

ANNALS OF THE PARISH: THE YEAR AT HOLYROOD, 2004-05

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A NEW HOME

Any chronicling of the past year in Scottish politics would have to start with the official opening of the Holyrood Parliament on 9 October 2004. The ceremony itself, slightly more understated than the previous opening on the Mound, was a dignified celebration, with the Riding down the Royal Mile and the Gaelic psalm singing, Nicola Benedetti, and 'Makar' Edwin Morgan's gallus poem 'Open the Doors', read with esprit by Liz Lochhead. The Scottish thistle showed its best barbed charm by greeting Her Majesty the Queen with Copland's 'Fanfare for the Common Man'. And a cross-party rendering of Burns's 'Auld Lang Syne', led by Eddie Reader, brought the proceedings in the debating chamber to a rousing close.

The £431 million Parliament was, by that time, already a working environment. The 129 MSPs and their staff had moved in at the beginning of September. On 15 September Lord Fraser had published the findings of his Holyrood Inquiry, which First Minister Jack McConnell had ordered before the 2003 elections and which had been hearing evidence at the Scottish Land Court in Edinburgh from more than sixty witnesses since October 2003. Lord Fraser's verdict was that he had found no single 'villain of the piece' who could be held responsible for the project's delays and escalating costs, but civil servants had to bear the brunt of the Lord's criticism for not informing ministers of the growing problems and increasing costs associated with the Holyrood project (Fraser 2004).

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In his response to the Inquiry Report, the Presiding Officer, George Reid, expressed what the majority inside and outside of Holyrood seemed to share: a call for closure, a belief that Scotland now needed to look forward to the work the Parliament would do in its new environment, rather than looking back on the building itself. The **Guardian**'s architectural critic got it right: 'The Scottish Parliament building is despised largely by mean-minded politicians. History will forget them as it learns to befriend this astonishing building that seems to have grown from the city's botanical gardens as much as it has from the architects' computer screens' (Glancey 2005).

LEGISLATIVE PROGRAMME

At the beginning of September, Jack McConnell had announced the Executive's legislative programme 2004-2005. Twelve Bills were to be introduced during the new Parliamentary year, and another five Bills, introduced before the summer, would complete their process. Tougher jail sentences for paedophiles, a bill to protect children from the crime of 'internet grooming' where children are preyed on by paedophiles, new powers to tackle schools facing difficulties, a 'comprehensive modernisation programme' of secondary schools, with the establishment of 'centres of excellence', but without 'elitist selection of pupils', a Budget Bill providing 'efficiency savings', a Prevention of Female Genital Mutilation Bill to prohibit the sending of young Scots girls abroad for what McConnell branded a 'grotesque crime', a Licensing Bill, a Health Bill focusing on tissue and organ donation and transplants, a Housing Bill to strengthen the rights of private sector tenants and to assist councils in dealing with areas in decline, a Charity Bill to increase public confidence in charities, a Strategic Environmental Assessment Bill to regulate the assessment of the environmental impact of planning applications, a Transport Bill and a Gaelic Language Bill were announced as part of what the First Minister promised to be 'modern laws for a modern Scotland'.

The five bills which would continue their passage through parliament involved tenement law reform, tougher penalties for attacks on emergency workers, new powers to enable ministers to intervene over schools facing difficulties, a new regulatory framework for the water industry and updating laws covering the fire service. McConnell also reassured that 'in this parliament we will take action to reduce the terrible toll that smoking takes on our people' (McConnell 2004).

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As Jack McConnell further explained, the posts of Tourism, Culture and Sport and Transport would now be fully salaried Cabinet posts to reflect added responsibilities in the portfolios. Transport would now have the added responsibilities of Telecommunications and Post Offices, and the Tourism, Culture and Sport Minister would assist the First Minister with External Relations.

In June 2005, when the Liberal Democrats named Nicol Stephen as successor to Jim Wallace as their new party leader and Deputy First Minister, the new leadership team of McConnell and Stephen announced a further reshuffle. Nicol Stephen, in addition to his new role as Deputy First Minister was appointed Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning; Tavish Scott was appointed Minister for Transport and Telecommunication (he was previously Deputy Minister for Finance); George Lyon joined the Cabinet as Deputy Minister for Finance and Parliamentary Business; Robert Brown joined the Cabinet as Deputy Minister for Education, replacing Euan Robson who left the Cabinet. Rhona Brankin, previously Deputy Minister for Health, was moved to the post of Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Affairs; and Lewis Macdonald, previously Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Affairs, was moved to the post of Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care.

While David McLetchie's leadership of the Scottish Tories came under considerable pressure – first, over his part-time status as an MSP while still practicing as a lawyer, then over the non-disclosure of taxi receipts (which allegedly were, in part, for his legal practice activities rather than his duties as an MSP) – the Liberal Democrats, the SNP and the Scottish Socialist Party actually changed their leaders.

Most acrimoniously, and perhaps with the most serious consequences for the party's fortunes, the SSP dumped its charismatic founding figurehead Tommy Sheridan, the day before he announced in November 2004 that he would resign as convener for personal reasons, particularly to become 'a proper father'. He was replaced by Colin Fox MSP, who prevailed in a contest with Alan McCombes, the party's policy coordinator. Strangely enough, the SSP's website still gives (in September 2005) Tommy Sheridan as the party's convener... In August, the actor Peter Mullan, a high-profile supporter of the SSP, lambasted the party's ousting of Sheridan as 'disgraceful and disgusting'. In a TV interview he added: 'Their treatment of Tommy has as good as destroyed them for now.'

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Jim Wallace, the Deputy First Minister, announced his resignation as leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats who are partners with the Scottish Labour Party in the coalition that forms the Scottish government. He added that he would also relinquish his role as an MSP at the next election in 2007. According to the Partnership Agreement between the parties, the Liberal Democrat leader is appointed Deputy First Minister. Wallace, the MSP for Orkney, who was also Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, stood down in June when Nicol Stephen was elected as his successor. Stephen saw off the challenge from fellow Lib Dem MSP Mike Rumbles.

After the disappointing result for the SNP in the 2004 European elections, John Swinney had announced his resignation and triggered a leadership competition which lasted all summer long. Roseanna Cunningham and Nicola Sturgeon looked like the frontrunners, with Cunningham poised to win when, at the last minute and in a spectacular U-turn, the former convener of the party, Alex Salmond MP, threw his hat into the ring, on a ticket with Nicola Sturgeon (whose leadership ambitions he had previously endorsed) as his deputy. He was duly elected in September, and the fears that his absenteeism from Holyrood would leave Nicola Sturgeon in a vulnerable and ineffective position have since dissipated. 'Already,' Ruaridh Nicoll commented in an up-beat fashion by the end of September, 'Sturgeon seems adept at skewering McConnell at First Minister's questions, just as the Labour leader has raised his game in response.' (Nicoll 2004)

TAXI FOR McLETCHIE, THE RAFFAN MILES AND A FIRE-RAISING PEER

Scandals at Holyrood have so far been of thankfully moderate proportions or, seeing that the site was the home of a brewery, distinctly small beer. There was Frank McAveety losing his ministerial job over pies (and the never-ending crisis of Scottish Opera); then there was a bit of a hillaballoo about Jack McConnell's Wark holiday (blown up to 'Kirstygate' or 'Villagate'). Likewise without consequences have been the allegations against Tory leader David McLetchie's predilection for taxis. The attacks would perhaps have been less venomous and out of proportion had it not been McLetchie who, in 2001, had been the scourge of Henry McLeish when his constituency sub-lettings had come under scrutiny. In February, after continued pressure and allegations of misconduct (he was cleared by the Standards Committee in

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September), McLetchie had given up his part-time legal work and resigned as a partner in the Edinburgh law firm Todd Murray (Gordon 2005).

Liberal Democrat Keith Raffan clocked up an impressive number of miles in his wee Skoda – enough to circle the globe three times – criss-crossing his constituency even while, apparently, away on an official trip to the Isle of Man (Dinwoodie 2005). All this is nicely listed by the Scottish Parliament under Freedom of Information legislation which had just come into effect and for which, of course, the Liberal Democrats claim credit. Not even MSPs have yet mastered the art of being in two places at the same time, and so he had to go. And was replaced by Andrew Arbuckle who, after half a year in the job, complained that Scotland was ‘overgoverned’ and that an MSP’s work did not make for a full-time occupation... (MacMahon 2005). Maybe he should drive around a bit more?

And then, Labour Peer Lord Watson who, apparently frustrated at the ‘Politician of the Year’ awards last November, had a few drinks too many and tried to set the curtains at Prestonfield House alight (Kelbie 2005), all meticulously documented on CCTV. Mike Watson was, immediately after the incident, suspended by the Labour Party. In September 2005 he admitted to the deed, resigned from his MSP seat and thus triggered a by-election in Glasgow Cathcart on 29 September, the same day Livingstone would elect a successor to Robin Cook MP who had died suddenly while hiking in the Highlands in August.

EXTERNAL RELATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In October of last year, Jack McConnell stated during a parliamentary debate that the powers of devolution provide for specific ways in which Scotland’s government can contribute to international development. He announced that the government would spend £3 million a year to help Scottish non-governmental organisations target their overseas work and promised that, at times of international crisis, the Scottish government would mobilise Scotland’s response.

A cross-party group of six MSPs left in February 2005 for a 10-day visit to South Africa and Malawi. The visit was aimed at bringing together Scottish and African parliamentarians with Scottish charities and other overseas aid and education organisations and at developing sustainable links with South

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Africa and Malawi. In May, the First Minister himself travelled for five days to Malawi. On his return, he announced the creation of a National Fund – the Scottish Malawi Appeal Fund – to channel support to Malawi. McConnell made it clear that the fund was not part of government and would have no direct relationship to ministers or politicians. In September it was wound up, having only collected a disappointing £30,000. The campaign is supposed to be relaunched as part of an international relief effort.

The early summer was dominated by the G8 summit, which was held in early July at Gleneagles in Perthshire. In the run-up, Sir Bob Geldof spoke at a special Executive-sponsored conference in the Parliament, saying that G8 leaders should stay away from Scotland in July if they were not prepared to actively tackle poverty in Africa. Other speakers included Kumi Naidoo, Secretary General and Chief Executive of CIVICUS, Salil Shetty, Director of the UN Millennium Development Goals Campaign, and Omar Kabbaj, President of the African Development Bank. Bob Geldof was one of 17 commissioners appointed by the UK government in 2004 to take a fresh look at the African continent and its problems and the international community's role in helping its development path. In June, the Parliament welcomed more than 80 international parliamentarians and policy-makers to the G8 International Parliamentarians' Conference on Development in Africa 2005. The main issues of the conference agenda were HIV/AIDS, sexual and reproductive health, and the empowerment of women. Delegates debated the findings of the Report by the Commission for Africa, which was co-authored by Bob Geldof. The first weekend in July saw the biggest demonstrations in Edinburgh in living memory, 250,000 out to 'Make Poverty History', and a massive Live Concert at Murrayfield – 'Edinburgh 50,000: The Final Push' – on the eve of the Gleneagles summit.

To strengthen international trade and economic contacts, the First Minister, in October 2004, paid a five-day visit to Beijing and Shanghai. He expressed his support for a tourist agreement between China and Britain, which would allow Chinese tourists to travel to the UK for leisure. During his visit Jack McConnell announced that Scottish companies were to get extra government support to help them take advantage of opportunities offered by China's growing economy.

But, as Jim Wallace announced in December, while the EU market for Scotland is worth £10 billion and accounted for 54% of Scotland's total exports in 2003, with Germany and France the second and third largest export markets, Scotland's biggest single export market, worth £2.5 billion, is the

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USA. It is, since 1998, annually targeted during Tartan Week in early April. This year, a parliamentary delegation visited New York, Boston, Washington DC, Québec and Alabama, celebrating Scotland's cultural and historical links with Canada and the USA. As part of Tartan week, Tom McCabe, Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform, launched an event where Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow Universities joined together to represent Scotland's expertise in life sciences at a specially created seminar in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They were aiming to secure business opportunities and strengthen US links through the event. As Patricia Ferguson, Minister for Tourism, announced later in April, a quarter of a million people had visited the Scottish Village in Grand Central Station in New York during Tartan Week – a purpose-built structure featuring aspects of Scottish life and culture.

Closer to home, the fifth annual conference of the Presidents of Regions with Legislative Power (RegLeg) was held in Edinburgh on 30 November 2004. Jack McConnell held discussions with Commission Vice President Margo Wallström to develop a project that will improve the way the EU Commission works with devolved governments and regions across Europe. On the eve of the conference, the First Minister handed over the presidency of RegLeg to Eberhard Sinner, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bavaria. Despite the debate centred on the draft European Constitution, the Scottish RegLeg presidency seemed, overall, to have made little impact (Harvie 2005, p. 9).

Two of Scotland's regional partnerships were moved forward when, in January, an Action Plan between Scotland and the German State of North Rhine-Westphalia was signed in Edinburgh by Tom McCabe and Wolfram Kuschke from NRW. The key areas of co-operation of the Action Plan are renewable energy, biotechnology, regional policy and structural funds, entrepreneurship, European policy, administrative reform and infrastructure investment. A similar step was taken in May with the Scottish-Bavarian Action Plan, signed by McCabe and the Bavarian Minister for European Affairs and Regional Relations, Eberhard Sinner, at a formal ceremony in Munich.

In June, George Reid, the Scottish Parliament's Presiding Officer, welcomed a delegation from the Parliament of Catalonia led by its President, the Rt Hon Ernest Benach i Pascual. The delegation met with the Convener and members of the European and External Relations Committee to discuss 'the Promotion of Catalonia to the Wider World' and the role sub-national parliaments play in influencing European decisions.

CULTURE AND SOCIETY

After an interim report last November, the Cultural Commission published its Final Report on 23 June. Patricia Ferguson, Minister for Culture, welcomed the completion of the report and stated that she was pleased that the Commission had recommended the concept of cultural rights and entitlements which was a priority the Executive had asked to be addressed. The Commission also recommended more links with the community planning process. Much more controversial was the suggestion to abolish the Scottish Arts Council, and give the Ministry direct control over the arts budget and its distribution through a new body, Culture Scotland. Other key suggestions are the introduction of a Culture Bill by 2007, the creation of a new Deputy Culture Minister and a tax support system for artists.

On 17 December, the Smoking, Health and Social Care Bill was published which aims to improve Scotland's health record by banning, as in Ireland since end of March 2004, smoking in enclosed public places in order to protect people from the effects of second-hand smoke. In April, the Bill was approved by 83 to 15 votes – only the Conservatives being against.

The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Bill passed its third and final stage in Parliament on 21 April 2005. It establishes a body, Bòrd na Gàidhlig, to promote the use and understanding of the Gaelic language. It sought to create parity of esteem rather than equal legal status with English – but nonetheless was significant progress for the recognition and support of Gaelic. For Education Minister Peter Peacock the unanimous passing of the Bill marked a historic day for Gaelic. The SNP's Alex Neil said it was a day when the Gaelic language was going forward, not backward, although the language still faced serious challenges – every year currently losing 1500 speakers. Lord James Douglas Hamilton, the Tory education spokesman, called the Bill a landmark for Gaels and their culture.

The Government also continued its efforts to combat racism and sectarianism in Scotland. In January, Jack McConnell and his Justice minister Cathy Jamieson met with supporters from both Rangers and Celtic football clubs to discuss ways of tackling sectarianism in Scotland. This was followed in February by a 'summit on sectarianism' in Glasgow's Kelvin Gallery, chaired by Jack McConnell, which brought together representatives from the Old Firm, the churches, local government, business, trade unions, police, youth groups and the media – as well as campaign groups against sectarianism and loyalist and republican organisations who insist in their right to march.

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In November, MSPs passed the Breastfeeding (Scotland) Bill which makes it an offence to stop anyone feeding milk to children under two in public or in family-friendly licensed premises. The First Minister also announced a five-point plan aimed at tackling knife crime – including doubling the maximum jail term for possessing an offensive weapon from two to four years.

Just before Christmas, the long years of protest succeeded when the Skye Bridge tolls were abolished with immediate effect. They had been in place for the nine years since the Skye Bridge had been built as the first private finance project in the public sector in Scotland. But there was a sting in the tail for the tax payer: the buy-back of the bridge cost £27 million.

PARLIAMENT AND POWER

30 November 2005 marks the tenth anniversary since the Scottish Constitutional Convention published **Scotland's Parliament. Scotland's Right**, the 'blueprint' for the Scottish Parliament – time, in Jack McConnell's view, to look again at the range of powers devolved to Holyrood. In July, he ordered a review of the powers of the Scottish Parliament, looking at issues ranging from nuclear power stations, casinos, abortion and broadcasting to the electoral system, the size of the Scottish Parliament and the appointment and dismissal of Scottish civil servants, still a preserve of Whitehall (Allardyce 2005). Tavish Scott, the Transport Minister, said he would welcome if some aviation powers were handed down from Westminster to Holyrood 'if it helped the executive in its attempt to reduce island air fares.' And former First Minister Henry McLeish called for the Scottish Parliament 'to have new powers, including on immigration, guns and drugs policy' (Fraser 2005). Canon Kenyon Wright, the convener of the Constitutional Convention, favours Scotland taking control of any possible changes in the relationship between Westminster and Holyrood. He promoted his idea of a permanent constitutional commission to consider changes to Holyrood powers and procedures, which should not be imposed on Scotland by Westminster.

Public opinion in Scotland supports an increase of the powers of Holyrood. In the 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 65 per cent of Scots either agreed or strongly agreed that the Parliament's powers should be increased; a Mori poll in 2003 found 59 per cent, and a poll for Scottish Television in September 2005, again by Mori, 58 per cent in favour of more power to Holyrood (Macwhirter 2005). But, as Allan Massie has pointed out, the

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appetite for more powers has been shrinking since the peak of 2001 and 2002, when 66 and 68 per cent respectively were in support of increased powers (Massie 2005). The increase of powers also chimes with the findings of the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey that 52% trusted the Scottish Executive 'just about always' or 'most of the time', while 22% said the same of the UK government. A total of 67% said the executive should have the most influence over how Scotland is run, and 19% think the UK government should do so. But only 19% think the Executive has most influence, while 48% see Whitehall as dominant (Scottish Centre for Social Research 2005).

While McConnell and his government stop short of demanding increased fiscal powers, these are being discussed by Labour backbenchers like Wendy Alexander. While she advocates a form of fiscal federalism, the Liberal Democrats are determined to make tax-raising powers a condition for any future coalition pact with Labour, focusing on the Scottish Parliament's right to levy greater proportions of income tax, corporation tax and VAT north of the border (Robertson 2005). The Tories believe that devolving financial powers to Holyrood would make MSPs more accountable and more responsible in their spending decisions. In July, the Tories drew up a plan for the 2007 election to lower the basic rate of income tax by three per cent (MacDonell 2005). After quitting his front-bench position as the party's spokesperson on finance in July (the post went to the party's newest MSP, Derek Brownlee), Brian Monteith MSP embarked on a tax-cutting campaign, promoting a flat-tax as pioneered in Estonia (Monteith 2005). For the SNP, fiscal autonomy, apart from giving Scotland the leverage to lower corporate and business taxes in order to make its economy more competitive, is the logical next step towards independence. The debate will not go away. In his typical pointed way, Allan Massie, the literary face of Scottish Toryism, put it in a nutshell: 'If we want a real parliament rather than a toy one, a responsible executive rather than a play-acting one, then Holyrood has to be granted fiscal powers' (Massie 2005).

The Executive's Fresh Talent Initiative is one of the areas where the Parliament managed to extend its powers by negotiating special arrangements for Scotland in the area of immigration – a reserved matter. In January, Jack McConnell announced the next stage of the project, which aims to help tackle Scotland's declining population by attracting people to live and work in Scotland. He revealed plans to extend Scotland's two year student work scheme to overseas students who complete an HND, and a government fund to help universities and colleges support international students settle in

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Scottish communities. The First Minister also formally launched the new Relocation Advisory Service (<http://www.scotlandistheplace.com>) that offers practical support and advice to people interested in living and working in Scotland.

Another area which has seen a transfer of power from Westminster to Holyrood is responsibility for railways. As part of the rail review the Executive and the UK Government agreed in July that Scottish Ministers will take a greater responsibility for rail powers in Scotland. This includes full responsibility for specifying track and infrastructure improvements, as well as all of ScotRail's services.

UK ELECTIONS

The UK General Election on 5 May saw a reduction in the number of Scottish MPs from 72 to 59 in response to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. In the campaign itself, there was no clear separation of reserved and devolved matters – the debates covered the economy, taxation, immigration and the war in Iraq as much as policies on health, education and crime (see also article by Nicola McEwen in this issue of **Scottish Affairs**).

The main question was, would the SNP under their returned leader make inroads into the Labour vote and position themselves as a credible challenger for the 2007 Holyrood election (see also article by David Denver in this issue of **Scottish Affairs**). They won six seats, gaining two, while Labour fared reasonably well, with its 41 seats (-5). But the SNP also slipped, with only 17.7 per cent, into third place in the share of the vote (Labour: 39.5%; Lib Dems: 22.6%). The Tories (15.8%) stagnated, with a nominal gain of 1 (David Mundell MSP) – in practice holding their one seat, albeit not Peter Duncan's. The short-lived new Shadow Scottish Secretary's call for abolishing MSPs led to ruminations among Scottish Tories like Murdo Fraser MSP whether it was not time to break from the UK party, becoming a 'separate party, separately funded, with separate responsibility for policy.' The SSP's vote dropped dramatically to well below 50,000, nearly 30,000 votes less than in the 2001 elections.

Of potentially greater long-term impact could be another English poll – the referendum on a Northern Assembly which failed abysmally on 4 November 2004, when only 22 per cent (on a 48% turnout) voted in favour of an elected assembly in Newcastle (Hetherington 2004). This kicked regional devolution

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in England into the long grass, perhaps to remain there as long as it took Scotland and Wales to recover from the 1979 referendums – if it did not indeed kill it off entirely (Summers 2004). This means that there is no short- to mid-term perspective any more for rolling devolution across the UK, a fact which might well affect attitudes towards devolution and independence in Wales and Scotland.

TOWARDS 2007

On 9 September, Jack McConnell opened the new year of Parliament by introducing 22 bills which would see the Parliament through the nineteen months until the next Scottish elections. The ‘bombshell’ was a promise to cut Scottish business rates by 10%, to the same level as in England and Wales (Knox 2005).

Other legislative proposals include legal reform, from a sentencing bill which will provide guidelines to judges on the granting of bail to football banning orders, council powers to ban sectarian parades and the outlawing of kerb crawling. McConnell also announced a new Police Services Authority and an independent Police Complaints Commissioner. There is to be a Human Rights Commission. The summary courts are to be reformed and the children’s hearing system overhauled.

The Executive plans a change, which will cause controversy with the churches, in the adoption law so that unmarried couples – including gay couples – will have the right to adopt a child. School forums will replace school boards, and school dinners are to be improved with a new nutritional standards bill. The sale of fizzy drinks on school premises will be banned.

A fish farming bill aims at controlling sea lice and escapes from fish farms. The planning law is to be streamlined. The definition of ‘crofting’ is to be made more flexible to allow different land use and to tackle the issue of absentee crofters. And an animal welfare bill will introduce a duty of care for those looking after animals (McConnell 2005).

The U-turn on business rates came as a surprise. Had the Executive in the past not rejected the opposition’s repeated demands, claiming that the rate was actually lower than in England and, anyway, not important in the overall calculation of businesses? For Tory leader David McLetchie, the Executive had ‘at last seen the Conservative light.’ Had the Government hoped that the

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move would smoothen relations with the business community, they were in for an unpleasant surprise at the 'Business in the Parliament' conference in the debating chamber, which some 200 business people attended on the Thursday and Friday of the first week of the new year in September to debate the future of the Scottish economy with MSPs, when business leaders lobbed a litany of complaints at the Scottish Executive. Apparently, there was some truth in the contention that business rates are not that important. Now, the attacks concentrated on tardy transport reforms and public procurement of goods and services from global players rather than Scottish firms. 'Scottish business had digested the good rates news,' Alf Young commented dryly, 'and moved on to fresh fare.' He felt compelled to remind the business sector that they have 'every right to expect that government will tax responsibly, operate efficiently and avoid unnecessary barriers to fair competition. But,' he added, 'government also has the right to expect that business will take its responsibilities equally seriously, that it will invest in the future as well as distribute profits in the here and now' (Young 2005).

With the threatened takeover of Scottish Power by the German utility concern E.On, and the compliance of the Executive with the European Commission in putting the CalMac ferry services out to tender as well as the award of a major shipbuilding contract to a Polish shipyard, rather than Ferguson's of Port Glasgow, the SNP put 'economic patriotism' at the forefront of its challenge to the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition. And with the price of oil at record highs, and secret Whitehall dossiers of thirty years ago, 'Scotland's Oil' seems back on the campaign agenda.

We have seen the return of Alex Salmond, even if not yet to the Scottish Parliament; John Swinney has returned to the SNP front bench as finance spokesman; Henry McLeish, while pocketing the erstwhile political enemy's Tory shilling, does not tire to urge a bigger international role for Scotland. Will we see the return of Tommy Sheridan? The door is not closed for a comeback, said Rosemary Byrne MSP at the end of August (Hutcheon 2005).

While the Greens pledged their support for 'Independence First', a cross-party group campaigning for a referendum on independence already endorsed by the Scottish Socialists and a number of SNP MSPs (Swanson 2005), Nicol Stephen ruled out a referendum on independence, which was a set back for a potential SNP-Lib Dem partnership. But the Lib Dems as well as Labour will want to sharpen their profile in the run-up to the May 2007 election.

Alex Salmond has called for his party to raise an extra £1 million for a

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strategy to win 20 seats in the next election, taking the SNP campaign into the Labour heartlands of the Central Belt. Can the cash-strapped Nationalists come up with the goods? And what about the Tories? Still troubled by the occasional crossfire from north and south of the Border questioning their commitment to devolution, will there be a challenge to McLetchie's leadership, combined with a more radical Tory strategy? Will taxation powers for Holyrood be one of the dominant themes of the 2007 campaign?

2007, just a few weeks before the Holyrood elections, marks the tercentenary of the Act of Union. Will the Parliament pass up on the potential for academic and political assessment and commemoration, as it did in 2003, at the quartercentenary of the union of Crowns? No one needs to celebrate the Union, if they do not wish to, but could there be an understanding to mark the occasion and use it to further Scotland's national and international profile?

BEYOND 2007

In his Donald Dewar lecture at the International Edinburgh Book Festival on 25 August, George Reid announced that he would step down as the Parliament's Presiding Officer at the next election. Last year, on 6 December, he had welcomed one hundred and forty experts from Scotland's blue chip companies, the arts, academia and civic Scotland, who joined MSPs to look at issues which will affect Scotland in the next ten years and beyond. They were joined in a day-long 'conversation' about a possible Futures Forum in Parliament by representatives from the Global Business Network in California, Stanford University, the Office of the Prime Minister of France and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Somewhat modelled on the Finnish Parliament's Committee for the Future, which helped the country to overcome the shock waves of the early 1990s by concentrating on electronic communications and public health, but taking cues from other countries as well, the Scottish Futures Forum was set up by George Reid in August. He summed up its credo: 'If we don't think from time to time out of the box and over the horizon, if we rely only on past experience, the danger is that we shall walk into the future backwards.' (Reid 2005)

Holyrood, already a serial winner of architectural awards and shortlisted for the RIBA Stirling Prize, also hosted the first 'Festival of Politics' in August which played to packed houses. Together with the astonishing fact that, since

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its opening in October 2004, over 500,000 visitors have come to see the new building from the inside, this shows that the Scottish Parliament is leading the way in opening up the process of public participation. Holyrood is the 'gathering place', the place where people meet, as George Reid said at the Book Festival: 'The bottom line, I suppose, is that politics is too important to be left just to the politicians.'

NOTE

I am indebted to Margaret MacPherson's monthly 'Parliament News', available at the Institute of Governance's website <http://www.institute-of-governance.org/pn/curr_issue.html>.

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