuck. The parliamentary group of 21 MPs discussed the matter on the morning of the vote. The Whips, hoping that the Scottish tail would wag the Liberal Democrat dog, had basically offered Sir Russell Johnston what was on offer to the Nationalist parties - six Scottish seats, four Welsh seats and two Ulster seats. That meant only 12 places, half the Committee seats, for England. The English Liberal Democrat MPs objected strongly. Cutting back Scotland and Wales to five and three respectively caused strong objections from the Scottish leader Jim Wallace, and even stronger objections from Welsh leader Alex Carlile, as three seats would mean the Liberal Democrats being shut out of any nominating process. One Scottish MP was all for ignoring him: 'Frankly, the Welsh Liberal Democrats barely exist and he's the only MP.' But another MP said: 'We could not have accepted it - we would have been lynched, and the party in Wales would have seceded.'

The meeting was sufficiently tetchy for rumours to spread round Westminster on the Monday that the Lib Dems were going to split, with a rebel faction being led by Sir Russell Johnston. But the Government and Labour Whips knew it was not true as Sir Russell had told them that the Lib Dems were backing Labour's amendment, which, it was then obvious, was going to win.

Absorbing the latest position, Salmond began to think that there would be no deal forthcoming, perhaps even that the Government might accept the amendment to avoid defeat. Fearing the SNP would be cut out, he approached Labour's European spokesman, the Hamilton MP George Robertson. He asked Robertson if he would accept an amendment, which, said Salmond, 'would have guaranteed Scotland a minimum of four seats for allocation among councillors of the four parties'. It had also been signed by a Liberal Democrat MP. Robertson refused, arguing that, as a matter of principle, it should be the local authorities to decide how to allocate the seats,

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and not Parliament (Salmond 1993). It was a weak argument as Labour's amendment still left the final nominating power in central government hands. Robertson, more practically, did not want additions which might cause the Tory Euro-rebels to abstain, rather than vote with Labour.

Meanwhile, as the day wore on, the Whips and Ministers decided to go to the vote and take the defeat. According to a Government source, it was decided it was better to let the rebels, and the waverers who would be satisfied with an abstention, have some blood on an issue which was relatively unimportant. More importantly, if it was pushed to the vote, Plaid Cymru and the SNP could be bound to deliver their votes on the more vital issues to come.

SNP CONFIDENT

Thus, with about a quarter of an hour to go before the vote and contrary to Salmond's expectations, a Commons attendant handed Margaret Ewing the now-famous 'Dear Margaret' letter. The full text was:

Thank you for your letter about the Committee of the Regions. I am content with all that you propose, except that I cannot guarantee at this stage 'between 6 and 8' Scottish members. I note that it is expressed as your preference. It is mine too and I will continue to seek the best outcome I can there, with a probability that I can secure for Scotland 6 members (plus alternates). I hope therefore that we have the basis of a deal.

Yours sincerely, etc

Ewing showed it immediately to Salmond and Welsh. The three agreed it looked fine and the deal was on. At that point it looked extremely promising politically. Even assuming a Government defeat, the SNP could claim both to have wrung a major concession from the Tories and to have stymied Labour's plans to hog all the Committee of the Regions seats. COSLA, they knew, had settled for three Scottish seats; so the SNP could claim to have doubled the number of Scottish seats. There was also the prospect, to judge by the Lib Dem meeting that day, of a rattling good Tory row once English MPs discovered how much had been conceded to Scotland at England's expense.

As Salmond resumed his Commons seat a few minutes before the vote, one of the Lib Dem MPs on the bench in front thought he was nervily excited. Unable to contain himself, Salmond leaned over and said: 'We've done you a favour, we've managed to get you a seat in Scotland.' Asked if he had done a

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deal and was voting with the Government, Salmond nodded. As the MPs filed into the division lobbies, Labour's George Robertson stayed in the Chamber, checking that no last-minute Government chicanery was afoot. He spotted the SNP trio still on their bench, and shouted: 'You're not going to vote with the Tories, are you?' Salmond replied: 'Have you got a better offer?' Robertson called back: 'How many pieces of silver do you want?'

LABOUR MOVES QUICKLY

That it was Robertson who spied the move was vital to subsequent events. Without his involvement, the SNP could have dictated the pace of revelation. With careful handling, news of their coup could have dominated the following day's headlines, while the letters could be released the following day to counter Labour accusations of betrayal. This was more or less how matters panned out in Wales, with the exception that no letters have been released. Plaid Cymru's deal was generally well received in the Welsh media.

In the Opposition lobby, Robertson and shadow Foreign Secretary Jack Cunningham spread the news rapidly. Excitement at the looming Government defeat turned to exultation. Shadow Scottish Secretary Tom Clarke and his deputy Henry McLeish were among the first to hear. 'The turkeys have voted for Christmas,' one said, echoing James Callaghan's comment on the night in 1979 when the SNP voted with the Tories to bring down his Labour government. 'The best news I have heard since the general election.' gloated an MP continually harassed by the SNP in his constituency. As soon as the vote was announced (Labour's amendment was passed by 314 votes to 292; 26 Tories voted with the opposition and 19 Tories abstained), Labour MPs rounded on the Nationalists, jeering and finger-pointing. Welsh MP Peter Hain seized a chance to make a point of order on the issue. Taken aback by the tumult, the SNP MPs left the Chamber, Ewing to prepare for a swift press conference, Salmond to a vital meeting.

CROSS-PARTY TALKS ON HOME RULE

Since the Democracy demonstration during the Edinburgh Summit on 12 December 1992, there had been pressure on all the parties to work together against the Government on the constitutional issue. Labour's Henry McLeish, Jim Wallace for the Liberal Democrats, and Alex Salmond for the SNP had all signed the declaration demanding the recall of the Scottish Parliament. Whatever the parties intentions were, the huge size of the demonstration (at an estimated 25,000 it was probably the biggest since the turn-out for Upper

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Clyde Shipbuilders in 1972) compelled the parties to respond, since it dispelled the post-election wisdom that the constitutional issue was not a priority to voters. Labour, scarred by the 1992 election, was most reluctant, feeling that it was being pushed further and further down a nationalist road. Only the party's nationalist wing represented by MPs like John McAllion was enthusiastic. The leadership tended to the view that the party's strategy should lie in crushing the SNP by tackling them head-on rather than being involved in tactics which enhanced the SNP's claims to credibility. But the media view, supported by newspaper letter-writers and radio phoners-in, was that there should be co-operation. And after a long tortuous process, the home rule radical Campbell Christie, general secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress, had succeeded in manoeuvring and nudging Labour into cross-party meetings to discuss a common agenda.

One such meeting was due that evening. But kneeling down between the Speakers' Table and the Labour front-bench amid the hurly-burly, Clarke and McLeish agreed this was their chance to ditch the whole process and blame the SNP. Indeed they would have been censured by their party if they had not done so. Scottish Television cameras caught the moment the door to Room W4 off Westminster Hall swung open. Inside were the SNP's Salmond and Welsh, Jim Wallace and Ray Michie of the Liberal Democrats, and Christie plus his deputy Bill Spiers. McLeish looked in: 'Can I speak to you for a moment, Campbell?' Outside, Christie learned the talks were off. 'There is absolute fury among our boys,' McLeish told him. Jubilation at the blow being delivered to Salmond, detested by Labour MPs for his ability to run rings round them, would have been more accurate. MPs happily signed a motion tabled by the leadership condemning the SNP and calling on Salmond to resign. Even Scotland United supporter George Galloway signed it. Initially Christie's reaction had been confined to regret that an opportunity for cross-party activity had been lost. Later, having mulled things over in the Red Lion pub, Whitehall, he issued a statement saying he had been deceived by the SNP.

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In the lobby, Margaret Ewing was trying to repair the damage. Instead of the expected victory press conference, she was on the defensive. For the London-based media, the story was Labour's reaction to the SNP tactics. For the Scottish media, it was that plus the cancellation of the cross-party talks. Ewing's release of the letters that night, much earlier than intended, did nothing to stem the barrage, Lang's cagey language serving only to suggest to cynical journalists that the SNP had been hood-winked. Amazement and

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anger was also the reaction of those party members who had seen the events unfold on Channel 4 News, and phoned party HQ in Edinburgh. HQ press officers Lari Don and Calum Smith, who had been working late on another unconnected project, knew no more than had been shown on television. Many members were furious, particularly as there had been a National Council meeting of branch delegates with the leadership on Saturday, and nothing had been said. It was several hours before the HQ staff were able to contact anyone at Westminster, and by then the Tuesday morning headlines were written. In the Commons smoking-room, Labour MPs Donald Dewar and Brian Wilson, foraying back into Scottish politics, joined McLeish in phoning radio and television newsrooms. McLeish had been on a radio debate with Salmond on the Monday morning when Salmond had twisted the cross-party talks hook on which Labour was unwillingly impaled. Thus the line the Labour MPs were putting out was: 'In the morning Salmond called on all Scotland to unite against the Tories. In the evening, he united with the Tories against Scotland.'

The following Saturday, the identity of the winners and losers was visible to anyone with a fast car. In Inverness, Labour met cheerfully for their Scottish conference. Tom Clarke, whose ability in his post had been surrounded by question marks, produced a triumphant speech that silenced his detractors.

PROBLEMS FOR SALMOND

In Glasgow, Salmond faced his toughest time since becoming leader two years previously. In the morning, at an SNP-organised anti-water privatisation demonstration, he was harrassed by annoyed party activists. He listened as STUC deputy general secretary Bill Spiers got the loudest cheers of the day when he complained that the SNP action had ensured Lang was laughing at the people of Scotland. And then he faced a special meeting of his National Executive.

The divisions engendered when he became leader in September 1990 had never really gone away. They were partly based on personal rivalries with those whose political careers his election had cut across, like Kenny MacAskill. They were also grouped around the personality of Jim Sillars, whose influence had not wholly vanished despite the loss of his Govan seat. Sillars's neo-fundamentalism was demonstrated by a thunderous column in **The Sun** on Tuesday 16 March: 'That our MPs should soil the party's soul for a place on a committee which is a unionist invention to be used against independence, is staggering.' The comment serves to help categorise the MPs' move as a gradualist one - accepting any advance on the present

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constitutional position as steps towards independence - rather than as part of the fundamentalist stance taken when Sillars was at the peak of his influence. Sillars was not on the Executive, but his close friend Alex Neil was.

Salmond knew the meeting of the Executive was going to be tough. He had been arguing his case inside the party, by, for example, sending a letter to SNP councillors putting the MPs' case that they had been trying to secure a benefit for Scotland. But it was by no means certain at the outset of the meeting in the Copthorne Hotel that he was going to be vindicated. Neil and MacAskill had submitted a motion saying simply that the NEC did not endorse the actions of the MPs, who had submitted a motion supporting their own action. A third was from policy vice-convenor Rob Gibson, usually counted as a Salmond supporter, expressing sympathy for the MPs' difficulties, but regretting their action. After a procedural shambles, including a motion of no confidence in deputy leader Allan Macartney's chairmanship, Neil and MacAskill withdrew their motion in favour of Gibson's.

The first half of the three-hour meeting was an open discussion which enabled each member to express their opinion. It was not a straight fundamentalist-gradualist split. The fundamentalist old guard, such as president Winnie Ewing and former leader Gordon Wilson, both instrumental in the attack on the 79 Group a decade earlier which resulted in Salmond's temporary expulsion, spoke in support of Salmond saying that MPs had to make quick decisions on the r5n. What may have been decisive in tipping the balance to the MPs, however, was worry about the consequences if the vote went against them. Salmond did not clarify things, saying at one point, in response to a question from Gibson, that he did not regard it as a confidence issue, but saying also, at another point, that passage of the Gibson motion could indicate a lack of confidence in the MPs.

The format of the meeting meant that it was possible to judge the likely outcome before it was formalised. There was a break before the formal procedure, and it has been alleged that during the break, Salmond pressurised the two youth representatives who had both spoken against him. Whatever happened, the acrimony of the second half of the meeting contrasted with the relatively civilised earlier discussion. The acrimony came from Salmond, who rounded in personal terms on his opponents. He asserted that Neil had bounced the party into the 'Free by '93' slogan at the 1992 conference. He rounded on another Sillars loyalist, Iain Lawson, who, he said, had been supported in his wish to down-play poll tax non-payment in the Paisley by-election. He also accused Roger Mullin, generally an independent thinker, of leaking a critical faxed letter to the BBC. Mullin was enraged, and spent

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much time in the weeks after the meeting obtaining evidence to prove the accusation was false.

In this highly charged atmosphere, the MPs' motion was passed by 13 votes to 11, by virtue of the MPs' voting for themselves. The two youth representatives abstained. It seems doubtful that Salmond would have resigned as leader had the vote gone against him, though Ewing might well have resigned as parliamentary leader. At any rate, Neil, MacAskill and Mullin all felt that Salmond's assault on them meant they no longer enjoyed his confidence and they promptly resigned from his 'cabinet' of leading spokespeople. There was no sign of sorrow from Salmond. The resignations, and the narrowness of the vote, meant that the row continued to rumble on in the party.

SNP TURMOIL

One branch, Mossend in Lanarkshire, where councillor Kathleen McAlorum is a strong supporter of Sillars and a key branch figure, held an Executive meeting on the Sunday and unanimously called on Salmond to resign. In a rapid response to the in-fighting, six of the 11 National Executive members who voted against the MPs - Rob Gibson, Tom Chalmers, Roseanna Conningham, Fiona Hyslop, Anne McNair and Nicola Sturgeon - signed a letter to **The Scotsman** calling for the NEC's decision to be accepted. But in the run-up to the SNP National Council meeting in Perth on 5 June, disgruntled members, mostly the CBAs as they are known in partyspeak (after their oft-repeated self-description as Central Belt Activists) sought support for a motion closely following the wording of Gibson's executive motion. It read:

This National Council is concerned by the anti-Scottish policies pursued by the Tory Government over many years and the Tories' responsibility for the destruction of Scotland's industry and the pain inflicted on our people. Therefore, National Council,

- 1) regrets the deal struck with the Tory government by the SNP parliamentary group over the UK membership of the EC's proposed Committee of the Regions; and
- 2) instructs the party's elected representatives at all levels not to enter into any deals with the Tories.

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It was signed by 10 branches, and was known as the Kilmarnock motion after the main signatory. Interestingly, a leading activist in Kilmarnock, Adam Ingram, works in the same office as Alex Neil in Glasgow. But the heat had gone out of the issue and the motion was defeated at the National Council by 147 votes to 81. According to some observers of the hour-long secret debate, there was as much criticism of those party members who had criticised the MPs in the media, as there was criticism of the original vote itself. An amendment was carried deleting everything after '1)', and substituting a criticism of Lang for reneging on his commitments and declaring that both Unionist parties could not be trusted. The reference to Lang was prompted by his announcement in the Commons during Scottish Questions on 5 May that '... the SNP failed to honour the deal they offered the Government and therefore the Government regards itself as under no obligation to them.' While it looked at the time that Lang had strengthened the hand of Salmond's critics, it in fact served to provide an escape route for the beleaguered leader.

The episode serves to highlight the fact that the fundamentalism to which the SNP moved after the disappointments and failures of the gradualist approach of the 1970s still strongly grips the party. To negotiate over these EC committee seats was essentially a gradualist move - seeking a slight improvement in Scotland's political condition that does little to help any advance towards independence. The party row has ensured that Salmond will be much less keen to embark on that road in future, which means that the cross-party talks on common home rule campaigning scuppered by the controversy are most unlikely to resume.

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