

THE SMOOTH WOOLING: THE SNP'S VICTORY IN THE 2007 SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

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Shambles, drama, suspense ... the 2007 Scottish parliament election had it all. There was the fiasco of more than 140,000 spoiled ballot papers, the intrigue of whether Scotland really was marching on to independence, and the cliff-hanger of the final result when the SNP beat Labour by just one seat. That alone was history – the first time Labour had failed to win the biggest haul of seats and votes in Scotland since 1955. So too was the aftermath – the first Scottish National Party government in British political history. True, it was a minority government, but it was a government with the keys to Bute and St Andrews House nonetheless. How this came about will be the subject of much research and debate for years to come.

LABOUR BEATS THE UNIONIST DRUM

The main themes of Labour's campaign were signalled at the party's Scottish conference in Oban in November 2006. Labour was then trailing the SNP by five points according to an ICM opinion poll for **The Scotsman**. The conference was dominated by vehement attacks on the SNP led by Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and John Reid. These assaults focused on arguments that Scotland and the rest of Britain were interdependent, viscerally linked economically, culturally, and socially. Reid made a particularly extravagant

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claim that independence would hamper the fight against terrorism.¹ Jack McConnell, while making dutiful swipes at the SNP, concentrated on laying out his policy agenda for the election. This centred around education and a pledge that by 2012 no 16 or 17-year old would leave school without being engaged in education, work, or vocational training.²

But in contrast to the previous Holyrood elections, when new Labour shone as a bright new force in politics, Labour now looked tired and tarnished. The aftermath of the Iraq invasion and Iraq's descent into civil war exacted a heavy toll on the party's credibility. The police investigation into whether Blair and his aides effectively sold peerages in return for Labour party donations and loans, which had been prompted by a complaint from the SNP Western Isles MP Angus MacNeil, blew away much of new Labour's claims to probity. Blair's decision to renew Britain's nuclear deterrent and build a new fleet of Trident submarines played into the SNP's campaign strategy as did his evident desire to build a new generation of nuclear power stations.

Some of these matters produced damaging fall-out in Scotland. In December 2006, McConnell was forced to sack Communities minister Malcolm Chisholm from his cabinet after he voted with the SNP over the renewal of Trident.³ His replacement by the deputy environment minister Rhona Brankin drew, according to newspaper reports, a particularly splenetic reaction from some Labour MSPs, indicative of McConnell's lack of authority over his group.⁴

The cash-for-peerages probe revealed serious divisions within the Labour hierarchy. One of those quizzed twice by police was John McTernan, Blair's political secretary. McTernan came north in early 2007 to work on the Holyrood campaign. This was evidently not welcomed by McConnell who, on becoming first minister, had sacked McTernan, formerly a special advisor to

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/6184412.stm>.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6182762.stm>.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/6178804.stm>.

² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/6182500.stm>.

³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/6201737.stm>.

⁴ http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/newspapers/sunday_times/scotland/article1292840.21546t-1ece.21546t-1

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Henry McLeish.⁵ McConnell, fearful that Labour's campaign would get sucked into the scandal, tried and failed to get McTernan sacked from the campaign team. Reports suggested that divisions deepened when McConnell presented his election plans at a Downing Street meeting with Blair, Brown and Douglas Alexander, the Scottish Secretary.

Things were even worse on the organisational front. Campaigners sent from England to assist their Scottish counterparts were aghast to discover that in most of Labour's Scottish seats there were no records of canvass returns from previous elections. With the SNP riding high in the polls, it meant that previously safe seats such as East Kilbride were in danger of being captured by the SNP and Labour did not have the organisational wherewithal to prevent such losses. One campaigner was quoted as saying: 'It was a nightmare. No work had been done. Everyone thought these seats were safe and that we didn't need to worry. We basically had to start from scratch finding out who our voters were.'⁶

Thus a party with its hierarchy divided, its strategy unclear, and its organisation in tatters, staggered to the election starting line. Though the electorate were clearly disenchanted with Blair and it was extremely dubious, to say the least, if he was much of an asset, the party determined that he and Brown would lead the assault on the SNP and independence.

Exactly how effective this would be was, however, open to doubt. The SNP had adopted Labour's strategy for defusing Conservative attacks on its plans for devolution in the 1997 election by promising that, in government, it would publish a white paper on independence and then hold a referendum. As with Labour in 1997, it meant that people could vote for the SNP and its manifesto for running a devolved Scotland without worrying whether this meant Scotland becoming independent.

Labour strategists, however, took the view that the SNP and independence were so inextricably linked that this was a detail. The strategy of stoking up fear of what an SNP victory might mean reached its zenith on April 3 when

⁵ http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4156/is_20070204/ai_n17198983.

⁶ Barnes, Eddie, and MacLeod, Murdo. 'How Jack lost the battle' **Scotland on Sunday**. 6 May 2007.
<http://scotlandonsunday.scotsman.com/opinion.cfm?id=700572007>

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Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Jack McConnell held a joint press conference in Glasgow. They published a document – **Economic Stability at Risk – The SNP's sums don't add up** – which asserted that the Nationalists' economic plans would mean Scotland would be spending about £12.9 billion more than would be raised in taxes. This sum was arrived at by taking the Scottish Executive's estimate of an £11.2bn deficit in 2004-05, adding the SNP's spending and tax pledges (estimated at £1.8bn in reserved areas and £2bn in devolved areas), adding a further £1.5bn estimated to be the loss of economies of scale in such things as defence and social security, and then subtracting £3.6bn in oil and gas revenues. This, it was said, was the equivalent of £5000 per Scottish household, the sum in extra taxes Scots would have to pay to finance independence and the SNP's programmes.

It was all strongly reminiscent of Labour's campaign in the first 1999 Scottish elections which featured the 'Divorce is an expensive business' slogan. Labour strategists and many commentators believed it had been an effective slogan, but it was heavily criticised as a disturbingly negative campaign which contrasted jarringly with the hopeful optimism of the 1997 referendum campaign that devolution would usher in new times of new and more positive politics. But Labour's 2007 campaign managers were unapologetic. One was quoted in **The Scotsman** as saying: 'In this campaign, after 10 years in government, it is fear, not hope, that will win.'⁷ The remark was a telling comment on the unpopularity of Tony Blair and the Labour government which Scottish Labour had to overcome.

The positive agenda that McConnell wished to promote came to the fore at Labour's manifesto launch on 10 April. He spoke with passion about education and unveiled a radical set of proposals to increase spending on education by £1.2bn over the next three years at the expense of spending increases on other areas. The number of modern apprenticeships would be doubled to 50,000 by 2011, language and science teaching would be expanded in primary and secondary schools, skills academies introduced, the school leaving age raised to 18, class sizes reduced, and higher and further education spending increased.⁸

⁷ MacMahon, Peter. 'Labour big guns banking on £13bn fear factor in election' **The Scotsman**, 4 April 2007. <http://thescotsmen.scotsmen.com/index.cfm?id=517982007>.

⁸ <http://www.holyrood.com/content/view/155/10540/>.

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Unfortunately for Labour, the media was more interested in council tax. McConnell said he would halve and then abolish the water rate element of council tax for pensioners and ensure no above inflation increases for council tax for the next four years. But he also proposed changes to the top and bottom council tax bands: some of those in the top band H would pay a little bit more and some of those in the bottom band A would pay a bit less. The media demanded details. He could give none. In fact, the policy was nonsense because there are only 11,750 houses in band H, but 566,232 homes in band A.⁹ So in order to give Band A taxpayers, say a £100 reduction, Band H taxpayers would have to pay £5000 more. Speculation about this dominated reporting of the manifesto and questioning of Labour spokespeople for days afterwards. And because Labour could not produce figures to back its own policy, the figures that it produced on SNP policies were undermined.¹⁰

TIME FOR CHANGE IN THE SNP

The SNP's campaign can be traced back to June 2005 when Angus Robertson, MP for Moray, gathered a group of senior party people and supporters at the Craiggellachie Hotel on Speyside. It included bright young people such as the party's former communications director Kevin Pringle, then working for Scottish Gas, and business, public affairs and academic supporters. The aim was to work out where the party had been going wrong and how to put it right. Reports say that the meeting agreed that the party had to stop talking to itself at election time, should concentrate less on protest campaigns and more on positive actions, and should present itself as a party ready for government. The most important factors contributing to previous poor performances were felt to be lack of money and poor communications. Five priorities for action were identified – communications, governance, message, organisation and resource – and teams of staff and politicians were allocated to each. Under governance,

⁹ http://www.saa.gov.uk/general_statistics.php?REPORT_NAME=ct_band#report_list.

¹⁰ Linklater, Magnus. 'Being a maths teacher doesn't mean you have all the answers.' *The Times*. 11 April 2007. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/magnus_linklater/article1637353.ece.

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the main message was: 'To be ready for government before 3 May 2007, and in government thereafter.'¹¹

Many of the tactics adopted by the SNP seem to have been adopted from the New Labour 1997 election guide. Indeed, some of it was written by a former New Labour supporter, Gordon Guthrie, who had switched allegiance to the SNP. A computer expert, he had constructed the software for a programme called Activate, which Labour used to identify and track existing and potential supporters. He now built an enhanced version for the SNP. **Scotland on Sunday** reported that he wrote a report for the party, advocating a change of culture. With one exception, the main thrust of SNP election campaigns has been to convert people to the idea of independence by promising that a host of good things – better pensions, lower tax bills, better hospitals – will become possible if only people vote for independence. But, since independence has never appealed to, at best, a third of the electorate, the strategy has failed. In the 2003 Holyrood elections, the SNP downplayed independence and concentrated on policies for devolution, a strategy that did not work either. Guthrie wrote that that the SNP should maintain its traditional base and add to them by constructing a 'coalition of interests'. He advocated: 'The party needs to position itself in the political landscape by understanding and reaching out to segments of the electorate, peeling layers of support from other parties, and binding them into an electoral coalition for independence.'¹²

This was the main tactic of New Labour in 1997. It reached out to groups traditionally hostile to it, such as the money managers of the City of London, wooed them assiduously in what the Tories derisively called the 'prawn cocktail' circuit, and adopted reassuring policies such as promising to stick to Conservative spending plans for the first two years of a Labour government. The SNP adopted the same tactic, devoting a lot of time and effort to talking to Scottish business and promising to use the powers of devolution to make radical cuts in business rates for small businesses. But it did not attempt to hide independence either. Indeed it tried to use independence to enhance its business-friendly credentials by promising that an independence Scotland would cut corporation tax to 20 per cent.

¹¹ Gordon, Tom. 'Wrestling with Independence' *Sunday Times Scotland*, 6 May 2007.

¹² Barnes, Eddie, and MacLeod, Murdo. 6 May 2007, *op. cit.*

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These efforts paid big dividends. In October 2006, the SNP announced that Sir Tom Farmer, founder of the Kwik-Fit chain of car exhaust and tyre fitters, had donated £100,000 in order to ensure a level spending playing field in the campaign. That was followed by £500,000 from Brian Souter, chairman of Stagecoach. Although Souter was a long-time Nationalist, Sir Tom's previous political leanings were towards Thatcherism. Apart from enabling the SNP to claim some heavyweight business backing, the donations meant the party reached its target of £1.5m to spend on the election.

The reaching-out strategy went much wider than that. The potency of bridge tolls to shift votes had emerged during the Dunfermline West by-election in February 2006. Labour lost an 11,000-vote majority on a 16 per cent swing to the Liberal Democrats. Forth Road Bridge tolls emerged as the biggest of the local issues dominating the campaign.¹³ So the SNP made abolishing tolls on the Forth and Tay road bridges a campaign pledge. In Ayr and Lanarkshire, the Labour/Lib Dem Executive had accepted health board plans to close Hospital accident and emergency units to much local outrage. The SNP promised to stop any such closures. Controversially, the SNP, discovering that there was a significant body of opposition to plans to spend £1.2 billion on trams and an airport rail link in Edinburgh, performed a U-turn while in opposition and promised to scrap the trams and find a cheaper airport rail link. This had the handy by-product of meeting with approval in the SNP heartlands in the north and north-east of Scotland where voters have a strong suspicion that they are losing out on the benefits of devolution while central Scotland is cashing in.

Not all of this manoeuvring had the desired result. Labour held on to its Lanarkshire seats, but unexpectedly lost Livingston to the SNP where hospital services were also an issue. Tolls helped the SNP win Central Fife, but the Liberal Democrats used their by-election experience to win Dunfermline West from Labour. In Edinburgh, the SNP's Kenny MacAskill wrested away Edinburgh East and Musselburgh. While opposition to trams played a part, so did opposition to East Lothian Council's plans to floodlight Musselburgh's race course and Labour's selection of the council's group leader as its candidate.

Some of the SNP's policies did not need changing, but re-modelling. The party has long opposed property-based local council taxes and favoured a local

¹³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/4700238.stm>.

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income tax. This has always been open to attacks from opponents claiming that the additional income tax would be penalising. In March 2007, the SNP announced that a fixed rate of 3p extra on the basic rate of income tax would be applied across Scotland, dropping the idea of local power to vary the rate. They also said that council tax bills would be frozen for two years until they were able to introduce the new tax.¹⁴

Although the idea that this would be a local tax was a clear weakness, the new format of an old policy had the merit of simplicity. It looks to have had a definite appeal to pensioners, for whom council tax is especially burdensome. And while income earners might have reason to be worried, it is reasonable to assume that the policy might appeal to middle-income earners being burdened, not just with rising council tax bills, but also with rising mortgage payments as a result of interest rate rises. In the many poster sites which the SNP procured during the election, and on leaflets distributed with newspapers, the party further reduced its message to that used effectively by the Scottish Socialist Party in 2003 – the simple, and effective, headline that council tax would be abolished.

The middle-income middle classes were further wooed with promises to abolish the post-graduation student endowment charge of about £2000 per student and to eventually reintroduce a student grant system. This also served to reinforce the party's already quite strong support amongst young people.

The New Labourisation of the SNP extended to instructing candidates on how to establish a rapport with voters by mirroring their posture, body language, and speech patterns, and by maintaining eye contact. Salmond undertook his own makeover, dropping aggressive and derisive verbal assaults on opponents in favour of more restrained and light language in an attempt to appear more like a statesman than a smart alec heckler.¹⁵ Recalling that encounters with the media during the 1999 election had been little short of disastrous, with reporters finding some damaging element to write about after every press conference, Salmond held only two press conferences in the campaign – to launch the manifesto and to make a last appeal to voters.

¹⁴ MacMahon, Peter. 'SNP unveil scheme to replace council tax.' *The Scotsman*. 15 March 2007. <http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=227&id=405512007>

¹⁵ Gordon, Tom. *Op cit*.

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One tactic from the 1999 campaign survived. In that election, realising that the party's messages were not getting past media hostility, the SNP resorted to printing its own newspaper to contact voters directly. This cost a small fortune but was a miserable failure. In 2007, direct contact was done much more professionally, using targeted mailings full of individualised messages addressing each voter's concerns. These voters were identified through the Activate programme which was linked to a call centre. This centre was making 25,000 calls a week in the weeks before the campaign and the call rate was upped to 125,000 per week when the campaign began. The SNP's highly energetic network of activists backed this up with leaflet delivery and doorstep contact.¹⁶

But it was planning that emerged as the key feature of the SNP's campaign. The entire campaign was mapped out minutely long before it began with the aim of controlling the agenda. Planning for the final seven days – regarded as critical by political strategists because it is when wavering voters make up their minds – was begun six months previously. One feature was a series of adverts in newspapers, local and national, with a range of people – pensioners, artists, businesspeople – endorsing the SNP. The idea was to convey to waverers that they were not alone in wanting to vote SNP, indeed that it was the fashionable thing to do.¹⁷

The most striking example of this planning came just before the campaign proper. In mid-March, Tony Blair visited Edinburgh and Aberdeen to deliver messages to businesspeople and the electorate that electing the SNP would be disastrous for the economy. But, on the morning of the visit, **The Scotsman** had a scoop – a letter from Sir George Mathewson, a former immensely successful chairman of the Royal Bank of Scotland, endorsing the SNP. He wrote: 'It's difficult to forecast the future, but I see no circumstance where independence would be a serious [economic] disadvantage' and dismissed Labour and the Liberal Democrats as having a 'lack of high quality leadership.' Blair struck back, saying Mathewson was 'self-indulgent and absurd', a charge

¹⁶ *Scottish National Party press release. 'Labour Campaign in disarray as they admit council tax isn't fair.'* 10 April 2007. <http://www.snp.org/press-releases/2006/labour-campaign-disarray-as-they-admit-council-tax-isn-t-fair/>

¹⁷ *MacDonell, Hamish. 'Cash and control – the SNP's recipe for campaign success.'* **The Scotsman**. 5 May 2007. <http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=757&id=698312007>

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which looked a little ridiculous given that Mathewson is perhaps the most successful Scottish businessman of his generation.¹⁸ The letter, evidently agreed in advance between Salmond and Mathewson, a long-time Nationalist sympathizer, succeeded in grabbing the headline and deflecting Blair's attack.

The SNP's response to Labour's assaults on Nationalist finances was subtly different to previous campaigns when they did their best to trade numbers. This tactic had presented journalists with a mass of competing balance sheets, jostling estimates and counter estimates, and rival columns of numbers. Many journalists did not profess to understand them and even fewer voters would have. As those elections took place at times when the electorate had been given little reason to distrust Labour, that appeared to be good enough reason not to believe the SNP. But in this campaign, the SNP had produced their counter estimate of the state of Scotland's public finances early with two publications in 2006.¹⁹ These reiterated the SNP's claims that an independent Scotland would be among the wealthiest countries in the world and that, when oil was included, Scotland's public finances were in balance. A few commentators noted that this latter claim referred to a balance sheet drawn up for the year 2006-07 when there was next to no statistical material available on which such an estimate could be based. They suggested that, given the source, there was rather more reason to believe that these accounts were politically biased than were the Scottish Executive figures which the SNP routinely attacked as 'fiddled'.²⁰ Having done that exercise, the SNP resisted any temptation to do more number-crunching in the election campaign, preferring to respond to Labour's numbers with assertions that they were 'tired old arguments' and even older negative campaigning. It also responded with quotes from articles written by economists sympathetic to the Nationalist case, saying that these 'totally demolished Labour's absurd claims'.²¹ This was more than sufficient reply for most journalists, grateful that they were not being asked to grapple with more

¹⁸ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/6456319.stm>.

¹⁹ *Scottish National Party, Edinburgh. 'The true wealth of the nation' August 2006, and 'Scotland in Surplus – past, present and future' December 2006. Both available at www.snp.org*

²⁰ *See for example: Midwinter, A. 'An audit of the SNP's accounting' **The Scotsman**, 9 February, 2007. <http://thes Scotsman.scotsman.com/index.cfm?id=197642007>.*

²¹ *MacMahon P. 4 April, op. cit.*

numbers. And this time the SNP's rhetoric chimed a lot more with an electorate which, post-Iraq War, was much more inclined to distrust Labour.

THE CONSERVATIVES BECOME POLITICAL PLAYERS AGAIN

Unlike previous election campaign, the Conservatives chose not to major on the threat to the Union posed by the SNP. Leader Annabel Goldie did make a big 'state of the union' speech a week before polling day in which she criticised the SNP for seeking to close doors for Scots that had been opened by the Union. But she also critiqued Labour and the LibDems as an equal danger to the union because their incompetence in running devolved Scotland had made people question the devolution settlement.²² And one of the party's election slogans – delivery not divorce – also attacked independence. But this was relatively low-key stuff compared to previous elections.

More interesting was Goldie's positioning of the Conservative Party. Since no other party was even remotely likely to do a coalition deal with it, it faced the prospect of being permanently out in the cold and serving little purpose other than being a punchbag for opponents. But in March 2006 at the Scottish Conservative conference, Goldie condemned coalition government as a failure and broached the prospect of minority government. She said her aim was to displace the SNP to become the principal opposition party, and added: 'With proportional representation, no one party will have an overall majority, and there is no reason why a minority administration cannot govern, but then that means the biggest opposition presence is tremendously influential.'²³ Later that year, the prospect of supporting a minority Labour government on an issue-by-issue basis was floated by the party.²⁴ The notion was greeted with some horror by many party members, but Goldie quietly reassured them it could have many benefits – keeping the SNP out of power, bringing the Tories in from the cold, and providing an opportunity for the Tories to have a real input into policy-making without soiling their hands with coalition politics. Labour was dismissive, but not overly so. During the summer, Margaret Curran, parliament

²² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/6593971.stm>.

²³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/4772964.stm>.

²⁴ Hutcheon, Paul. 'Tories plan pact with Labour to beat SNP' *Sunday Herald*. 4 June 2006. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4156/is_20060604/ai_n16453242.

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minister, had visited New Zealand to learn how its minority government worked. Her report seemed to enthuse McConnell, who began privately discussing the prospects for a Labour minority government.²⁵

This promising positioning was blown off course, however, in March 2007 when the **Daily Record** published a four-page memo written the previous June by a former MSP, David Mundell, who moved to Westminster in 2005 and became shadow Scottish Secretary as the sole Scottish Tory MP. In the memo, Mundell criticised Goldie for her 'lack of activity and strategic thought'. He swiped at the MSPs for their lack of action and lack of thinkers, and called for Peter Duncan, the Scottish party chairman, to be replaced.²⁶ This was meat-and-drink for the other parties but the memo was less damaging than it might have been thanks to the party rallying around Goldie, isolating Mundell and forcing him to recant.

For the duration of the campaign, Goldie concentrated on what she termed 'bread-and-butter' issues such as law and order and support for families, her touring round the country in the pre-election months having convinced her that constitutional matters were way down the voters' priority list. The talk of minority government seemed to pay off during the campaign in that the Tories' proposals were listened to more intently than in previous campaigns, and Goldie proved during televised leaders' debates to be more relaxed and mischievously humorous than her matronly image suggested.

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS STRUGGLE TO ESCAPE THE CONSTITUTIONAL BOX

'There's something exciting happening in Scottish politics ...' began a Scottish Liberal Democrats' election broadcast. What could this exciting thing be? Poverty disappearing? The economy roaring ahead? No, it was Nicol Stephen, name-checked six times, and on screen for two of the two and a half minutes of

²⁵ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/6053154.stm>.

²⁶ Gardham, Magnus. 'Scots Tories are clueless'. **Daily Record**. 8 March 2007. http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/tm_headline=scots-tories-are-clueless&method=full&objectid=18721189&siteid=66633-name_page.html.

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the film and being talked about for the remaining 30 seconds.²⁷ The party's campaign had a big problem in this election – its leader was the least known so much of the campaign was devoted to building him up as a dynamic, forceful, vigorous, personality when in reality he is rather shy and diffident. 'I need to build my profile,' he admitted with admirable frankness in an interview.²⁸ It also appeared to have a problem with its federal UK leader, Sir Menzies Campbell. Though a Scottish MP, he was evidently judged to have minimal appeal to Scottish voters. The election broadcast mentioned above was voiced over by the former leader, Charles Kennedy, who also appeared in the campaign much more than Sir Menzies.

In common with most Lib Dem campaigns, the party chose high-mindedly to stay out of the mire of negative campaigning, concentrating on a positive presentation of their policies. In an 87-page manifesto, there was a lot of them, the boldest of which was an aim for Scotland to convert entirely to 'clean, green energy – the renewables powerhouse of Europe.'²⁹ The manifesto set out a calendar of action for the first seven months of a Lib Dem government. June was to be about new opportunities for youngsters including an hour a day of physical exercise; July would see new seven-year sentences for knife crime and a tougher regime of community sentences; in August an extra 1000 police officers would somehow appear to cut crime; September would see targets set for achieving 100 per cent renewable energy; in October a start would be made to building 100 new local health centres and the recruitment of 2000 extra nurses; in November the poundage for business rates would be cut to below levels in England; and in December plans would be implemented to cut class sizes, build 250 new schools and employ 1000 extra teachers.

It was a not unreasonable assumption that Labour and the SNP could be relied upon to knock lumps out of each other, but would lay off the Lib Dems because they were potential coalition partners. So, armed with a suitably attractive manifesto, the Lib Dems could pick up votes equally from

²⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnPSi9emC-M&mode=user&search=>

²⁸ Cowing, Emma, and MacMahon, Peter. 'Can Stephen wave goodbye to anonymity?' *The Scotsman*. 21 April, 2007.
<http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=783&id=613402007>

²⁹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/6542737.stm>

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disenchanted Labour supporters who could not stomach the thought of voting SNP, and from would-be SNP voters who could not tolerate voting Labour.

The SNP certainly laid off assaulting the Lib Dems, but the party did not reap the rewards it hoped for. This was mainly because, through televised leaders' debates and newspaper reports, the Lib Dems were constantly asked whether they would support a referendum on independence. That had the effect of confirming that the SNP were the only real challengers to Labour and also put the Lib Dems on the back foot. It did not seem to matter how many times Stephen said that no, his party did not support a referendum on independence because they did not believe in independence, he kept on being asked about it. Sometimes the pot was stirred by his own members, such as when Donald Gorrie, a retiring MSP, said that they should never say never to a referendum.³⁰ Sometimes he kept it going himself such as when he ducked a question on whether his opposition to a referendum was a deal-breaker, replying: 'Well, let's see what the result is on the 3rd of May.' Salmond, appearing on the same programme, stirred things up further by suggesting, as he did throughout the campaign, that this meant there was scope for a coalition agreement, perhaps through a multi-option referendum with choices on independence and enhanced devolution.³¹ The net effect of this concentration on coalitions and referendums was to obscure the rest of the Lib Dem agenda, and the party's campaign never really got past the first hurdle.

DOWN TO THE WIRE

For about 10 minutes as the sun went down on Friday 4 May, Jack McConnell thought he had pulled off a last gasp victory. It all hinged on the last count – for the Highland regional seats. Word came through that Labour had won four and the SNP none. It would have given Labour 47 seats and the SNP 45. But then the SNP demanded that the returning officer recalculate the seats. He did so, and this time the result was Labour three seats and the SNP two. Salmond was ahead by one seat.

Still, it was a damned close run thing. The SNP outpolled Labour in the constituency vote by just 0.7 per cent and in the regional list vote by 1.8 per

³⁰ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/6575105.stm>

³¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/politics_show/6587793.stm

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cent. Considering that the SNP began the campaign with a five to six point lead in the opinion polls, Labour's campaign was a success minus the icing and the jam filling on the cake. Of course, this turnaround was eclipsed by the triumph of the SNP. This was undoubtedly the best funded, the best organised, the best planned and the most controlled campaign of the SNP's history, and beat the other parties' 2007 campaigns hands down for professionalism. It won 21 constituency seats, the most it has ever done. It won Labour heartland seats, such as Central Fife, Labour since 1910 apart from a brief period being held by a Communist. It ousted two Lib Dem ministers from their constituencies. But is it a big step forward to independence?

Once the euphoria or shock, depending on your point of view, has faded, the result begins to look less impressive. True, the SNP increased its share of the constituency vote by 9 percentage points and its regional vote by 10.1 points. But despite all the advantages it had – an unpopular Labour government and prime minister, disillusionment with Labour's performance at Holyrood – Labour's constituency vote fell by only 2.4 points and its regional vote by 0.1 points. The Conservative vote held steady in the constituencies and fell by just 1.6 points in the regional lists. The Lib Dems actually improved marginally, up 0.8 points in the constituency vote and down 0.5 points in the regional vote. It adds up to a 1.6 percentage point erosion of the major UK parties' constituency vote and a 2.2 point erosion of their regional vote. Where Labour managed to rush in last-minute constituency organisational support, such as in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth and Glasgow Kelvin, it held seats it was expected to lose.

Most of the SNP gain appears to have come from the collapse of minor party support, in particular following the self-destruction of the Scottish Socialist Party in the Court of Session. Its constituency vote fell by 6.2 points and its regional vote by 6.1 points, hardly compensated by the new Solidarity Party which gained just 1.5 per cent of the regional vote. The Greens also lost 2.9 points from their regional vote. These factors suggest that if the three main opposition parties can improve their organisation to match that of the SNP's, the Nationalists may struggle to retain many of their gains.

Opinion polling also suggested that independence became less and less popular as the campaign wore on. In the pre-election period, polls which asked basically whether people were for or against independence showed more people in favour than against. But in the final days of the campaign,

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questioning by ICM in this format showed only 35 per cent for independence and 55 per cent against.³² Again, pre-election polling which gave people a choice between independence and devolution showed that between 30-35 per cent favoured independence and 45-50 per cent for devolution. But a Populus poll for **The Times** published on 20 April showed only 22 per cent backing complete independence. Even amongst SNP voters, 47 per cent wanted a devolved parliament with more powers, more than the 45 per cent who wanted independence.³³ Clearly, Labour's attack on independence had a big effect. It seems reasonable to conclude that the SNP won the election, but lost the constitutional argument.

INTO AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

After 3 May, Scottish politics moved into uncharted waters for modern British politics – minority government. Unlike the first two coalition administrations, this meant that Salmond as first minister could not announce a legislative programme in the first few weeks of his government. The parliamentary arithmetic means that if Labour is minded to oppose a particular measure, the agreement of the Greens and either the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats will be needed to get a measure passed. It seemed certain that the summer parliamentary recess would be hard work for Salmond's ministerial team as they attempted to negotiate Conservative and/or Liberal Democrat agreement on a range of legislative priorities. The SNP, which has spent its life opposing, protesting, and scorning its Unionist opponents, now has to make a hurried conversion to being negotiators and compromisers. That will not come easy, neither to the SNP nor to those with whom it must now be friendly.

Tensions within the SNP, which ruptured it during the 1999-2003 session, still abound. The parliamentary group contains fundamentalists for whom the sole purpose of being in government is to advance the cause of independence and gradualists who reckon that their main job is simply to make Scotland a better place. It also contains people whose pro-business agenda must stick in the

³² [http://www.icmresearch.co.uk/reviews/2007/Scotsman per cent20- per cent20May/scotsman-may-2007.asp](http://www.icmresearch.co.uk/reviews/2007/Scotsman%20per%20cent20-%20per%20cent20May/scotsman-may-2007.asp)

³³ Millar, Bill. 'How the SNP could win and lose at the same time.' **The Times**. 20 April 2007. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article1680124.ece>

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throats of the socialists in the group. Managing these tensions and maintaining SNP unity will not be easy.

This implies that the SNP's grip on power is fragile, and its ability to legislate, given that the opposition can defeat it any time they choose to unite, even more so. But Salmond has some powerful cards. That he is first minister and has presided over the party's most successful election campaign gives him more authority over his party than perhaps any SNP leader has had. The opposition parties also have to adjust to the completely new reality of minority government. When should they choose to influence legislation and insert some of their ideas, and when should they choose to oppose and defeat? There is no rulebook for this. Many mistakes may be made before they get the hang of it. Salmond also has the power of the civil service machine behind him, which, while it is not infallible, is still formidable and gives ministers, if they are astute enough to use it well, a considerable advantage.

The opposition parties, while in theory having the voting whip hand, may not be able to use it at will. Each is aware that a general election is due in 2009-10 and each has a different agenda to advance. For the Conservatives it represents a golden opportunity to come in from the cold and to demonstrate that they are once again political players and no longer the pariahs. The Liberal Democrats need to re-find their distinctive identity and move away from Labour, which needs to re-assert its previous dominance of Scottish politics. As the Labour-SNP divide is perhaps the bitterest of all the divisions in Scottish politics, its inclination is likely to be to oppose everything the SNP tries to do. Perhaps one of the oddest outcomes of this election is that the SNP, which has written a ban on having anything to do with the Tories into its constitution, comes to find them as its most reliable ally in the parliament. That will impose another tension on the SNP.

Will it make for a different type of politics? It should do. The first two terms were characterised by a Labour/Lib Dem coalition with an overall majority. The coalition settled its programme in a partnership agreement within days of the election and then set about implementing it in a rather traditional Westminster majoritarian fashion to which the opposition, principally the SNP, reacted in an even more traditional oppositional style. Minority government will still have some of those characteristics, though this time the government will have to negotiate issue by issue bilaterally with the Greens and one other party. But the chance for the two remaining parties to change the initial legislative terms during the committee stages of bills is considerable. That in

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turn makes the opportunity for interest groups outside parliament much greater. This should make for a more open and transparent legislative process.

The big question is: will it last? I think it will certainly endure up to the general election, and perhaps even for the full four years. Although the opposition have the ability to pass a vote of no confidence in the first minister and then, by not electing a replacement, the ability to force an election, it is a nuclear option capable of inflicting as much damage on those who press the button as on the intended target. There is little point in even thinking about it if the SNP continues to be popular. The general election looks like the first serious chance to assess whether it is or is not. Given that there has been a pattern for the SNP to fare less well in UK elections than in Scottish elections, this next election has the capacity to be a turning point.

The only sure thing that can be said about the next four years is that they are completely unpredictable. The SNP might maintain its discipline or fall apart. Labour looks likely to have a Scottish leadership contest that may prove renewing or bitterly divisive. The Tories may emerge as major political players once more, especially if they win the next general election.

Will the SNP in government make Scots warm to independence? It is the SNP's toughest task and remains the most improbable outcome. The title of this essay is adapted from the label on a period in mid-16th century Scotland following a decision by the Scottish parliament to accept, after the death of James V, a proposal that Henry VIII's son Edward, then aged 6, should be betrothed to James' daughter Mary, then six months old. The Scottish parliament then changed its mind and an angry Henry sent armies north which ravaged much of the Scottish lowlands. This only served to convince the Scots that they were right to reject Henry's plan for a dynastic union. The Earl of Huntly commented that Scots 'did not so much dislike the [English] match, as the rough manner of wooing.' In this election, it seems to me that the Scots did not so much dislike the smooth manner of the SNP's wooing, as the SNP's main proposition.

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