The

SCOTTISH

GOVERNMENT

YEARBOOK

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edited by
DAVID McCrone
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A COMMENTARY

The Editor

Nineteen eighty six was not a year of miracles. Scotland slid further into the pit of economic recession, unemployment climbed inexorably, the end of deep-mining in Scotland grew more likely, and the new industries of oil and ‘hi tech’ suffered in the global slump. Readers of Scottish Government Yearbook should not be surprised that the new dawn has been slow to happen, for our contributors have been pointing out throughout the 1980s that Scotland has little control over its economic affairs which are ruled from the boardrooms of multinational companies or from the inner recesses of Whitehall. The failure of the much-vaunted ‘Scottish lobby’ to influence the Guinness shareholders is proof of that. The role of the Scottish Office and its agencies is too often to provide some trimmings and garnishing at the edges. And now even the limited powers of the SDA are threatened by Treasury cuts.

What impact does this economic gloom have on the governance of Scotland? Since our last edition, Scotland has a new Secretary of State in Malcolm Rifkind. He too has found it an uncommon bed of nails much like his predecessor genial George Younger who has at last been allowed to move to the gentler world of the Defence Ministry. Rifkind is an Edinburgh advocate and well versed in that breed’s professional capacity to argue a threadbare brief. He has little to work on, for most of the problems of his successor he has inherited, and they show a stubborn refusal to go away. Of the three issues we identified last year, none has been resolved. The teachers’ dispute smoulders on and is given piquancy by the threat that the England and Wales teachers might strike a better bargain than their Northern colleagues. The schools are entering their third year of discontent, and it will take a major reversal of political philosophy to grant the teachers what they would settle for. Public sector workers do not figure much in the Thatcherite pantheon. Ravenscraig too remains a threatening shadow over Scotland’s industrial base and over Rifkind’s credibility, but it is probably safe until after the next general election.

Only the rates issue has been tackled head-on, and there is a suspicion that the cure might be worse than the disease. The solution, the euphemistically sounding ‘community charge’ or ‘poll tax’, is a creature of its time. It is hard to imagine that such a regressive piece of taxation would have been introduced ten or twenty years ago, for it is an unashamed appeal to the pockets of the middle class owner occupiers who have been deserting the Tories in droves in Scotland. It may be too late to stop them, and there is the possibility that the government will encounter great difficulties getting it through on the current parliamentary