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The experience of more than ten years of Thatcherism in Scotland has contributed to major political developments and changes in the fortunes of the political parties north of the border. In 1990 disputes over the poll tax, the government’s proposed reforms of the legal, education and health services, and yet more closures in Scottish industry, ensured that the political temperature remained high.

As Iain Macwhirter’s article makes clear (see ‘Year at Westminster’), 1990 proved to be a very difficult year for the Conservative Party in Scotland and for the Scottish Secretary in particular. The poll tax, legal reform and the proposed closure of Ravenscraig presented Mr Rifkind with a sufficient number of problems on which to exercise his political skills. Speculation about the future of the Party Chairman, Michael Forsyth, and the internal squabbles within the Conservative Party – accusations, counter-accusations and resignations (which even the Labour Party would be hard pushed to match) – provided the Scottish media with ample copy. Not having taken the opportunity in her last Cabinet re-shuffle to re-deploy Mr Forsyth, it was assumed that Mrs Thatcher was determined he should stay put. That was until the ex-Secretary of State, George Younger, joined the ‘Michael must go’ lobby. In a political twist that caught most people by surprise, Forsyth was indeed asked to resign the Chairmanship but was promoted to Minister of State at the Scottish Office, with a wide range of responsibilities including health, education and social work. According to political commentators in ‘Scotland on Sunday’ this move was at the behest of the ‘old enemy’ Rifkind himself, who in spite of the policy differences between them, considered it would be to the advantage of the party to have Forsyth as one of the Scottish Office team. Is this an example of it is better to have Forsyth ‘inside the tent p..... out’ than ‘outside p..... in’? What happens next remains to be seen. After all, it was only last year that Mr Forsyth was brought in to reverse Tory decline in Scotland and lead the party into the next general election. Forsyth may attempt to dismiss the infighting as “midsummer madness generated by the summer heat” but it is unlikely that his new appointment will end speculation about his own political future or troubles within the Conservative Party.

Not surprisingly the poll tax continued to feature high on the political agenda especially after it was ‘discovered’ south of the border. The topic was debated in numerous TV and radio programmes and between outraged MPs in the House of Commons, as if it had come as a great surprise to everyone (witness John Major’s gaffe in his Budget speech). Meanwhile as Scotland fought for the right to receive the reforms conceded to English taxpayers,