

ANNALS OF THE PARISH: THE YEAR AT HOLYROOD, 2005-2006

Eberhard Bort

The political year in Scotland, from September 2005 to September 2006, was the year of the smoking ban in enclosed public places, and of the official – and very successful – opening of the Scottish National Theatre; it was the year when bird flu’ came and went, much like Y2K and SARS. Remember that swan in Cellardyke? It was also the year of the summer spectacular in the court room: Tommy Sheridan v. the **News of the World** (and most of his own party); it was the year of the McKie fingerprint controversy; the year that brought the whacking by-election defeat for Labour in Dunfermline and West Fife, with a 16 per cent swing to the Liberal Democrats; the feverish identity debate triggered by a wee football tournament in Germany and the vital support the English team apparently craved from their neighbours in the North – which was denied them by no lesser figure than Jack ‘Trinidad & Tobago’ McConnell himself. The never-ending West Lothian Question filled newspaper columns, with the likes of Michael Portillo and Simon Jenkins contemplating Scottish independence, and Roy Hattersley promoting an English parliament. It was the year of the long drawn-out (and continuing) farewell of Tony Blair and the perspective of a Scottish UK prime minister – who in turn seemed to miss no opportunity to reaffirm his ‘Britishness’ – and the impact of this disorderly transition on Labour’s election prospects in Scotland; and it was a summer of contradictory polls, once having the SNP, then Labour in the lead, which added to the rising temperature of the political climate as we edged closer towards the Holyrood elections of May 2007.

The past year has also seen the practical increase of the powers of the Scottish Parliament. In October 2005, Tavish Scott, Minister for Transport, announced the transfer of the new rail powers to Scotland, which now allow the devolved

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government of Scotland to determine the long term future for rail in Scotland, securing, managing and monitoring the performance of the rail franchise, and funding and controlling the tracks through Network Rail; this was enabled by a transfer of around £360 million to the Scottish Executive. In July, it was reported that UK and Scottish ministers had entered talks about whether to transfer control of the marine environment in Scotland to Holyrood. The debate about increased powers – fiscal autonomy, media, immigration – for Holyrood is ongoing, backed by surveys in which up to two-thirds of respondents in Scotland express their favour for a further devolution of powers.

MEDIA TENSIONS

Also ongoing is the tension between the media and devolution. Just when we thought the Parliament building itself had left the headlines behind, the beam struck, and the media – especially Scotsman Publications, antagonistic to the building from the start – had a field day. ‘Holyrood scare as roof beam collapses over heads of MSPs,’ titled the **Scotsman** in dramatic fashion (3 March 2006). ‘Holyrood shut down after roof beam breaks free,’ was the slightly less dramatic take by the **Herald** (3 March 2006, p.3). ‘Holyrood is falling down,’ blared the front page of the **Scottish Daily Mail** (3 March 2006), topping that inside with the headline ‘Sorry, we’ve had to cancel Holyrood questions because the new £431m parliament is falling to bits.’ Clearly, hopes that the editorial policy of Scotsman Publications would change with the new ownership remained unfulfilled. A beam had come lose; the chamber had to be temporarily closed; repairs were completed over the summer, and after the recess the MPS could move back in – embarrassing, annoying, particularly at a cost of over £500,000, but not exactly the collapse of the building!

Scotland has become ‘inward-looking and slightly Anglo.’ since devolution – that was the gist of an article in the **Economist** magazine, written by Johnny Grimond and published on 18 May 2006. As for the First Minister dismissed it as ‘the rambling thoughts of someone on a day trip from London.’

In August, Ian Bell attacked BBC Newsnight as ‘failing Scotland’. Clearly miffed by the programme’s output (and outlook) over the summer, he argued that the programme, broadcast since October 1999, ‘has become home rule’s most relentless, even obsessive, critic,’ with an editorial policy ‘to proceed from the assumption, on every possible occasion, that devolution has indeed

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failed.’ He contended that a ‘Scottish Six’ – a main news bulletin edited and broadcast from Glasgow, as proposed and repeatedly rejected since 1999 – would never adopt this ‘assumption that devolution is a wash-out [which] has become Newsnight Scotland’s default position,’ ignoring ‘consistent polling evidence demonstrating that a majority of Scots want home rule and their parliament to continue, despite an understandable aversion to politicians.’ (Bell 2006a)

On 12 July, BBC Newsnight Scotland reported on itself. Blair Jenkins had resigned from ‘Current Affairs’ which raised further questions concerning cutbacks in staffing and budget of BBC Scotland. The media pundit Philip Schlesinger saw this as casting doubts on the overall strategy of the BBC indicating a wider crisis of BBC management. Alex Neil MSP (SNP) saw it as raising ‘a series of new questions about the BBC’s position north of the border.’ He was worried about the impact of cuts on the wider media landscape of Scotland – ‘brain drain’ or ‘take-over’ from the South? He saw ‘the case for devolving media policy to the Scottish Parliament ... growing by the day’.

LEGISLATION – SMOKING AND DRINKING

The Executive’s legislative programme until the 2007 elections – fifteen bills overall – was already introduced last September. One of the most important pieces of legislation from the previous year, the banning of smoking in enclosed public places, came into force on 26 March of this year. The **Sunday Herald** dedicated a leader to the landmark legislation, calling it ‘a triumph for health and a testament to the power of devolution.’ (Leader, 26 March 2006)

In November, the third-stage debate of the reform of the Licensing Bill showed that Holyrood is still capable of living down to its bad press. It turned into, in the words of John Knox (the journalist, not the fire-and-brimstone reformer), ‘a pantomime, a farce, a shambles, a comedy of error’ (Knox 2005). After a shambolic debate, Labour backbenchers prevailed with a restrictive line on off-licence sales, to the chagrin of Labour’s coalition partner who had backed the more liberal proposal of the Executive. ‘It was supposed to be the biggest reform of Scotland’s licensing laws for a generation,’ so Knox: ‘But, in the words of one MSP, it was as ill-organised as a proverbial booze-up in a brewery. It ended up with the sale of drink being banned in supermarkets and off-licences from 10pm to 10am, for no apparent reason.’ Five years of consultation ended in what the **Sunday Herald** called the ‘licensing fiasco’ (Leader, 20 November 2005).

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In December, the Family Law (Scotland) Bill was passed by Parliament. It provides rules for quicker divorces, regulates parental responsibilities and rights (PRRs) for fathers, raises protection against domestic abuse, as well as introducing new legal safeguards for cohabiting couples and their children. Particularly the cut in separation periods from five to two years in contested divorce cases, and from two years to one in uncontested cases, drew fire from the Catholic Church who accused the Executive as ‘attacking the family’ and ‘dismantling marriage’ (Macdonell 2005). Cardinal Keith O’Brien attacked MSPs for passing ‘immoral’ laws: ‘It is all too easy to think of laws and proposed laws of our own Scottish parliament on marriage, the family, and the adoption of children, which come into this depressing category’ (Hutcheon 2005). The Cardinal’s comments were rebutted robustly by MSPs from different parties. SNP justice spokesman Kenny MacAskill questioned whether O’Brien had yet fully arrived in the twenty-first century. But the selfsame accusations were to be repeated in September 2006 when the Parliament passed a new adoption law which allows same-sex partners to adopt children. Joseph Devine, the Bishop of Motherwell, claimed in a letter to MSPs that the ‘distressing legislation’ was a ‘violation of family life’ (Gray 2006). In the Chamber, too, the legislation was not uncontested. ‘I hate to break the cosy consensus,’ said the SNP’s Roseanna Cunningham, speaking against the right of gay couples to adopt: ‘I can’t see how overturning tens of thousands of years of nature’s design moves us forward.’ (Dinwoodie 2006a). In the end, the bill was passed by 103 votes to eight.

End of March, the Parliament gave the green light for Line One of Edinburgh’s planned tram system. The line will form a loop from St Andrew Square, along Leith Walk to Leith, west to Granton, south to Haymarket and back to St Andrew Square along Princes Street. In June, the Waverley Railway (Scotland) Bill was passed, giving statutory authority to the Council and its successors for the construction of a railway from a point immediately south of Newcraighall to Tweedbank, largely following the route of the former Waverley railway line (which was closed over 35 years ago). In June, MSPs backed the £210m projected rail link between Glasgow airport and the city centre to be completed by 2009. Despite cost and efficiency concerns, the Parliament also approved of the £650m Edinburgh airport railway link. The SNP opposed the scheme, and its transport spokesman promised the scheme would be scrapped if his party gained power in 2007.

FLAGSHIP POLICIES IN TROUBLE

A number of legislative projects encountered implementation problems. Free personal care for the elderly, one of Holyrood's flagship policies, made headlines for all the wrong reasons. Although two research reports, one in February from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, one in June from a team of researchers at the University of Stirling, were very complimentary, calling the policy successful in improving the quality of life of older people and crediting it with the removal of many of their financial concerns as well as having the broad support of the electorate, they also pointed out that greater clarity was needed on how to calculate the costs of free personal care. Since its introduction in 2002, about 50,000 elderly people in Scotland have benefited from the policy. But the provision of care has been vastly different from council to council; there is controversy about the distinction between nursing and personal care. It was alleged that one-third of the 32 Scottish councils were charging for food preparation which should be covered by free care; worse, many councils were revealed as operating sometimes substantial waiting lists. The Executive was accused of having underestimated the costs involved in free care, and councils seem to have used funds allocated for free care to fill other gaps in their budgets. A report by the Health Committee revealed the 'postcode lottery experienced by some of Scotland's most vulnerable elderly' (Puttick and Fraser 2006).

Another of Holyrood's showcases lost some of its lustre. The £2.15bn investment into schools following the (Gavin) McCrone settlement of 2001, which gave teachers a 23 per cent pay increase over the three years to 2004, and which limited class teaching to 22.5 hours per week (in force since August of this year), was criticised by Audit Scotland for the Executive's lack of proper assessment of cause and effect. No doubt the financial situation of teachers has been improved, but did the 'Deal' also improve education? – there the Audit Report published in May failed to find clear proof of improvement.

The Executive's antisocial behaviour legislation was branded a flop by opposition politicians when figures were released in August showing that, across the board, only little use was made of Asbos (Antisocial Behaviour Orders) and that, numerically, there were huge differences across different council areas. The Executive had to admit: 'We believe there can be more, and more appropriate use of these types of antisocial behaviour measures' (Swanson 2006a).

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Last September, Jack McConnell had surprised Parliament and public by announcing to bring down business rates to the level of England. He then added that he was prepared to look at a further reduction in business rates for firms investing in research and development. This plan to make Scotland, in McConnell's words, 'the most attractive place in the UK in which to invest in research and development' (Barnes 2006a) was effectively shelved after one year of inaction.

NATIONAL THEATRE AND FRESH TALENTS

While there still is controversy about the Cultural Commission Report and the Executive's plan to fuse the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen to form a new body, Culture Scotland, and take the national companies under its direct funding wing, Scotland's National Theatre, which was inaugurated on 24 February with performances under the collective title 'Home' at 10 different locations across the country, has been hailed a remarkable success. As a 'virtual' National Theatre, the organisation has an administrative base in Glasgow but no building of its own. It works with existing companies, tours Scotland and beyond, making use of venues as appropriate. Even if the Parliament closed its doors to a hilarious take on First Minister's Question Time as written by kids and performed by Alex Norton, Tam Dean Burn & Co, it was staged with great merriment at Edinburgh's Queen's Hall. Since then, The National Theatre has gone from strength to strength, from a highly acclaimed production of 'Transit', imaginatively staged at Edinburgh Airport, to the mega hit of this year's Edinburgh Festival, Gregory Burke's 'Black Watch'.

The 'Working in Scotland' initiative, better known as the 'Fresh Talent' project, encouraging international students to stay in Scotland after finishing their studies on a two year visa without need for a work permit, has been, in Jack McConnell's words, 'one of the successes of this administration over the last few years.' (Edward 2006) It started in June 2005, and more than 1,500 students from about 75 countries have since successfully applied for the scheme.

Until the 2007 elections, the Parliament's legislative agenda encompasses another 23 bills in progress, thirteen of them Executive bills, the rest Members' and Private bills. Among them are new regulations forbidding Christmas Day and New Year's Day trading, the St Andrew's Day Bank Holiday Bill, Mike Pringle's Environmental Levy on Plastic Bags (Scotland) Bill, the

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controversial Legal Profession and Legal Aid (Scotland) Bill which has already drawn flak from the legal profession, and bills to introduce Commissioners for Older People and for Human Rights (controversial as the already existing tsars are deemed too costly by some critics).

The Planning Bill is controversial because the Greens and environmental organisations press for the right of third parties to appeal, which is rejected by the Executive. The Executive's Crofting Bill, which was heavily criticised in the Parliament's Environment and Rural Development Committee, particularly for a section which would have introduced a free market in croft tenancies, has already seen a 'major climbdown' (Ross 2006) by the Government, when Deputy Minister Rhona Brankin admitted that several key parts of the bill had been dropped and a wide-ranging inquiry into crofting issues was to be set up. Committees at Holyrood are working at full throttle to cope with all these bills before the election campaign proper starts and Parliament is dissolved in early April.

BY-ELECTIONS 1: DUNFERMLINE AND WEST FIFE

While the Cathcart (Scottish Parliament) and Livingston (Westminster) by-elections in September 2005, following the resignation of fire-raising Mike Watson and the death of Robin Cook, did not produce any great surprises, things were to change when a by-election for Dunfermline/West Fife became necessary following the death of Rachel Squire MP. It was scheduled for 9 February.

Following the demise of Charles Kennedy as leader, described in an **Evening News** editorial as 'the brutal eviction of Ross, Skye and Lochaber MP Mr Kennedy by a cabal of conspirators,' (24 January 2006) and the revelations of Mark Oaten and Simon Hughes about their sexual orientations, a **Scotsman** editorial spoke of the 'sobering prospect for Lib Dems' (9 January 2006); the **Evening News** diagnosed a 'Lib Dem meltdown' (24 January), and a **Herald** editorial saw 'The Lib Dems in crisis' (27 January 2006). Douglas Fraser even mused about Labour fears that the Lib Dems could come a poor fourth in Dunfermline, concerned 'that if its [i.e Labour's] partners lose momentum going into next year's Scottish elections, their joint majority could be at risk' (Fraser 2006a).

But the actual campaign for the by-election, like the subsequent result, turned into a nightmare for Labour, starting with accusations of 'fixing' Catherine

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Stihler's candidature before she was duly selected. This came on top of the news of 700 job losses at the Lexmark factory and an embarrassing rift between Westminster Labour ministers and the Labour-led Executive at Holyrood, as the Forth bridge 'farrago' led to questions of 'who runs Scotland?' and 'who runs the Labour party in Scotland?' (Bell 2006b). Peter Jones saw the 'devolution concordat' crumbling, calling the 'Dunfermline by-election shenanigans' of London's 'meddling' and McConnell's 'resistance' no less than 'a defining moment in the relationship between the devolved government in Edinburgh and the UK government in London' (Jones 2006).

The turning point for the Lib Dems was undoubtedly Charles Kennedy's visit to Dunfermline on 2 February. After four weeks 'out of the spotlight', Kennedy was the darling of the media, 'the day's true star'. The 'Kennedy factor' turned out trumps as TV screens and newspaper columns were full of the affection which was shown to 'the party's greatest asset and its greatest loss' (Gordon 2006a). More important, even, was Kennedy's signal that he did not bear grudges. So, no need for Lib Dem and Charles Kennedy supporters to punish the party for the treatment meted out to the former leader.

The by-election was won by Willie Rennie of the Liberal Democrats with a majority of 1,800 on a 16.2 per cent swing. At the previous May's General Election Ms Squire had won the seat for Labour with a majority of more than 11,500. The fall-out of this election result – Labour losing 'a safe seat in Gordon Brown's backyard' to the Lib Dems who had in the months leading up to the election been 'embroiled in back-stabbing, sniping and scandal' (Swanson 2006b) – was seen as damaging to Gordon Brown's chances of, at least a quick, succession to No 10 Downing Street and coloured the spring party conference season.

While the Lib Dems celebrated, claiming that they now 'can win seats from the Labour Party in all parts of Scotland' (Swanson 2006c), Labour MPs (and some MSPs) cried foul over the Lib Dems' 'amoral campaign'; there were calls for a minority administration at Holyrood. Dishonest, dublicitous, untrustworthy, irresponsible, lack of discipline and 'no obvious sense or honour' were accusations hurled at the Lib Dems. As an **Edinburgh Evening News** editorial put it:

The Lib Dems have ... managed to pull off the impressive trick of avoiding responsibility for the unpopular aspects of the Scottish Executive's record but claiming credit for the policies people like. (25 March 2006)

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Or, in the relative moderate words of Alasdair Morrison MSP (Labour): ‘We are scunnered that there are those in the Lib Dem party who think they can have their cake and eat it’ (C. MacLeod 2006).

BY-ELECTIONS 2: MORAY

The media were united in their appreciation for the late Margaret Ewing – ‘one of the few politicians without an enemy’ (Dinwoodie 2006b) – whose death triggered another by-election, this time in Moray on 27 April. Tory Mary Scanlon was first to throw her hat into the ring. Both Scanlon and the SNP’s candidate Richard Lochhead resigned their Holyrood list seats to contest the Moray seat (which Margaret Ewing had held with a 4000 vote majority).

Even before the campaign had properly started, Mary Scanlon found herself enmeshed in problems. Letters of endorsement, allegedly by independent Moray councillors and distributed in leaflet form, were disowned by the councillors in question, and another leaflet, emphasising Scanlon’s friendship with the late Margaret Ewing and presenting her as the ‘continuity candidate’ – but omitting the fact that she was a Tory – was fiercely criticised by the SNP. Yet it was not only the ‘Trojan Tory’ who got into trouble, the Lib Dems were also accused of ‘dirty tricks’, as their candidate Linda Gorn and her team were likened to ‘snake-oil salesmen’ by the editor of the local weekly paper, the **Northern Scot**, for falsely suggesting in a leaflet that the paper was backing her candidature (Urquhart 2006). The by-election was easily won by Richard Lochhead with 12,653 votes. Mary Scanlon came a poor second with 6,268 votes. Richard Lochhead thus became a directly elected MSP. Maureen Watt took his list seat, and David Petrie of the Scottish Conservatives replaced Mary Scanlon. Maureen Watt took her oath of allegiance in the Doric dialect of the North-East as well as in English – a premiere at Holyrood.

PARTIES 1: SCOTTISH LABOUR

Dunfermline had sent Labour reeling. As the surprise defeat fed speculations about Brown and Blair, it became increasingly clear that Jack McConnell’s biggest headache in the run-up to the forthcoming elections would be the fall-out of Blair’s long farewell and the timetable of his succession. A **Herald** editorial spelled it out:

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Enduring the dog days of a premiership does not enthrall electorates, especially if tarnished by endless bickering about who will take over. This could be the baleful backdrop to next year's Holyrood poll. (7 September 2006)

Or, as Ian Bell pointedly observed: 'The prime minister is, after all, the single biggest reason for an outbreak of panic within Scottish Labour' (Bell 2006c). The last McConnell wants is a Labour 'beauty contest' between leadership contenders overshadowing the Scottish election campaign – a 'nightmare scenario' (Macdonell 2006a) as one MSP put it. From McConnell's perspective, the **Scotsman** concurred, 'diverting the attention of party activists and the media towards an internal beauty contest, smack in the middle of a fight to the death with the SNP, is plain electoral suicide' (Editorial 14 September 2006).

Based on an analysis of current electoral trends, John Curtice projected in May that Labour could lose up to 15 seats in the 2007 election, and thus the power to continue the present coalition – even if the Lib Dems were up for it. McConnell tried to impart the seriousness of the situation to Tony Blair in June when he told him that the SNP could win next year's election, after private polling by Scottish Labour had revealed that the party could lose up to 12 seats in May 2007.

Labour's woes were compounded by revelations of a major cash crisis of the party, in London, with the potential of job losses in Scotland and considerably less money than expected for next year's campaign, and warnings by the Catholic hierarchy that the party was losing support among Catholic voters because, as Bishop Tartaglia of Paisley said, Catholics were 'tired of being bullied into ascepting an intolerant new orthodoxy on issues such as homosexual unions while the family and marriage are constantly attacked by a very anti-family Labour party.' (Macdonell 2006b). Add to this protests about hospital closures and re-organisation, with the SNP and independents targeting Justice Minister Cathy Jamieson's seat over the Monklands A&E closure, and worries over the civil service relocation programme in Edinburgh, and it becomes clear that Labour has its work cut out for the 2007 campaign.

In response to the Dunfermline campaigning disaster, which was blamed on London's interference in devolved matters (like the Forth Bridge tolls and the building of a new Forth Bridge), McConnell increasingly distanced himself and Scottish Labour from 'ill-informed' Westminster politicians, stressing that he

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would in future be firm defending Scottish Executive business against interference from London.

When McConnell announced that, shock horror, he would not support England in the World Cup, it earned him a bitter reprimand from Gordon Brown who accused him of ‘draping himself in the Saltire’ and ‘pandering to nationalism’ (Allardyce 2006). Does this and his support, all of a sudden, for St Andrew’s Day as a national holiday, mean that ‘Tartan Jack’ is ‘trying to out-nat the nats’? (McAlpine 2006) Iain Macwhirter saw McConnell’s changing stance as a consequence of devolution itself:

Quietly, almost imperceptibly, Scotland is becoming more self-confident as a nation and clearer about what is required to make it a better place to live. Jack McConnell is acutely conscious of this, which is why he is talking up his independence from London control. (Macwhirter 2006a)

In August, a YouGov poll commissioned by the SNP saw Labour trailing its opponents, and ex-Minister Susan Deacon declared she would not seek reelection next year, expressing frustration and disappointment over the devolution process so far: ‘Devolution hasn’t delivered change on the scale or at the pace that it should have done’ (MacMahon 2006a). And the papers from the **Scotsman** stable splashed out stories about an internal rebellion against McConnell. There was even talk of a ‘coup plotted amid election panic’ (Barnes 2006b). While Susan Deacon bowed out of next year’s contest, Lord Foulkes entered it, and Donald Anderson gave up his position as Council Leader in Edinburgh to contest Edinburgh South.

While speculation about the future of the Holyrood coalition flourished, it is maybe worth while remembering that the coalition has been there before. Many media pundits saw it on its last legs from the start, and again in the run-up to the 2003 elections – oddly enough, it has, so far, proved remarkably resilient. That’s realpolitik for you. But the Labour conference’s adoption of nuclear power as an option for Scotland’s energy policy seemed to put more potential obstacles in the way of the existing the Holyrood partnership beyond May 2007, as the Lib Dem Conference clearly rejected nuclear energy.

After sitting on the fence on the question of new nuclear power stations for months, McConnell surprised the public by declaring in September that Scotland could meet its energy needs through a ‘massive increase in renewable energy’ which could ‘replace nuclear entirely’ (Gordon 2006b). This could ease dealing with the Lib Dems, but there remains the tricky issue of Trident’s

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replacement, which Brown already endorsed in June – clearly a reserved matter, but a sensitive issue for ‘all those veterans of the old “nuclear-free Scotland” campaigns on the Labour benches’, and particularly for the ‘old unilateral disarmer’ McConnell (Bell 2006d), under incessant pressure from the SNP.

Relief came only – and perhaps temporarily – when a TNS System Three survey published in early September saw Labour eight percentage points ahead of the SNP. Calculating on the basis of that poll, John Curtice had Labour on 49 seats (just one down) and the SNP at 24 seats (three down).

Labour commitments likely to be in the 2007 Manifesto were leaked in late September. Green issues, public health and law and order are, apparently, to dominate the agenda. Council tax discounts for making homes more environmentally friendly, the use of recycled materials in new roads and road repairs, trade academies for vocational training for 14 and 15-year-olds, cutting prices for sports facilities to encourage more people to use them in the fight against obesity, banning unhealthy snacks from sports centres, allowing local authorities to fluoridise water, investigating the possibility of a direct ferry link between Rosyth and Denmark, a light rail link between Rosyth and Edinburgh, a one-stop Scotland-wide box office with tickets for all cultural events, and powers for ministers to compel local authorities to impose Asbos. While Labour sources are quoted as claiming that the draft manifesto represents a list of sensible and realistic policies which can be put into practice,’ the oppositional view is that the leaked manifesto shows ‘that First Minister Jack McConnell’s party has run out of new ideas’ (M MacLeod 2006a).

McConnell refused to even contemplate seat losses: ‘We go into these elections more confident than I have ever been in my five years as First Minister. I believe we will have the better ideas, more of them, a greater clarity of vision in our manifesto’ (MacMahon and Gray 2006).

PARTIES 2: SNP

After mixed fortunes in the by-elections of September and February, Alex Salmond demonstrated confidence at the SNP conference, sticking to his aim of 20 seats to be gained from Labour in the May 2007 elections. Lower taxation, public sector savings, replacement of the council tax by a local income tax, a legally binding waiting time guarantee, and the publication of a

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referendum bill on independence were among the pledges unveiled in Dundee in April as cornerstones for a 2007 SNP Manifesto.

The YouGov poll in August showed the SNP four points ahead of Labour (33 to 29 per cent), Salmond ahead of his rivals on the question who would make the best First Minister (43 per cent, compared to 27 per cent for Jack McConnell, 13 per cent for Annabel Goldie, and 10 per cent for Nicol Stephen) and public support for the SNP as the leading party in a coalition government after May 2005 – 28 per cent for an SNP-Lib Dem pact, against 25 per cent for the existing Holyrood coalition. The poll also endorsed the preliminary talks before Christmas between the SNP and the Greens, probing the possibilities for a coalition after the next elections: 66 per cent agreed with the talks; just 14 per cent disagreed.

The SNP used the summer for a series of policy announcements, including a pledge to cull quangos and slash bureaucracy and take local enterprise companies away from Scottish Enterprise and transfer them to councils; no more nuclear power stations and ambitious targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions; a total restructuring of the civil service, streamlining, cutting bureaucracy costs and focusing on three dominant departments (sustainable growth, health and education); slashing the size of government – fewer ministers, reducing civil service numbers in favour of ‘small government’; Irish-style tax breaks for artists; a pledge for old age pensioners to be exempt from council tax; a £100m funding package to abolish the graduate endowment tax and return to free higher education; the slashing of business rates for 150,000 small businesses with a new Small Business Bonus Scheme worth £122m; and the vow to scrap the Edinburgh airport rail link.

The write-off of existing student debts and the scrapping of the graduate endowment tax came under double attack. The SNP’s budgeted £100m were a massive underestimate – Labour politicians put the price tag between £1.7 and 3bn; and morally, Paul Hutcheon argued, wiping out existing debts of ‘graduates in well-paid jobs is simply preposterous.’ It would ‘hand a £1bn plus subsidy to 300,000 people with more earning potential than anybody else’ (Hutcheon 2006c). Tax-free OAPs, fee higher education, tax exemption for artists, slashed business rates on the one hand – small government on the other. In the run-up to the election the SNP’s financial probity will be examined in proportion to its likelihood of gaining power.

While Ian Bell pointed out that the YouGov poll was commissioned by the SNP, he speculated on what could happen if the SNP were the leading

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government party after May 2007, whether the SNP could win the election but then could fail to get a yes vote in the promised independence referendum which would follow their electoral victory – and what the consequences of such a scenario might be (Bell 2006e). The pledge to hold an independence referendum within four years of gaining power could become a major stumbling block if the SNP needs to form a coalition with the Lib Dems. While the Lib Dems have signalled that they are prepared to talk to all other parties about coalitions, Nicol Stephen expressly ruled out that the Lib Dems could consent to an independence referendum.

For Alex Salmond, the referendum is a *sine qua non*, but Mike Russell who is expected to return to Holyrood in 2007 has just published different thoughts on the subject (Russell and MacLeod 2006). No referendum in the first term of an SNP-led government, and sharing of responsibility for foreign affairs and defence with England as part of the UK. This idea of a ‘New Union’ is, as Paul Hutcheon comments, likely to infuriate not just the ‘fundamentalists’ in the SNP – it is also in clear contradiction of Alex Salmond’s stated policy (Hutcheon 2006d). Iain Macwhirter, on the other hand, suspects that a majority of SNP MSPs share Russell’s scepticism regarding the referendum: ‘after all, what is the point of having a referendum which the SNP are likely to lose?’ (Macwhirter 2006b).

But the conflict extends to other policies. Even in the existing parliamentary party there is an uneasy peace between the social democrats of Salmond’s ilk, and the pro-business, low-tax free marketers like Kenny MacAskill and Jim Mather. The SNP expellee Campbell Martin accused his former party of having turned ‘hard to the right’, now sharing many policies with the Tories (Martin 2006). Jim Sillars claimed ‘an independent Scotland must be right-thinking’ (Sillars 2006), and Mike Russell and Dennis MacLeod propose cuts in income tax and the abolition of corporation and inheritance taxes. They want Scotland to have its own currency, not joining the Euro (official SNP policy), a voucher-based system for education, privatisation of trunk roads and the water system, and an end of the party’s bar on working with the Tories. Could this cast doubts on the SNP becoming the natural beneficiary of an electoral meltdown of the SSP as suggested by commentators over the summer?

PARTIES 3: LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

After the Dunfermline boost, internal Liberal Democrat calculations this summer predicted an increase of seats for them from presently 17 to 25 after

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next year's election. They would then talk not just with the strongest party (Labour, as expected) but also with the SNP about forming a partnership government. They have clearly ruled out new nuclear power stations in Scotland and staked the claim at their autumn conference to become the greenest party, pledging that by 2050 all of Scotland's energy needs would be met from renewable sources. But that long-term focus was criticised by the Green's co-convenor Shiona Baird as deflecting scrutiny away from the party's current actions:

The Lib Dems have utterly failed to take serious action to fast-track renewables. You only have to look at their record in office – of expanding motorways, aviation and even campaigning against congestion charging – to see that they will run a mile from the tough decisions that are really needed urgently (Peev and Thompson 2006).

Other Lib Dem manifesto commitments include lowering the voting age in Scottish Parliament and local government elections to 16, pupils' councils in every school and youth councils in every local authority area.

The recommendations of the Steel Commission, published in March, pointed the way to Lib Dem demands for greater powers for the Scottish Parliament, including new tax powers (Fraser 2006e). This was seen, at least by the **Scotsman**, as 'a dramatic shift in the balance of Scottish politics,' running a front page headline reading 'Lib Dems open door to coalition with SNP' (7 March 2006). The Steel commission's report was, said Iain Macwhirter, 'little short of a declaration for independence' (Macwhirter 2006c).

In contrast to the Dunfermline scenario, the Lib Dems will have to defend the Executive's record next May. Souring relations with Labour, competition with the Greens over environmental kudos, and doubts about their stance vis-à-vis a coalition with the SNP could make their task of gaining seats somewhat more difficult than forecast.

PARTIES 4: SCOTTISH CONSERVATIVES

At the end of October of last year, David McLetchie MSP had to resign his post as leader of the Scottish Conservative Party after continued pressure over his Holyrood taxi expenses. In November, Annabel Goldie MSP was elected as the new leader. At the same time, Brian Monteith MSP resigned from the Party following his revelation that he had briefed against David McLetchie. He stated

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that he would remain at Holyrood as an independent MSP until the next election.

The Tories had hoped to improve their standing in Dunfermline, but they fell back from 10.3 to 7.8 per cent of the vote. Likewise, their aspiration to gain Moray were frustrated. Addressing the Tory conference in Perth in March, UK party leader David Cameron told the party to ‘focus its fire on the Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians running Scotland, rather than the institution at Holyrood.’ Their only Scottish MP, David Mundell, said: ‘For us as a party in Scotland, the time for whingeing about the Scottish Parliament is over. We have to focus all our time, energy and resources on making it better at delivering for the people of Scotland’ (Swanson 2006d). Defying grassroots objections to devolution, Annabel Goldie demanded ‘real devolution’, as she formulated her ‘strategic objective’ to become the ‘principal party of opposition’ at Holyrood (M. MacLeod 2006b). But her deputy, Murdo Fraser MSP, contended that the Tories would only regain power if they were prepared to enter into coalition, perhaps with a ‘pro-business SNP’, which triggered speculations about a split on this strategic issue at the top of the Tories.

More controversy lay ahead as Annabel Goldie suggested, in an apparent U-turn, that the Tories could prop up Labour after the Holyrood elections for concessions on public service reforms and lower business rates – in order to keep the SNP out of power. At the same time, discussions in the SNP about a coalition with Labour were reported. ‘Strange bedfellows emerge,’ Douglas Fraser commented, ‘when coalition fever grips the nation’ (Fraser 2006c).

When Cameron returned to Scotland in September, he seriously risked obesity from over-indulging on humble pie – he apologised for practically everything, from the highland clearances to the poll tax and English prejudices against the Jocks. But it did not go down too well: ‘Go home Cameron to think again’ shouted an editorial in **Scotland on Sunday** (17 September 2006), categorising his speech as ‘backward-looking, shallowly ingratiating and self-abasing’ ... ‘to say that it was light on policy would be a charitable understatement ... a wasted opportunity.’

So, no Cameron effect north of the Border. And, indeed, the biggest problem for the Tories is their stagnation, and the low esteem in which its MSPs are held even among their own Holyrood candidates – who in August called for the lot of them to be de-selected to make space for fresh blood. Former deputy chairman Mars Goodman even spoke of the way the party was run at the moment as ‘sheer lunacy’ (Macdonell 2006c). As a **Scotsman** editorial had it,

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‘Scottish Tories are all at sea’ (28 August 2006). ‘No direction, no inspiration ... no chance’ was the verdict of Allan Massie (Massie 2006). And Paul Hutcheon did not have to fear a lot of contradiction when he came to the conclusion that a Tory revival north of the border was ‘still a long way off’ (Hutcheon 2006c).

PARTIES 5: SCOTTISH SOCIALISTS

Some 500 votes for ex-Labour MSP John McAllion standing for the Scottish Socialist Party in Dunfermline did not augur well for the party’s prospects for 2007. But then all hell broke loose. More headlines than by all the other parties taken together were made by a court case which provided red tops as well as broadsheets and broadcast media with a summer extravaganza rivalling anything Big Brother and other celebrity TV shows could come up with. The mighty Tommy Sheridan MSP, founder of the Scottish Socialist Party, took on the **News of the World** (who had published a story about his alleged extramarital affairs in November 2004) and his own party, and won. Sexual capers – two, three, four in a bed (Tom Gordon commented on **Newsnight Scotland**, it could be ‘sixes and sevens’ before too long) – provided the voyeuristic novelty value. The problem was that Tommy Sheridan could only prove his case by proving his party to be a basket case. It was his word against that of four of his fellow MSPs – somebody had to be lying in court. The Jury ruled in favour of Sheridan, who turned round calling his former comrades ‘scabs’ (a term he later regretted) and, on 3 September, formed ‘Solidarity’, his own break-away Socialist Party.

Not only did this libel case and the party split totally overshadow any policies the SSP promotes – for example, free prescriptions, a proposal which gained Committee backing at Holyrood and was then voted down in the Chamber by the Executive’s majority. It also revealed a misogynist streak in the party. Most of the witnesses backing Sheridan were men, most of those giving evidence against him women. It was ironic that ‘the women giving evidence in court to support the NoTW case were portrayed as those the paper is usually out to get – feminists, hookers, gold-diggers, witches and man-haters. On Sheridan’s side was his martyred mother and his near-perfect wife. ... The whole affair cannot be,’ said Julie Bindel, ‘described as one that has advanced the cause of women in any way.’ (Bindel 2006)

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The **Scotsman** predicted in an editorial leader (4 September 2006) that the most ‘acrimonious’ and ‘bitter’ contests in next year’s election would be fought between these two rival socialist parties:

The anti-Sheridan faction believes Mr Sheridan is an egotist and a liar and wants nothing to do with him. The pro-Sheridan faction believes he has been the victim of a vicious attempted coup and that he is still the best political leader in Scotland.

In September, Arthur Scargill’s Socialist Labour Party announced that it would also enter the fray and field candidates across Scotland, hoping to capitalise on the divisions and infighting between former members of the SSP. Sheridan may claim that ‘Scotland is big enough for more than one socialist party’ (Malone 2006), but it is difficult to see any of them repeating the electoral success the SSP achieved in 2003.

PARTIES 6: THE GREENS

The sad picture of the SSP at war contrasted sharply with the growing prospects of the Greens, from pre-Christmas coalition talks with the SNP to the mainstream parties’ belief that they ‘could play kingmaker after next year’s poll’ (Hutcheon 2006d). They share common ground with the SNP on the question of independence for Scotland, on more powers for Holyrood, a nuclear-free Scotland, more wave and wind power, third party (community) appeals on planning, asylum and rendition, and PFI/PPP government finance deals. But they differ on business-friendly policies, on major new road projects, on airport expansion, reliance on oil revenues, and fisheries conservation policies.

Solidly led by Robin Harper and Shiona Baird, with Mark Ballard winning the post of student and staff rector at Edinburgh University (against Boris Johnston MP and Magnus Linklater), it is no pipedream when their election co-ordinator, Patrick Harvie MSP, says the Greens aim at winning ten parliamentary seats in May 2007. In any power deal after the election, they would prioritise assurances on key Green policies over cabinet posts.

In September, the ex-leader of Edinburgh Council, Labour Holyrood hopeful Donald Anderson, launched an invitation to his own party and to the Greens to consider a three-way coalition:

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I believe Labour needs to open a dialogue with the Green Party. There are successes in our relationship with the Lib Dems, but failures too. Weekend environmentalists, they are guilty of adopting gimmicks or policies they believe to be popular. A three-way coalition could give a real drive and strength to our environmental policies. ... The Greens could play a role in delivering, rather than demanding, better policies for our environment. The question for us in the Labour Party is, are we bold enough to open up the dialogue, and, if we are, will the Greens respond? (Anderson 2006)

Their draft manifesto includes scrapping Asbos, allowing local authorities to introduce car parking charges, abolishing zoos, prohibiting the import of animals for circuses, banning coursing, live baiting and the use of whips in horse racing – ‘none of which are likely to impress Mr McConnell or SNP leader Alex Salmond’ (Hutcheon 2006d). But, then, not all of them might be signed off by the autumn party conference, and even fewer would perhaps survive power-broking talks after the election.

MAY 2007: THE HEAT IS ON

‘Normally, August is the “silly season”,’ the **Scotsman** summed up this political summer:

But not this August, when the Scottish political scene has been anything but quiescent. The Scottish Socialist Party has self-destructed in the wake of the Tommy Sheridan trial. A new opinion poll gives the SNP a four point lead over Labour, and it is set to be the largest party next May. Meanwhile, inside Labour ranks, there is growing criticism of the First Minister. One political party alone seems to fail to capture any headlines – Scotland’s Tories. The same poll that puts the SNP firmly ahead of Labour indicates a slump in Conservative fortunes – the party has dropped seven points to only 10 per cent. At this rate, they could be overtaken by the Scottish Greens. (Editorial, 28 August 2006)

What is true about August can be said of the entire year at Holyrood. Since last autumn, the political climate has warmed significantly. The political temperature is rising because the next Holyrood election, coinciding with the 300th anniversary of the Union, promises to be the most interesting since devolution. In 1999 and 2003 the polls predicted a pretty clear-cut majority for a Labour-Lib Dem partnership. This time, even if they had the numerical

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strength after the election, it is not sure whether the partners wish – or will be able – to continue. The SNP could be on the verge of a break-through, and Labour’s long hegemony in Scotland could come to a close. The rainbow Parliament could get a rainbow coalition government. Voter turn-out should, given these circumstances, be up – and election night next May should be well worth staying up for.

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

More detailed quarterly monitoring reports can be found on the Constitution Unit’s website: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/devolution/devo-monitoring-programme.html>

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