THE YEAR AT WESTMINSTER

Peter Hannam

It was the year in which Malcolm Rifkind led a fierce fight-back by the Scottish Conservative Party and Labour discovered that numerical superiority in the Commons by itself counted for little.

Anyone who had expected the Scottish Secretary to slope away to lick the wounds inflicted by the electorate in the 1987 general election had another think coming. His was to become an uncompromising counter-attack on several fronts, given added force by a higher profile north of the Border for the Prime Minister herself.

For Scottish Labour leaders, fresh from achieving a 50-seat target which had been derided by their opponents beforehand, it quickly became apparent that a position of responsibility with no power to implement election promises was fraught with danger.

With, in addition, the Scottish Nationalist Party constantly snapping at Labour's heels and rubbishing what it called the "Feeble Fifty's" inability to deliver, especially on devolution, the Shadow Scottish Secretary, Donald Dewar, and his colleagues were often forced on the defensive when they expected to be winning the argument.

The party's problems were compounded by the provocative antics of the vociferous Anglo-Scots (Scottish MPs from English constituencies) and their friends on the Tory benches who regularly sought a confrontation and complained about what they regarded (though even Rifkind himself dissented) as the public spending "feather-bedding" of Scotland.

Labour's attack tended, as a result of a combination of factors, to fragment, with deep divisions in the ranks about tactics inside and outside the Commons and a series of clashes at Westminster.

Meanwhile, Liberal/Social Democrat MPs pursued a two-pronged strategy of condemning the Government while rubbing salt in Labour wounds, but their effectiveness was blunted by internal strife over the creation of a new party.

The disastrous election performance of the Scottish Conservative Party provided the back-drop for the political year. With only ten MPs,
morale slumped while the elected representatives were stretched. Rifkind provoked Opposition scorn when forced to take an Anglo-Scot, David MacLean, the young MP for Penrith and the Borders, as his Parliamentary Scottish Whip.

The problems of having just five backbenchers were highlighted at regular intervals, most notably in the manning of Parliamentary committees, sparking a series of rows over the drafting-in of MPs from English constituencies with Scottish links – and reaching their pitch in the epic of the Scottish Affairs Select Committee which never in fact materialised.

**Rifkind’s strategy and Labour’s heart-ache**

The Scottish Secretary had few options as the scale of Tory defeat became clear. The strategy which he brought quickly into effect involved capturing the initiative from Labour, carrying the Parliamentary fight to Labour and re-organising his own party in Scotland.

Rifkind argued that the Conservatives’ failure arose from their inability to get across the message that the Thatcher years had been good for the Scottish people who had not appreciated how well-off they had become thanks to the turn-round in the Scottish economy since 1979. Economic success was to be a constant theme of the new appeal.

It followed that there was to be no let-up in the pursuit of Thatcherite policies – which prompted accusations that Rifkind had sold out his earlier more liberal inclinations for personal gain – and that greater efforts must be made to persuade voters that they had never had it so good.

To that end, Rifkind enticed one of Whitehall’s top communicators to the party’s headquarters in Chester Street, Edinburgh. Alex Pagett – though, to his boss’s dismay, he was to remain in post for only a year before moving to the industrial sector – was to play a key role in giving the message a real cutting edge and sharpening the Tory counter-offensive.

Pagett was to build up a press office and vastly expand contacts with the media (and not just the Scottish media) to make sure that journalists were kept fully informed about the Rifkind Revolution.

Meanwhile, the new chief executive, John MacKay, who had lost his Argyll and Bute seat the previous summer, began work, with the help of Central Office in London, trying to rebuild the party. It was tough going and there remains a handful of derelict constituency parties.

On the plus side, a group of Scottish businessmen was formed to bring in untold riches with which to finance the resurgence. Substantial new technology was imported. New and bigger offices were sought out.

At Westminster, the objective was laid down of out-maneouvring Labour. Rifkind, one of the most intelligent and articulate members of the Cabinet, led from the front. He and his colleagues rightly pin-pointed the inexperience of Labour’s new MPs and the disadvantages of the system to any Opposition as being to their own advantage.

Labour’s contingent was undoubtedly more talented and enthusiastic than before the election with rising stars evident in the likes of Alistair Darling (Edinburgh Central), Sam Galbraith (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) and Henry McLeish (Fife Central). The Labour group’s early tactics were, however, less than subtle and not very successful. They were to be reviewed by the turn of the year.

Two illustrations highlighted Labour’s autumnal difficulties of presenting an effective and credible attack. One was the tabling of 2,000 Commons questions en bloc. The second involved a Commons filibuster of the Second Reading of the uncontroversial Scottish Development Agency Bill which resulted in the embarrassing loss of a debate on the Scottish economy.

As Ministers gloated, an editorial in The Scotsman on October 23 mused: “By sheer force of numbers, Scottish Labour MPs can take the lead in filibustering and question-setting exercises but these are most unlikely to make the slightest difference to Scotland’s political situation... The Government can take comfort from the Scottish Labour Party’s display of frustration and limitation.”

In November, Labour took another knock. The day after Dewar had addressed the full Parliamentary Labour Party on his intended tactics and won support for a clear run against Rifkind, four items of Scottish business were scuppered by English opponents in the party of the private Felixstowe Docks Bill. The Tories celebrated another example of Labour’s suicidal tendency while Dewar uncomfortably tried to put a brave face on the setback.

**Devolution**

Labour leaders moved speedily to restore their attack on the Government by publishing their proposals for Scottish devolution. They produced a Scotland Bill for an elected Scottish Assembly with tax-raising powers and responsibility for domestic policy – the election manifesto commitment.

Devolution enjoyed broader support in the party than in the 1970s. But the Bill exemplified the impotence of the Scottish Labour Party for it
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Bruce Millan became one of Britain’s new European Commissioners, forcing a by-election in Govan, the first in Scotland for some six years.

The fortunes of the Liberals and Social Democrats revolved around two Scots: David Steel, who had forced the pace on a merger in the immediate aftermath of election disappointment, and Robert Maclennan, who was thrust into the spotlight to lead the SDP when Dr David Owen walked off into the political wilderness.

Maclennan showed his lawyer’s touch in the preparation of the new party’s constitution. Steel was courted as its leader but after twelve dramatic, draining years as Liberal leader decided to return to the backbenches. But the two of them were responsible for the biggest political mistake of the year – the so-called “dead parrot” policy prospectus which they approved for the new party at Christmas.

Its over-hasty declaration of a myriad of controversial policies shocked the parties, particularly the Liberals, and an outright rebellion by Liberal MPs killed it. Credibility shattered, the parties produced a second draft based on known policies agreed at the last election.

Majorities in both parties eventually gave the merger the green light and Paddy Ashdown emerged as the new Social and Liberal Democrats’ first leader – but the process had consumed a whole year.

Mrs Thatcher discovers Scotland

That Mrs Thatcher should pay more attention to Scotland and Scottish affairs was one of the central findings of the Tory Party’s inquest into its electoral disaster north of the Border. Not least in the constituencies there was a feeling that she had neglected Scotland and ought to become for a campaign of non-payment, but the Official Opposition stuck to tactics of disruption falling short of illegality. In the summer, the executive of the Scottish Labour Party endorsed that view.

The bickering between the Opposition forces again brought relief to the Scottish Office.

Meanwhile, individual Scottish politicians continued to enjoy a high profile and personal success. Rifkind and, in a different way, the Defence Secretary, George Younger, shone from the Treasury Bench. John Smith, the Shadow Chancellor much discussed as a successor to Neil Kinnock, and Gordon Brown, who devoted his usual skill and enthusiasm to the task of Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, emerged as an influential economic duo.

Robin Cook out-performed the Health and Social Security Ministers.

Poll tax

It would be wrong, however, to create the impression that everything went badly for the Scottish Labour Party. Like the party nationally, it scored highly on social issues and industrial matters (as when Ravenscraig burst back onto the political map in the summer).

The SNP, with their call for independence, and the Social and Liberal Democrats also raised the banner but devolution was not the political litmus that it once was.

The community charge retained a high profile throughout the year, as England and Wales got to grips with the Local Government Finance Bill which introduced the “poll tax” enacted for Scotland the previous session. The Bill was used to bring forward a multitude of Scottish amendments in addition to several new Orders relating mainly to details of registration and exemptions. It also offered Labour a chance to go on the offensive.

The political campaign against the “poll tax” continued apace. Dick Douglas resigned as chairman of the Scottish Labour group to concentrate his fire on the charge. Brian Wilson, the new MP for Cunninghame North, chaired the STOPIT campaign. A growing number of MPs, including spokesmen such as Robin Cook, the Shadow Health Secretary, declared they would not pay it.

The SNP laid down a strong challenge to Labour by asserting support for a campaign of non-payment, but the Official Opposition stuck to tactics of disruption falling short of illegality. In the summer, the executive of the Scottish Labour Party endorsed that view.

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But the blunt and unsympathetic tones were to disappear altogether under the new regime once it became evident that, as the former Tory Minister, Alick Buchanan-Smith, so persuasively declared, they did more harm than good to party fortunes.

As telling the Scots to stop moaning vanished, so Mrs Thatcher’s Scottish profile grew.

In May, in her own inimitable fashion, Mrs Thatcher rallied the Scottish Tory faithful at their annual Perth conference with a speech peppered with Scottish references and designed to underline her complete commitment to turning Scotland blue again. The following day, she exhibited previously unknown enthusiasm for soccer by attending, despite the obvious dangers, the Scottish Cup Final at Hampden Park.

There was more important work to do, too. The Prime Minister chose an invitation to speak to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to bid for the moral high ground of politics and associate the Conservative Party with the guardianship of morality. To note that it was a controversial declaration of personal faith would be a risky understatement; the row rumbled on for weeks.

Pity Mr Speaker

On the evening of April 18th, Labour MPs left the Commons in a state of special excitement and satisfaction following the embarrassing cut in the Government’s national 101 majority to only 25 on the so-called Mates amendment to the “poll tax” legislation aimed at linking the charge to ability to pay. Their joy was to be short-lived.

The morning news headlines were to be dominated by the Hon Member for Leith, the unpredictable Ron Brown.

In what was surely the most extraordinary affair of the year at Westminster, Brown had stolen the limelight from the Government’s difficulties by a late-night protest in which he picked up, dropped and damaged the Mace, symbol of the Speaker’s authority.

And it got worse. Interfering with the Mace is a serious offence but not without precedent: Michael Heseltine had done something similar in 1977. He had been forced humbly to apologise next day. Brown was expected to do so. His Chief Whip, Derek Foster, went to great lengths to prepare the ground and a personal statement, to be read out by Brown, was agreed in the customary way with the Speaker.

He compounded his offence however by refusing to apologise without reservation, despite no fewer than nine attempts by the Speaker, Bernard Weatherill, to let him. The anger of Labour MPs knew no bounds.

Conservative MPs held up the affair as proof of Labour’s unruliness and even unfitness as Official Opposition. They wanted to suspend Brown for 60 days but eventually he was ejected for 20 days. Brown subsequently lost the party Whip and was reported to his constituency party amid dark rumours of an attempt to de-select him.

His was the most bizarre Commons outburst but by no means the only one in a year when some Opposition MPs appeared to have decided that there was no alternative to protest to try and make their voices heard.

The SNP MP, Alex Salmond, sought his moment of glory towards the end of Chancellor Lawson’s Budget speech. No-one could remember that ever having happened before, but he also was thrown out of the House on refusing to end his interruption and sit down. Tam Dalzell (Linlithgow) was twice suspended for continuing his personal guerrilla campaign against Mrs Thatcher.

Protest was not confined to the Chamber. Labour’s Dennis Canavan provoked the anger of his colleagues in January for disrupting two separate committees in fury at English Tory MPs taking part in the discussion of Scottish business. Labour reported him to the Speaker.

Paisley Grammar School

Correspondence between the Private Secretaries of the Prime Minister and Malcolm Rifkind was leaked to the Glasgow Herald in April, which caused the most serious clash of the session between the Government and Opposition parties. At the centre of the row was Paisley Grammar School.

The Scottish Office had already aroused political and educational opposition with its proposals in the School Boards Bill for a major extension of parent power. But now it emerged that the legislation was to be used as a stalking horse for the much more radical plan to allow individual schools to opt out of the state system. The letters revealed that the favoured option was for the former Scottish Education Minister, Allen Stewart, to introduce an amendment aimed at enabling schools to do just that. The amendment would be dropped after a declaration of similar intent by Rifkind.

To cut a long story short, the School Boards Bill proceeded on the basis that the more controversial extensions of parent power were dropped. Rifkind took powers to intervene in school closure plans such as those of Strathclyde Council and save schools like Paisley. And legislation to implement the opt-out proposals is due in the 1988-89 session.
The two main pieces of legislation introduced by the Scottish Office in the session were the Housing (Scotland) Bill, to extend tenants' rights, and the School Boards Bill.

Both saw protests over the inclusion of Tory MPs from English seats to make up Government numbers: oddly enough, both Tories involved, James Arbuthnot and Ian Bruce, claimed strong Scottish pedigrees. But the arguments were a throw-back to the election result and the drastic cut in backbench Scottish numbers. There were simply not enough backbenchers to go round - as with the Select Committee, on which two of the five Scottish Tories refused to serve from the start.

In the unpromising realms of Private Members' Bills, two Scots scored notable successes.

Bill Walker, Conservative MP for Tayside North who had won pride of place in the annual Private Members' Bills ballot, saw his Scotch Whisky Bill make rapid progress to the Statute Book with cross-party backing. The measure was designed to protect real Scotch from poor imitations, much as the French protect their champagne.

Archy Kirkwood, Liberal MP for Roxburgh and Berwickshire who also unsuccessfully sought the leadership of the Scottish SLDs in a straight fight with Malcolm Bruce, steered a second Private Members' Bill to law in as many years to set something of a record. Again it was in the area of freedom of information. His Access to Medical Reports Bill enabled patients to see and challenge general practitioners' reports about them commissioned by employers and insurance companies.

The way ahead

Scottish affairs occupied a large measure of MPs' time in this extended Parliamentary session: the future of Dounreay; tax hand-outs to the rich to develop private forestry, much of it in Scotland; inner city regeneration which brought Mrs Thatcher on an early visit to Glasgow; salmon netting; the Piper Alpha disaster which claimed 167 lives; orders for Yarrows from the Ministry of Defence; the future of Scottish Universities, particularly Aberdeen in its financial crisis; prison riots; nurses pay; and alleged Militant infiltration of at least one Glasgow Labour constituency party.

Of all these things and of all the mix of personalities was the colourful kaleidoscope of Scottish politics made up.

But this has only been the start.

Scotland has now emerged as the most fascinating area of British politics. While Mrs Thatcher's own cultural revolution has swept across England and Wales with the result that the Labour Party struggles even to hold onto its traditional heart-lands, Scotland has remained out of her reach.

Labour, which exceeded 50% in a couple of mid-session Scottish public opinion polls, remains the most powerful political force in Scotland and entrenched its local government superiority in the May elections.

But Rifkind has begun to change the political balance. This is not to suggest that he has solved all the Scottish Conservative Party's problems; but things are on the move and not all going Labour's way. In what is chiefly still a two-party contest, the protagonists have locked antlers.

There is no hint of any relaxation in Rifkind's battle-plans. The 1988-89 session will feature highly-contentious, radical legislation in the form of electricity privatisation, schools opt-out and the sell-off of the Scottish Bus Group. The three prongs of the Scottish Secretary's offensive to reverse the long-term decline of his party and pose a real electoral threat to Labour will certainly be pursued with determination.

The battle-lines have now been drawn. To date, more questions than answers exist as to future fortunes and a lesser degree of certainty than for some years clouds the field. It is impossible to adopt other than an Asquithian caution in looking to the future.

Much is at stake. For Mrs Thatcher, the prize of winning over the Scots would crown her political achievements just as failure would be an historical irritant. For Labour, Scotland could act as a spring-board for national revival and proof that there is life after Thatcher.

The fight for political supremacy is likely to be long and bloody.

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