The
SCOTTISH
GOVERNMENT
YEARBOOK
1988

edited by
DAVID McCORNER & ALICE BROWN
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A COMMENTARY

The Editor

The governance of Scotland is a mess. This is not to say that Scotland is inefficiently administered, for since the days of Tom Johnston we have had an enviable system of services coordinated through the Scottish Office, and as long as the local authorities did its bidding with a minimum of grumbling, it worked pretty well. This somewhat corporatist system which had evolved from Johnston and Churchill through Secretaries of State, Labour and Tory, to meet the challenge of modernising an economy bequeathed by Victorian prosperity has broken down at last. Or at least, it has lost its legitimacy. The irony is that the attack has come from the Right not the Left, and with it the whole basis of the United Kingdom has begun to rock.

Consider the facts.

It seemed fanciful to imagine before the 11th June that the Tories would receive such a hammering at the election in Scotland. 'Doomsday' seemed to belong to leader-writers who always like to rumble up the readers over breakfast. And yet while the Tory vote did not fall too far, it slid in the wrong places, leaving ministers ash-faced the morning after, and wondering how to make a living.

It dawned on them and the rest of Scotland that an important threshold had been crossed, and Malcolm Rifkind saw it more clearly than most as he sought to gather the bits of wreckage together. For a few days, he was shell-shocked, and only found solace in the bosom of the Tories' English victory. Like the advocate he is, he recited the fact that the 'unionist' parties in Scotland had done well, but found uncomfortable the fact that proportional representation would have provided more lobby material in Westminster.

If things have gone quiet over the recess, it is because all parties are coming to realise that the ball-game has changed. None can take comfort from what has happened. The Tories have been pushed further into the Thatcherite bosom, and many of their own supporters, brave souls, realise that their party is wrong – at least over its anti-devolution stance. For the rest, Labour is feart; the Alliance is lost; and the SNP indulges in loud whistling in the dark.

Looking back over the last thirty years of Scottish politics, we can see more clearly the direction. It takes a major effort of memory to remember that once upon a time (it is almost a fairy story) the Conservatives took 50% of the popular vote. And only 22 years ago. Much has been made of the North-South divide, and much of it is misleading. Scotland's story is not simply to explained by geography, but by economics, and culture. It was the very success of the Scottish Establishment – the Lithgows, the Frasers –