A COMMENTARY

THE EDITOR

Once the dust settled on the district election result in May 1984, the Government party in Scotland was left in control of the bastions of Berwickshire, Bearsden and Milngavie, Kyle and Carrick, and Eastwood. These districts represented 5% of the Scottish electorate; Labour districts accounted for 74%.

Defeat on this scale, however, does not appear to have dented the self-esteem of George Younger and his Scottish Office team. They have continued to implement Whitehall policies without significant deviation, insisting the while that they have successfully protected, even promoted, Scotland’s interests.

In this year’s Yearbook, we pay special attention to the current state of housing policy, and health policy in Scotland. Despite Labour’s control of so many districts, and rearguard action by some, government housing policy has been implemented without much fuss. Health policy, too, reflects central government initiatives, Labour and Tory, since the 1970s. There is little especially Scottish about the character or impact of these policies, despite continuing evidence that Scotland’s health problems are peculiar and chronic.

Given the unpopularity of the Government in Scotland, why so little conflict? Certainly, Scottish local authorities have been in the shade of the GLC, Liverpool and Sheffield these past twelve months. Apart from mutterings that they were at the receiving end first, few Scottish local authorities seem willing to take on the Government. Why should this happen? First of all, we can grouse that the Metropolitan (English) media don’t notice, and even if they do, they don’t understand (a traditional and complacent view of ours). Secondly and more importantly, Labour has failed to mount an integrated challenge. Lothian stood alone because
Strathclyde mistrusted the motives of the East Coasters, and weren’t doing too badly out of the Scottish Office. Dundee was ignored. No-one understood them anyway, and wasn’t it the biggest village in Scotland? Thirdly, the Scottish Office came into its own as a weapon of Whitehall. Honed nicely by previous Labour administrations to provide a comprehensive basket of services, the Scottish Office has proved to be a marvellous instrument for controlling Scottish local authorities. While it is not too difficult for Liverpool to cock a snook at the cumbersome Department of the Environment (which hasn’t all the Scottish Office powers anyway), it’s more difficult for Scottish local authorities to oppose St Andrew’s House. The Scottish Office has evolved for ninety-nine years into a peculiar weapon of Government, administratively devolved, but democratically unaccountable, a perfect device for a colonial viceroy to employ.

Paradoxically, the weakness of the Tories in Scotland is Younger’s strength. He doesn’t have to worry much about dissident Tory authorities because there aren’t many. Elections aren’t won or lost for the Tories in Scotland. It’s far-fetched to imagine the Tories winning a majority of Scottish seats as they did in 1955. Scotland’s politics aren’t those of Quebec, and Thatcher is no Mulroney. Younger’s successes — essentially defensive, the protection of Ravenscraig and of ‘Locate in Scotland’ bureaux — are traded against the privatisation by Trafalgar House of Scott Lithgow and the RCG offshore construction yard at Methil. His Cabinet colleagues allow him some victories in return for curbing the local authorities, and using the monetarist vocabulary. The saga of Ravenscraig will keep him occupied, and he will be faced with problems from sectors of the economy he has not had to worry about before. He lost a major battle over Regional Aid, but put his customary brave face in things. The ‘real’ crisis of Scottish agriculture promises to be a thorn in his flesh and that of the Tory Party particularly thirled to the farming lobby in Scotland. Whisky can no longer be counted on as an invisible earner of a highly visible asset. The Scottish Office (and the SDA) bangs the drum for Silicon Glen in the hope that publicity hype will attract in enough hi-tech companies to generate a critical mass. Hood and Young’s definitive survey of Scottish Industry* shows the parlous state of much of it. Engineering companies have failed to capitalise on oil-related work, and to adjust to new product and market opportunities. Resource-based industries — forestry, fishing and food processing — are conservative, and give poor returns on capital. Even the electronics industry has difficulty holding its own in employment terms. Between 1971 and 1983, employment in electronics had increased by 14%, while manufacturing employment fell by 38%. Still, electronics only accounts for 10% of manufacturing employment (p.298). Much relies, the editors conclude, on a strong interventionist role for the Industry Department of Scotland (IDS) and the SDA, but these are not the political times for such a message. The Scottish Office pursues an intervention-by-stealth policy up to the limits allowed by government policy. As a consequence, IDS is forced into a reactive rather than a proactive role. The dropping of ‘economic planning’ from its title in 1983 was more than symbolic. The SDA, too, has evolved a role more agreeable to government and business in Scotland as a consequence of eschewing its previous front-loading strategy. The authors of this impressive survey conclude that while the openness of the Scottish economy, and its strong linkages with the rest of the UK is a real constraint, more — Keynesian — intervention is required, and even an ‘enhanced Scottish dimension’, which would allow an independently determined industrial policy for Scotland.

This definitive report will provide ammunition for Younger in his battles with the Department of Trade and Industry, and the Treasury, but also for his political opponents. Labour will be a major beneficiary, but will continue to find it difficult to play the tartan card now that support for the SNP is off the floor of the opinion polls. The Alliance, with around a quarter of the electorate, is unsure how to use this asset in Scotland. Besides, its local government strength is negligible, and that is where the battles will be fought in the year to come.

The slumbering giant of Strathclyde has now put its foot down, aided by Dick Stewart’s succession to the COSLA presidency. It promises to use its weight to block the new round of Scottish Office cuts. Intriguingly, Lothian, run by a minority Tory administration, looks set to do something similar, though in a more dour way. Brian Meek’s Tories on the whole don’t speak the language of the New Right, and promise to defend services. George Younger will recognise their voices as more akin to his own, but will be tied by Party and Cabinet loyalty. He is, after all, a team player. There are cracks in the opposition to be exploited again. The four cities (now all Labour) show signs of wanting to run their own campaign to the annoyance of much of it. Engineering companies have failed to capitalise on oil-related work, and to adjust to new product and market opportunities. Resource-based industries — forestry, fishing and food processing — are conservative, and give poor returns on capital. Even the electronics industry has difficulty holding its own in employment terms. Between 1971 and 1983, employment in electronics had increased by 14%, while manufacturing employment fell by 38%. Still, electronics only accounts for 10% of manufacturing employment (p.298). Much relies, the

The Scottish Office, celebrating its centenary, will be playing contradictory roles to two audiences. To Scotland, it will have to show its interventionist capabilities. To London, it will have to be a true privatiser. It will need to call up all the skills of its venerable ghosts to ride these two
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horses at once.

The *Yearbook* will watch this trick with interest, and will report on it in twelve months' time. Meanwhile, we hope that this edition will shed more light on the governance of Scotland. The editor is indebted to all the contributors, and particularly to Chris Allen, Hamish Henderson, Allan Macartney and Richard Parry for continuing to provide their valuable reviews for readers.

Helen Ramm continues to cope with annual changes in technology, and is indispensable to the production of the *Yearbook*. John Nimmo and his staff work marvels with our copy, and meet our needs admirably. Above all, we are indebted to readers and subscribers without whom there would be no *Yearbook*.


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