

REVIEW: POLITICAL GUIDE TO MODERN SCOTLAND

Bob McLean

Gerry Hassan and Douglas Fraser, **The Political Guide to Modern Scotland**, London: Politico's, 2004, 568 pp, pb, £19.99, ISBN 1 84275 047 X.

In the spring of 2001, I reviewed **The Almanac of Scottish Politics**, the precursor of **The Political Guide to Modern Scotland**. Back then, I was struck by Gerry Hassan's and Peter Lynch's arithmetic, which reminded us that each Scottish voter is represented by 18 different people. It was in that context that I warmly welcomed the **Almanac** as a timely route map with which to navigate the alphabet soup of Westminster MPs, constituency MSPs, list MSPs, MEPs, unitary authorities etc.. Given that the Scottish political landscape is evolving with every electoral contest, I speculated as to whether the 2001 **Almanac** would be the first in a series of regular revisions and updating, or remain a one-off snapshot of the Scottish body politic at the turn of the millennium.

With the publication of **The Political Guide to Modern Scotland**, the former scenario has been borne out. Writer, researcher and commentator Gerry Hassan and his new collaborator, **Herald** Political Editor Douglas Fraser, have reworked and updated an important reference work, which is essential for those who want to understand how Scottish politics works.

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More than 350 of **The Political Guide's** 568 pages are devoted to descriptions of all 73 Scottish Parliamentary Constituencies. The socio-economic composition and political history of each constituency is detailed, along with the biographies of the constituency MSP and MP.

Other informative lists and tables include:

Regional seats and MSPs, which includes a comprehensive, yet concise, explanation of the additional member system

UK election results in Scotland since 1945, including May 1955 and the record-breaking 50.09% of the popular vote won by the Scottish Unionists and their National Liberal allies.

Notional results for Scotland's new Westminster constituencies. As a result of the Scotland Act 1998, the number of Scottish Westminster constituencies has been reduced from 72 to 59, to bring their electorates into line with the UK average, and the new constituency boundaries applied at the Westminster general election held in May 2005. By way of prediction, Hassan and Fraser drew on the work of mathematician, Martin Baxter, and psephological sage Professor David Denver. Based on the results of 2001 Westminster election, and the 2003 local government elections, all concurred that Labour was likely to win ten fewer seats, down from 56 to 46, that the Tories could lose their solitary Scottish representative while the SNP and Liberal Democrats could lose one seat each. Of course, the results of this crystal ball gazing came with a raft political and statistical health warnings, but in the end were quite accurate. Their calculations overestimate Labour's performance. AS the smoke of battle cleared on 6 May, Labour's Scottish total turned out to be 41 seats, rather than the predicted 46. The five additional Labour losses were distributed among the SNP (Dundee East and Na h-Eileanan an Iar), the Liberal Democrats (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey and Dunbartonshire East) and the Conservatives (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale).

Scottish Parliamentary By-election results since 1945, including Glasgow Bridgeton in November 1961, West Lothian in June 1962 and Glasgow Pollock in March 1967 – the countdown to the SNP's electoral lift-off at the Hamilton by election of November 1967.

Scottish Affairs

Scottish local government election results 1974-2003, which remind readers that Labour's 32.6% in May 2003 was the party's worst municipal performance since the District Council elections of May 1977.

Scottish Executive Ministers since 1999, three First Ministers in thirty months. Careless or unlucky?

Secretaries of State for Scotland since 1885, from the Duke of Richmond and Gordon to the Secretary of State for Transport and Scotland

Biographies of prominent Scottish politicians, past and present, from Herbert Henry Asquith, Scottish MP, Liberal Leader and British Prime Minister from 1908-1916 to 'Gentleman' George Younger, Secretary of State for Scotland 1979-1986.

A chronology of Scottish politics, from Robert McIntyre's SNP by-election victory in Motherwell in April 1945 to March 2004, and the legislation introducing the Single Transferable Vote for Scottish local government elections

Along with its user-friendly, full-colour soft-cover, and colourful fold out constituency map, **The Political Guide** differs from the **Almanac** in a number of ways. It includes two guest essays by veteran observers of the Scottish political scene. In 'Big Changes and Big Sameness', the **Economist's** Peter Jones delivers his verdict on the Scottish Parliament's first term. He concludes that the Parliament's institutions have been a success, 'but the people occupying them have failed to live up to public expectations', and calls on Holyrood legislators to 'raise their game'.

The quality of political leadership is also addressed by Professor John Curtice. In 'The 2003 Election: Lessons for Devolution', the Strathclyde University academic argues that 'uninspiring' political leaders, and the perception that the Parliament is less powerful than expected, are two of the factors which produced a disappointing turnout in the 2003 Scottish Parliament election.

Like **The Almanac** before it, **The Political Guide** is essential equipment for political 'twitchers', and for all of those who consider themselves as political players. At the launch of **The Political Guide**, at Castlehill's Scotch Whisky Heritage Centre, the latter could be seen flicking through the pages to count the number of mentions, and check the accuracy of the details. None more so

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than Independent MSP, Margo MacDonald, who informed those present that Hassan and Fraser had added an additional year to her age.

At the beginning of this review I referred to the Scottish political landscape evolving with every electoral contest. In relatively good economic times, with Labour in power in London and Labour and the Lib Dems in control in Edinburgh, that evolutionary process has been steady with relatively little differentiation north and south of the border. In their introductory essay to the **Guide**, Hassan and Fraser remind us that conditions can change. Following the UK general election, the third term Labour Government might be increasingly reliant on its Scottish MPs to get its way on English issues. Further down the line there is the remote spectre of the Tories returning to power in a British state that has created devolved institutions, but done little to reform itself. The onset of an economic downturn, or the lessening of Labour's dominance at Westminster or Holyrood, could force the pace of that evolution.

Given the possibilities of more fluid change, **The Political Guide to Modern Scotland** seems set to be a continuing feature. Apparently, the first edition is close to selling out. If **The Political Guide to Modern Scotland** does not already number among the titles on your bookshelves, make sure that the next edition does.

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