

## **THE YEAR AT WESTMINSTER: PARLIAMENTARY SESSION 1993-1994**

*Iain Macwhirter*

### **A REORGANISATION TOO FAR**

This was the session when it all went sour for the Scottish Secretary Ian Lang. His enhanced political authority, derived from his success in the 1992 general election, was dissipated in an ill-thought-out and largely unnecessary attempt to restructure Scottish local government and commercialise Scottish water. He ignored the lesson of local reorganisations of the past: that, like new taxes, attempts to redraw the council map invariably make things worse. And the reformers invariably get the blame.

Mr Lang should have resisted pressure from the Treasury and Whitehall departments to take Scottish water out of council control and go for single-tier local government ahead of England. The Treasury wanted Scottish water privatised and brought into line with the south. The Environment department wanted Scotland to be a proving ground for the unitary authorities it planned in England. All this is well documented. Leaked Scottish Office briefing papers published in **The Scotsman** (3 June 1994) revealed the extent to which Lang had to fight to prevent an outright sell-off of water.

But Scotland does not like being used as a guinea pig, as the ill-fated Community Charge demonstrated. The poll tax was introduced in Scotland a year ahead of England, with disastrous consequences - not least to Baroness Thatcher, who eventually had to go down with her 'flagship'. But history was allowed to repeat itself. Conservative electoral support has evaporated as a result, creating a crisis of legitimacy in Scotland, which could rapidly turn into a crisis of the Union itself.

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### *Scottish Affairs*

The final irony is that now, after all the unpleasantness in Scotland over the Local Government Etc. (Scotland) Bill, enthusiasm for local authority reform is now waning rapidly south of the Border, as MPs and councillors there see what anomalies and contradictions have been caused north of it. But there's no pulling out now. Ian Lang, or his successor as Scottish Secretary will have to live with the consequences for many years, as Scottish Conservatism is drained of yet more of its dwindling public support. And the SNP and Labour squabble over its corpse.

#### **TILTING AT LEVIATHANS**

Of course, the Scottish Secretary would insist that he was in no way compelled by London to alter the control of Scottish water or refashion the local map. No Westminster poodle he! Mr Lang - we are assured - needed little persuading that it was time to confront the 'bureaucratic leviathans' with their extravagant budgets and corrupt practices. He was convinced that it was time to bring Scotland's water and sewerage system into the twentieth century, and the cost - some five billion - could only come, he believed, from the private sector.

Moreover, to maintain his administration's political momentum, and prevent the constitutional question finding its way back onto the agenda, he was no doubt told by his political advisors that he needed radical initiatives - though preferably not ones likely to foster too much radicalism amongst Scottish voters. His imaginative 'Taking Stock' proposals of the previous year had proved perhaps a little too imaginative. Some Conservatives privately feared that the reforms to the Scottish Grand Committee might create a kind of rolling recall parliament which would tour Scotland stirring up discontent.

Fortunately for Mr Lang, the congenitally fractious Scottish opposition parties remained incapable of seizing even this initiative, and he was able to let the results of the stock-taking exercise quietly gather dust. (see **The Scotsman** 8 February 1994).

And so, instead, there was local government reform - a project for which Lang could claim, with some slight justification, that there was a cross-party consensus, since Labour had promised to scrap the Regions if they won the last election. However, the Opposition angrily refused to join Mr Lang's putative consensus pointing out that they had envisaged setting up unitary authorities only after the creation of a Scottish parliament had rendered the Regional tier redundant. Labour, Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National

### *The Year at Westminster*

Party were resolutely opposed to attempts to take water out of local authority control, which Labour insisted was a prelude to privatisation.

Nor was there any obvious enthusiasm amongst the Scottish public. It was after all only twenty years - a short time in politics - since the last upheaval in Scottish local government had created the unloved Regions and Districts Lang sought to unify. The Wheatley reforms had been a valiant attempt to create units of local government large enough to manage sprawling services like transport and planning, and small enough to deliver more personal services like housing and social work. But the 1974 councils were never loved by the Scots, many of whom remained emotionally attached to the old patchwork quilt that preceded them. Moreover, the new Regions proved to be bureaucratic and remote. Encompassing half the Scottish population, Strathclyde Region summed up the problem: too big to make local sense, and too small to act as a Scotland-wide 'regional' government (though sometimes it has elected to stand in for one). The Regions were far from ideal. But then, the local status quo always looks irrational and inefficient - until you try to change it.

Were the opposition being disingenuous in suddenly rediscovering the virtues of the Regions just when they were about to be chopped? A little, perhaps, since units like Strathclyde were widely thought to be unmanageable and had few friends. But recognising the limitations of the existing structure is one thing; trying to change it is quite another. Labour would only have restructured Scottish local government as part of a wider constitutional reform involving devolution and reform of Westminster. There was deep suspicion - extending beyond the opposition parties - that the government's primary motivation was not a desire for good government, or even to save money, but a Thatcherite distaste for competing powerbases. The Scottish Regions were - and remain - Labour strongholds, the Tories holding none of them, and were constant reminders of the government's continuing failure to win the hearts and minds of the Scots.

The details of Mr Lang's local authority reforms have been examined in previous issues of **Scottish Affairs**, and I do not propose to go into them here. Suffice to say that there was widespread criticism that they amounted to a gerrymandering of local boundaries to create Conservative 'safe havens' in places like Stirling and Eastwood. The reforms were sold as an efficient and cheap alternative to the unwieldy and bureaucratic Regions. Yet it is far from clear that government forecasts of 'efficiency savings' will materialise. The Scottish Office has had constantly to revise downward its figures, which have dwindled to £16-60 million a year according to Alan Stewart the local

### *Scottish Affairs*

government minister (**The Scotsman** 23 February 1994). But it's far from clear that even that modest cost reduction will ever show up in reduced council tax bills. Bureaucracies have a habit of spending vast sums making themselves 'efficient'.

But what should be of more concern to Mr Lang is that the political benefits are equally hard to predict. And the problems began even before the reform bill had its first reading in the Commons.

#### **THE 'UNELECTED STATE'**

In the new year, the imminent arrival of the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Bill provoked a lively debate in Westminster over the merits of what has been called the 'unelected state'. The growth of quangos - quasi-autonomous non-governmental agencies - became, for a while, a major issue for the Opposition. The debate on them has not been resolved - such debates never are. Indeed, there was a curious irony in Labour focusing so much of their critical energy on their campaign to eradicate quangos, since it mirrored a similar Tory campaign against Labour in the late nineteen seventies.

Labour's essential charge was that the Scottish Secretary Ian Lang had been dismantling structures of democratic accountability and replacing them with unelected bodies run by politically partisan individuals appointed by him. Labour's spokesman Henry McLeish claimed that there were some two hundred and fifty bodies spending more than half of the Scottish office budget and run by five thousand political appointees or 'Tory placemen'. 'Rubbish', said Mr Lang. The Conservatives had hacked back the number of unelected executive agencies like Scottish Heritage and Scottish Homes to a mere forty seven, and the total number of quangos had been cut from 246 in 1979 to 160 now. The chairmen and others appointed are, Mr Lang insisted, democratically accountable via him and his ministers to parliament, and kept up to scratch by Citizen's Charters.

Where you stand on this issue depends largely on whether you believe this rather tenuous chain of accountability to be democratically adequate, and on how you view bodies like Local Enterprise Companies and Hospital Trusts set up under government auspices to take over what were formerly functions of local government or the central state. The government would like us to see LECs as independent business units which have no political dimension whatsoever. Critics say it is naive to believe that a significant proportion of the businessmen coopted onto them would be socialist. Hospital Trusts too are hardly politically neutral - though for every true blue Tory appointment,

### *The Year at Westminster*

Mr Lang is wont to throw back counter examples like the former Labour Minister Lord Ewing who sits on one.

From a nationalist perspective, Lang's vulnerability to charges that he is trying to subvert democratic accountability derives largely from the fact that he belongs to a party which has been consistently rejected by the Scottish people at successive elections. The largest quango of all is arguably the Scottish Office itself which, though drawn from the governing party of the UK, has little direct democratic legitimacy in Scotland. On the other hand, of course, we live in a unitary state with a unitary sovereign parliament - fount of all legitimacy. The mandate argument will not apply unless and until the Scottish people demonstrate that they want self government. Until then, the constitutional dispute is perhaps best left to constitutionalists.

However, if nothing else, the debate over the 'unelected state' registered deep disquiet in Scotland at the administration of public affairs and the erosion of the culture of the civil service, as the government turns increasingly to executive agencies, boards, opt-outs, contractings-out and outright privatisation of functions which in the past would have been undertaken by elected bodies. The Scottish Office told the Scotsman (9 February 1994) that Mr Lang has no fewer than four thousand posts in his gift, in quasi governmental agencies spending over £5 billion. It seems to violate reason for Mr Lang to argue that all these people are accountable through him. Can one man be across so many activities? Is the Scottish Secretary omnipotent and omnipresent?

Fears that the ethos of public service was being eroded by the new cult of commercial management were fuelled in January by a report from the influential Commons Public Accounts Committee. It warned that fraud, waste and corruption were becoming commonplace in the erstwhile 'public' sector and that the management reforms were overturning a 140 year tradition of public service.

It is perhaps not surprising therefore that matters which normally would only be of internal interest to civil service personnel officers, such as the Peterken affair, became major political issues at Westminster. In December 1993 it emerged that Laurence Peterken, the abrasive former chief executive of Greater Glasgow Health Board, had fallen out with the equally forceful board chairman Bill Fyfe. The resolution of the dispute involved a large sum of money and a few odd appointments. The Scottish Select Committee staged hearings on the Peterken affair in Westminster - lifting the lid on the turmoil in the public sector and the clash of commercial culture with the traditions of the civil service. But, though it prompted official apologies for the handling

### *Scottish Affairs*

of the matter by the head of the civil service in Scotland Sir Russell Hillhouse in January, the committee regrettably decided not to report on its findings. Its chairman, the Labour MP Willie McKelvey, evidently feared that any attempt to do so would lead to the committee splitting on party lines. The verdict on the Peterken affair, as with the quango question, was a resounding 'not proven'.

### **THE LONGEST BILL**

The controversy over the 'unelected state' served as a provocative curtainraiser for the main parliamentary event of the year: the passage of the Local Government Etc. (Scotland) Bill. Here was a case - in Labour eyes at least - of the government not only attempting to take yet more powers away from local government by removing water and sewerage, but also attempting to manipulate the very boundaries of local government in such a way as to enhance the representation of the Conservative party.

The Bill as published sought to scrap the nine Scottish Regions, and set up some twenty eight unitary authorities in their place, along with three new public boards to oversee water. Debated through winter and spring, it was to become one of the longest running bills in parliamentary history, taking nearly two hundred hours to complete its Commons stages - longer even than the Maastricht ratification bill the previous year. That of course was when Labour inflicted the first serious government defeat in nearly twenty years over the Social Chapter opt-out. The mastermind of the Maastricht strategy had been the then Labour Europe spokesman George Robertson, now Shadow Scottish Secretary. Many Labour MPs hoped that he might be able to work the magic again over Scottish local government reform.

However, the marathon took a long time to get off the starting line. For two weeks, Labour whips refused to cooperate with the Commons Committee on Selection in deciding the composition of the standing committee that would scrutinise the bill. This was at the height of Labour's campaign of parliamentary non-cooperation with the government, and it was the first time in Commons history that this obscure committee had been disrupted. Labour argued that the government had no right to pack the committee with English Tories, when the bill was a matter of such Scottish interest. However, unlike the SNP's Alex Salmond - who staged a one man sit-in on the committee in protest at the presence of English MPs - Labour were concerned about the inbuilt Conservative majority on the committee, rather than the racial origins of the Tories coopted onto it.

### *The Year at Westminster*

Eventually, the government whips yielded. Labour managed to get a majority of one instead of two on the committee. To Opposition cheers, the Secretary of State Ian Lang himself had to agree to stand down. To those outside the Westminster hothouse, this might have appeared a curious, even trivial achievement. But given the current instability of the Tory backbench, it opened the possibility that the government might be defeated by the rebellion of one of the four English Tory MPs who had been drafted onto the committee to make up the numbers - or indeed by one of the Scottish backbench Tories themselves. Bill Walker, the redoubtable Conservative MP for Tayside North, had been a consistent and vocal critic of the government over Maastricht, and Roger Knapman, the Tory MP for Stroud, was another Euro-rebel.

But any hopes that the Shadow Scottish Secretary might have entertained that he would be able to exploit Tory backbench divisions in the Scottish bill in the way he had during Maastricht were quickly dispelled. Mr Walker had no overall objection to the scrapping of the Regions, though he wanted some tinkering at the edges. And Roger Knapman was a privatisation enthusiast whose only objection to the plans for water were that they didn't go far enough fast enough down the privatisation road.

### **TACTICAL RETREAT**

As the committee stage of the bill got underway in earnest in February, the Government moved quickly to counter the 'gerrymandering' charge by signalling (anticipated in a **Sunday Times** piece 23 January 1994) that it intended making various concessions on the new council boundaries in Berwickshire, Ayrshire, and Aberdeenshire. As the bill ground on through the parliamentary mill, the number of councils eventually rose from twenty eight to thirty two.

But this open-mindedness did not impress the many critics of government 'gerrymandering' - such as Professor Arthur Midwinter of Strathclyde University Department of Politics. He insisted (**The Scotsman** 28 February 1994) that the ring-fencing of Stirling and Eastwood appeared to be a blatant attempt to maximise the Conservative vote in these areas, instead of creating the most efficient unitary councils by the government's own criteria. The leader writers of the Scottish press agreed with him.

But the gerrymandering charge was always a rather abstract one, and what really captured the imagination of the Scottish public - or rather aroused their wrath - was the plan for taking water out of local authority control. From the

### *Scottish Affairs*

moment debate on the bill began in the Commons, the government found themselves on the defensive over whether or not this amounted to actual privatisation. Mr Lang insisted that - despite what the prime minister had said at the despatch box about the benefits of water privatisation being brought north - he merely wanted to take water out of local authority control and into the hands of public boards, which would be able to introduce some commercial practices and finance into the management of Scottish water. Labour refused to listen to him and hammered on and on at the theme that these were merely steps towards the outright privatisation of Scottish water along English lines.

This may have been 'scaremongering' as the Scottish Secretary described it, but, if so, there were a surprising number of Scots only too willing to be scared. It was certainly effective politics. Scottish MPs reported that water had become an issue of extraordinary significance to their constituents. Some said that feelings were running higher even than they had been over the poll tax three years previously. Certainly, there were strong emotions aroused in Scotland at the prospect of what the marxisant MP for Hillhead George Galloway described at Scottish Question Time as 'God's water' being sold of to the highest bidder.

That such privatisation might never have been on the agenda is hardly the point. In politics, perceptions matter, and somehow the Scottish Office - for all its information officers and access to the means of communication - failed to get across the message that the government wanted to keep Scottish water public. Mr Lang was driven to ever more desperate attempts to quell privatisation fears. This reached new heights of absurdity on BBC Scotland's 'Scottish Lobby' programme in March, when Mr Lang said he didn't expect water to be privatised 'not just in this century, but indeed in the next one'.

The extent of Mr Lang's failure on the water issue, was brought home by Strathclyde's celebrated plebiscite on water in March. Initially, the prospect of this expensive exercise in direct democracy was regarded with some coolness in Westminster, and not just among Tory MPs. Many Labour members agreed with the Scotsman's sniffy editorial ('Down the Drain': 28 February 1994) which said that the referendum did not 'constitute the basis under which people can be expected to take an informed decision' and was, at a cost of over five hundred thousand pounds of council-tax payers' money, 'an expensive way to get into **The Guinness Book of Records** for the biggest ever local authority plebiscite'.

The day after the result was published, Labour MPs took to wearing the badge of local plebiscites with pride - quite literally, since many of them

### *The Year at Westminster*

arrived at Westminster with huge badges pinned to their lapels announcing '97%'. That was the margin by which the government's plans for water were rejected by one million Strathclyde voters in one of the most extraordinary exercises in direct democracy ever undertaken in Britain. The Strathclyde water referendum deserves its place in the record books. In a postal ballot, some seventy one percent of those eligible voted - a level normally seen only at general elections, and significantly higher than the turnout for the 1979 referendum on Scottish devolution. Senior Labour MPs were astounded, and many offered private apologies for their failure to lend wholehearted support to Strathclyde Region before the vote.

The full significance of the Strathclyde referendum is still a matter of debate. Was it just a one-off protest? Did it represent a displaced vote for home rule - a case of 'what might have been' if the post-1992 campaign for a referendum on home rule had succeeded? Was it just that the Scottish Secretary is not believed to be a man of his word? Whatever, it transformed the rather tedious proceedings in the Scottish local government bill committee, and its reverberations are still being heard .

Of course, the Scottish Secretary rejected the Strathclyde plebiscite as a political stunt. At Scottish Question Time on 22nd March, Mr Lang said that: 'Since Strathclyde council have wilfully misrepresented the government's policy, I see nothing surprising in the result'. Mr Lang's argument was that, while the referendum question may have been straightforward enough (Do you support the government's plans for water?) the voters' minds had nevertheless been infected by Labour propaganda about incipient privatisation. Since the people had been told lies, Mr Lang implied, their votes didn't count. Students of the history of the Left might recognise this as a variant of Lenin's concept of 'false consciousness', which dismissed the workers' expressed political wishes since they couldn't be expected to see the light through the fog of capitalist ideology. But it was odd coming from a Tory Scottish Secretary.

The Strathclyde plebiscite, however, carried little weight in the division lobbies of Westminster. As expected, the Tory backbench rebellion failed to materialise and the bill duly completed its Commons' stages at the end of May, after a low key Third Reading debate overshadowed by the death of John Smith. At the time of writing, the bill has yet to go to the Lords, where it may get into serious difficulties from peers who have become tired of being handed botched legislation by this government. There are already grumblings from Another Place about the logic of a reform process which promised to create less anonymous and bureaucratic authorities and then came up with a

### *Scottish Affairs*

plan for a vast sprawling authority in the Highlands bigger than Belgium and just about as remote. If there is further delay in the bill getting the Royal Assent, it could be difficult for the government to hold elections for the new councils as planned in April 1995. Then there is the difficulty of implementation. The argument about water and Scottish local government is not over yet.

#### **AFTER THE DELUGE**

What has all this told us about the state of Scottish politics? Well, that there is still a degree of radicalism around, despite the apparant collapse of the home rule debate. It also shows what can happen when a government with little popular support tries to promote radical measures in Scotland. Mr Lang may have thought that the Scottish question was a thing of the past, since the Scottish parties had signally failed to get their act together after the last general election and unite behind popular and well-argued proposals for constitutional reform. But the Scottish Secretary came crashing up against the continuing and unavoidable reality of the Scottish dimension in politics, which has always been more than the sum of the Scottish political parties.

While a lot of the criticism of the changes came from party political sources and hostile newspaper leaders, the opposition to Lang's reforms was by no means merely party political. Many Conservative councillors publicly criticised the water proposals. The Scottish Secretary failed to carry majority opinion with him in promoting his reforms. He sought instead to press them through by parliamentary force majeure, and the help of English Tory backbenchers. For this, his administration has been severely punished at the ballot box.

The referendum on water in Strathclyde itself dealt a serious blow to the authority of the government. Then, in the last ever Regional elections in May, the Conservatives came a humiliating fourth in Scotland in terms of seats won. In the European elections the next month, they failed to win any seats at all, as their vote slumped to 14%. In Glasgow, they came fifth, behind the Scottish Militant Labour candidate. In recent opinion polls, the Tories have been plumbing new depths of unpopularity, registering an historic low of 10% in the June ICM opinion poll in **The Scotsman** (7 June 1994). And in the Monklands East by-election, they attracted only 799 votes, coming fourth, and losing their deposit - their worst by-election performance since 1945. These disasters are not just 'mid-term blues'; they represent electoral meltdown.

### *The Year at Westminster*

Of course, seen one way, these votes of no confidence are of little account since the Conservatives have been used to governing in Scotland without consent for many years. Who is to say that at the next general election the Conservative might not bounce back a little against the odds, as they did in 1992? Clearly, there has been a strong element of protest in recent polls and plebiscites. But in a democracy, no political party can continue to ignore unpopularity of this magnitude indefinitely. If this parliamentary year has been about anything it has been about the difficulties of running an administration which has no visible means of democratic support. If Lang remains un-reshuffled at the Scottish Office, he would be wise to keep his reforming zeal in check until after the next general election, unless he manages to establish a real, as opposed to a spurious, consensus for them.

#### **REARRANGING DECKCHAIRS**

Following the Conservatives' UK-wide disaster in the European elections, Westminster is in a state of pre-reshuffle tension. John Major is constructing his cabinet for the next general election - assuming he is still there to lead it. Among the names being bandied about Westminster is Ian Lang's - not because he is in any danger of being sacked for his recent performance, but on the contrary because he is being marked out for promotion.

The Scottish Secretary's image may be tarnished in Scotland, but it retains its lustre within the parliamentary Conservative party. He may have taken the Tories to the very edge of electoral oblivion in Scotland, but to many Tory MPs in Westminster he remains the man who boldly stemmed the home rule tide, and saved Scotland for the Union. In a Cabinet of basket cases, Ian Lang is one of the few real success stories, and his prestige is high. He is one of those ministers who is said to have that semi-mystical quality a 'safe pair of hands'.

Moreover, as one of John Major's campaign team in the 1990 leadership contest, he might expect to be borne in mind by his mentor - perhaps taking over Transport from John MacGregor, or even putting his Cambridge Footlights experience to good use as Heritage Secretary. Lang has been strongly tipped as a candidate for Conservative Party Chairman, if the President of the Board of Trade Michael Heseltine manages to pass the 'poisoned chalice'.

But the problem for all Scottish Secretaries is that doing well (or doing badly for that matter) doesn't automatically assure promotion, as Lord Younger and Malcolm Rifkind discovered. There is such a shortage of material on the Scottish Tory benches that ministerial replacements are hard to find. The

### *Scottish Affairs*

local government minister Allan Stewart is not thought to be going any further (though he is said to be considering his own prospects after many years of insisting that he wanted to go no further up the ministerial greasy pole); neither is Lord James Douglas-Hamilton or Sir Hector Monro.

The obvious candidate - assuming he holds onto his Stirling seat after boundary changes - might appear to be the employment minister Michael Forsyth. He has been carefully moderating his hard-line Thatcherite image, and has been working well with the left-wing 'Christian Democrat' David Hunt, his boss at employment. So well, indeed, has Mr Forsyth been working at his image, that he is now regarded almost as a traitor to the cause by former comrades in arms like the Europhobe Tory MP Sir Teddy Taylor.

But in Scotland, the memory lingers on. The Scottish Conservatives have not forgotten Forsyth's disastrous tenure as Scottish Party Chairman, and it is not at all clear that the party could live with him as Scottish leader, as was clear after soundings on his suitability taken at the May Tory Conference. And if the Tories are doubtful, you can be sure the Scottish voters are too. It is unlikely that Conservative electoral fortunes would improve with Forsyth at their head.

Mind you, the calculation in Number Ten might be that there is not a lot left to lose in Scotland, and a period of Forsythian rigour might be good for us, a kind of punishment for voting Labour. After all, what's good for Wales...

### **A GOOD YEAR FOR ROBERTSON**

One person who would probably be only too glad to see Forsyth at the Despatch box would be the Shadow Scottish Secretary George Robertson - if only because he would be a relatively easy target. Labour's Scottish leader has had a relatively good year. He may not have managed to foment Maastricht-style rebellion over the local government bill, but he kept up the pressure right through the marathon, and kept his own troops well disciplined. The consigning of Scottish Conservatism to the dustbin of history must inevitably reflect well on the leader of the Scottish Opposition. Robertson has brought a sharpness to Labour's parliamentary attack which let Mr Lang escape little of the wrath he has brought upon himself.

Moreover, the divisions within the Scottish Labour group over the neo-nationalist grouping Scotland United now seem a thing of the past. Robertson exploited the apparent collapse of the home rule issue to reintegrate able MPs from the neo-nationalist wing, like John MacAllion and Irene Adams, who has been given responsibility to conduct an inquiry into quangos. But just as

### *The Year at Westminster*

the nationalist menace subsides within the party, nationalism again appears suddenly to be menacing Robertson from without. Mr Robertson's political honeymoon may soon be coming to an end.

#### **THE SMELL OF NATIONALISM**

The evidence of recent polling confirms what one veteran Labour MP remarked in the parliamentary lobby on the eve of the Monklands by-election: 'Nationalism is in the air again in Scotland - you can smell it.' In the May Regional elections, the SNP came second in terms of seats and votes, a remarkable result, but one which could nevertheless be marked down as a meaningless protest, since the Regions are about to be abolished. But things became more serious when the nationalists won two seats in the European elections with a higher share of the vote (32.6%) than they had had even back in the heady days of the 1970s, when the SNP had eleven MPs. Then of course in the Monklands by-election they cut the Labour majority from 15712 at the last general election to just 1640, with a swing of 20%. Had the nationalists fielded a by-election candidate of the calibre of Margo Macdonald or Jim Sillars - or even of some of their unsuccessful by-election candidates of the past - they would almost certainly have had a famous victory. (Nevertheless, such a victory would not in itself have been proof of a nationalist resurgence, because of the extraordinary local circumstances and the widespread protest by Labour voters against a local Labour council which had lost their trust and respect.)

Viewed from Westminster, this revival in nationalist fortunes presents a puzzle. The SNP haven't been much in evidence in parliament in the last session - except for Alex Salmond's one man sit-in on the local government bill committee in January. They've been around of course, but have presented a low profile. However, they clearly haven't been dragging their feet in Scotland. Even discounting the media hype that SNP revivals always attract, their progress is remarkable. After their showing in the Monklands by-election - which should have been a walkover for Labour - it seems clear that the nationalists have been tapping into some fundamental processes in Scottish politics.

Now, in the past, nationalist surges have coincided with Labour governments. The intriguing question now is this: could it be that the prospect of a change of government in Westminster is already making Scottish voters change their minds about the party - Labour - which is the normal vehicle for their constitutional radicalism?

### *Scottish Affairs*

It is far too early to say what the political consequences of a Blair leadership will be. But clearly, the Scots will not automatically have the ear of the leader, as they have had in the last couple of years under John Smith. Blair has made clear that he supports devolution, but he has not done so with any burning passion. The danger, clearly, is that having a UK leader committed to winning the battle in the South of England, and having a Scottish leader who has been no enthusiast for home rule, Labour might be vulnerable on the nationalist flank. The irony of course is that Blair is Scottish, and a product of Fettes college in Edinburgh. But that does not inevitably mean he will be taken to the hearts of the Scottish voters.

### **MONKLANDS MAN**

The Labour party in Scotland were, of course, shattered by the sudden death of their well-loved leader John Smith in May. The sense of loss was palpable, and not just within the party. A national outpouring of grief ensued in Scotland, as the former Labour leader was buried in Iona - 'the last resting place of Scottish kings' as the TV news put it. In death, Smith rose above party politics, and became something of a Scottish national icon. He was a figure who embodied the positive aspects of the Scottish Presbyterian tradition of enlightened egalitarianism, yet with none of its narrow minded bigotry. Smith was the Scots as they would like to see themselves. Pity some of the bigotry re-emerged in his own constituency after his death - but that's another story.

Back in Westminster, the Scottish parliamentary group of Labour MPs were inconsolable at the loss of Smith. Many were deeply disappointed too when the two Scottish stars - shadow chancellor Gordon Brown and industry spokesman Robin Cook - decided, or were persuaded, not to stand in the election for his replacement. Gordon Brown was, in the eyes of many Scottish Labour MPs, the rightful successor, and there was anger at the thought of Blair supporters trying to press him into standing aside. The Edinburgh South MP Nigel Griffiths went as far as to criticise publicly the Labour MP Peter Mandelson for trying to poison the media with anti-Brown propaganda. Mr Mandelson insisted that he just didn't want to see either of them hurt in a bruising leadership contest. As for Robin Cook, hero of arms-to-Iraq, a number of commentators are already marking him as the next candidate for the 'best-leader-Labour-never-had'.

The problems posed to the Scottish Labour Party by the new leadership will need careful handling. It's not just Blair's perceived 'English-ness' (despite his Scottish origins) that might alienate a lot of Scottish Labour voters. There is

### *The Year at Westminster*

the bonfire of socialist nostrums too. Labour is in the throws of 'modernisation' under Tony Blair. This means abandoning many of the 'Left' policies that the party espoused with varying degrees of enthusiasm through the 1980s.

Now, the point about this 'out-dated socialist baggage' is that the Scottish electorate rather liked much of it. At least they were prepared to continue to support the Labour party at repeated elections while it was still carrying the full weight of its socialist ideology. Scots have always been less frightened about redistributive taxation than the South of England. Scots have rather approved of the public sector and nationalised industries - as the ferocious response to the plans to commercialise water demonstrated. When the late John Smith remarked at the 1992 Labour conference that 'ownership is largely irrelevant' in a modern capitalist economy, he provoked a furious row in the Scottish party. Scots have little enthusiasm for the Tory trade union reforms which Labour seems likely to retain. Then there is CND. The policy which, in the 1980s did most to lose Labour elections in England - unilateral nuclear disarmament - still has its adherents in Scotland, and will continue to have so long as Trident submarines are parked in the Clyde.

It is possible that Scots Labour voters may have less enthusiasm for Blair's modernising project than the chattering classes of the south realise. And as Labour gets nearer to Number Ten, and becomes more and more 'responsible', its traditional support in Scotland may become alienated. Scotland remains a 'Labour country'. Indeed, it was its strength here that saved Labour from oblivion in the 1980s, and provided the leaders - Smith, Brown, Cook - who brought it back from the wilderness. More than a fifth of its MPs are Scottish. But if Tony Blair is as keen to jettison Labour policies as he appears to be, then there will be a lot of votes on the loose in Scotland, and if Labour doesn't want them, Alex Salmond will be only too happy to sweep them up.

This leaves George Robertson with a job to do to persuade Scotland to remain faithful to the cause. Yet Mr Robertson is not a man of the Left, nor was he ever one to speak the language of the Left, unlike Robin Cook and Gordon Brown who speak it fluently - even if they believe it to be largely out-dated. Still less is Mr Robertson a man to speak the language of neo-nationalism. He is one of nationalism's sworn enemies, ever since he smashed the SNP at the 'other' Hamilton byelection in 1978). While he supports the party's policy on devolution, he is no home ruler, believing that the whole issue was over-played before 1992 and may even have contributed to the Tories' relative success in the general election. Robertson differs markedly

### *Scottish Affairs*

from his predecessor Donald Dewar, who was a 'cultural'nationalist - albeit with a very small 'n'. However, Mr Robertson may have cause to rethink his distaste for Scottish home rule, if only to prevent the SNP taking this ground from under him.

#### **UNIONISM'S LAST DITCH**

Scotland has not been on the agenda in any significant sense in Westminster in the last year. The London media has lost interest. So has Mr Major. He was the original sponsor of the Taking Stock reforms before and immediately after the last general election - but he has had other things on his mind ever since. He would do well to renew the interest showed in 1992. For the threat to the Union is arguably greater now than it was then.

Conservative opinion in Scotland is waking up to the enormity of the disaster that is occurring here. They are beginning to realise that the Conservative party is in danger of losing Scotland for good - or at least for a generation. Most of us assumed that the Tory vote would never go much below 25% in any significant election. That, we all thought, was bedrock. But something has happened, and the bedrock is turning into quicksand. 14% in Europe. Oblivion in Monklands. Where will it end?

Some Conservative commentators are thinking the unthinkable. As Allan Massie put it in a recent column (**The Scotsman** 13 June 1994): 'The question for Scottish Unionists now is whether to die in the last ditch.' He urged Ian Lang to steal the clothes of the opposition and propose a better form of home rule than Labour - a Unionist home rule. This is not at all a flight of journalistic fancy. The Conservatives invented modern devolution - in 1968 with the then Prime Minister Edward Heath's 'Declaration of Perth'. There is no reason why the Tories could not revive this tradition, and no reason why they should not embrace nationalism more convincingly than Labour. Conservatives after all are a lot more comfortable with things like patriotism and love of country than Labour have ever been.

If Mr Lang had persevered with his 'Taking Stock' reforms of the previous year (see **Scottish Affairs**, no.4, July 1993) then he would be in a better position to do this. Indeed, the idea behind Taking Stock was to ensure that Scottish nationhood was not obscured in government departments of state, and was premised on an acceptance of Scotland's claim to be a different nation with a different culture. But, and it is a big 'but', a nation *within* the Union.

*The Year at Westminster*

Perhaps after the disaster of this session, more life will be breathed into the constitutional question within the governing party. For if it is not, and events continue on their present course, life may continue to drain from Scottish Conservatism. As Mr Massie concluded in what may become a lament for a lost cause, 'I expect the last ditch to be a crowded place, littered with Unionist corpses, honorably dead, of course, but very dead.'

*July 1994*