THE YEAR AT WESTMINSTER

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At the 1989 Scottish Tory Conference in Perth, the Scottish Secretary Malcolm Rifkind set the tone for the coming session of parliament. The watchword, if you'll excuse the mixed metaphor, was “listening”. After two years of controversial legislation, there was to be a period of consolidation. The Party was to turn to “sensitive”, “listening” Conservatism.

This session we saw listening Conservatism in action. But things didn't quite work out as planned. Indeed, Mr Rifkind's receptivity to Scottish anxieties over the poll tax and steel, all but cost him his place in Margaret Thatcher's Cabinet. And many English Conservatives heard Scottish angst over the same issues only too well, and concluded that the Scottish whinge had gone on long enough.

A Lighter Legislative Load

The legislative burden, as outlined in the Queen's Speech in November, was light. The measures were uncontentious, by comparison with the previous two years of radical legislation on 'opting out' for schools, competitive tendering, private housing and local government finance. The centrepiece was a Bill to merge the Training Agency in Scotland and the Scottish Development Agency (SDA) into a new organisation called, Scottish Enterprise; and to wind up the Scottish New Town Development Corporations at the same time. Mr Rifkind said enigmatically that the Enterprise and New Towns (Scotland) Bill was: “the most important piece of Scottish legislation since the Government came to power in 1979."

Most of the political heat over Scottish Enterprise was generated in Scotland rather than in the House of Commons. There was scepticism about the quality of the businessmen who might be attracted to the local enterprise boards. Labour felt the trades unions and local authorities were being sidelined. There was also the question of the status of the SDA. Ever since the so-called “Enterprise Scotland Initiative” had been dreamed up by the vice-Chairman of the Scottish Conservative Party, Bill Hughes, there had been a suspicion that the whole exercise was a ploy to pull the SDA back into the orbit of the Scottish Office. The SDA was a Labour creation and a successful one at that.

As the Bill went through its committee stage in the Commons, there were persistent reports of demoralisation within the SDA and talk of employees deserting the sinking ship. These anxieties filtered down to Westminster, but did little to enliven proceedings in the Scottish Standing Committee which was examining the Enterprise Bill line by line. Throughout January and February, the Committee ground on. Many of the MPs in the Committee Corridor professed to be thoroughly bored by the whole proceeding.

The only remotely exciting event took place on the last week of the Committee in March when the alert Labour MP for East Kilbride, Adam Ingram, engineered a snap division which left the Government short of bodies. When a division is called, MPs have only a limited time to return to the committee room before the door is locked. Not enough Tories made it. Labour won the vote by six to five, and the clause dealing with dissolution of New Town Development Corporation assets fell. However, Labour jubilation was short-lived. The clause was restored at Report Stage the next month. The Minister of State, Ian Lang, said that New Town tenants would have a degree of choice “further down the road” over who their landlords (public or private) would be after the New Town Development Corporations were wound up.

The legislation to end solicitors' monopoly over conveyancing, and end the monopoly of Faculty of Advocates in the Court of Session, was introduced into the Lords, not the Commons. There was a perfectly respectable reason: the Law Lords sit in the Upper House and would be able to apply their experience and legal knowhow to the Bill. The Law Reform (Miscellaneous Provisions)(Scotland) Bill was presented to their lordships at the end of January by the Lord Advocate Peter Fraser. He had a rough time. The past Lord President of the Court of Session, Lord Emslie, discarded the tradition that maiden speeches in the Lords are uncontroversial and warned their lordships that the Bill could undermine the quality of the Scottish legal system. Lord McClusky, a Court of Session Judge, also breached convention by launching a truly vitriolic attack on Lord Fraser for undermining Scots law. Lord Fraser appeared shaken by the ferocity of the criticism.

The striking difference between the reaction of the Scottish peers to the Scottish Law Reform Bill – as opposed to the mild response of the English peers to similar legislation – was that, as Lord Grimmond put it in the debate, the Government was “tampering with one of the expressions of Scottish nationhood”. They would have to have a much better reason than an urge to deregulate before altering it for ever more. Scottish peers were also offended by the way this radical change to the Court of Session was lumped into a portmanteau Bill along with more liberal licensing laws and controls over the sale of liquor in supermarkets, as well as changes to divorce and charities law.

The Scottish Law Reform Bill led, indirectly, to a serious constitutional confrontation between the Commons and the Lords over the prosecution of war criminals. On May 1st, their lordships voted for an amendment to the Scottish Bill, in the name of Lord Campbell of Alloway, disallowing the use of video links in any prosecution of alleged Nazi war criminals. It was the first
shot in the Lords' campaign to prevent the Commons from bringing aged alleged Nazis to trial. A month later, the Upper House, again with the encouragement of Lord Campbell, voted to reject the Commons' War Crimes Bill, thus challenging the Government to invoke the Parliament Acts against the House of Lords.

The Law Reform Bill also led to a confrontation between the Scottish Secretary and his own backbenchers. Led by Sir Nicholas Fairbairn, three Scottish Tory MPs threatened to vote against the Government in the standing committee of the Bill, on the grounds that the Government had not assigned enough time for the Bill to be scrutinised properly. Sir Nicholas said he was not prepared to be subjected to the "thumbscrews of exhaustion". It was one of many confrontations Mr Rifkind was to have with his increasingly fractious and rebellious backbench.

In the end, the Scottish Secretary accepted that most of the controversial clauses of the Bill were lost. He accepted the Law Society's demand that banks, building societies and other financial institutions should not be allowed to do conveyancing. Only "qualified licensed conveyancers" would be allowed in. Mr Rifkind claimed that he had bust the solicitors' monopoly; but his own backbenchers said he had only created "mininal non-effective competition". Other clauses of the Law Reform (Misc. Prov.) (Scotland) Bill which would have reduced the waiting time for divorce, liberalised Sunday licensing, fell in bargaining with the Opposition. It was a humiliating climbdown for Mr Rifkind.

Earlier in the year, the Environmental Protection Bill, the "Green Bill", was presented by the Environment Secretary Chris Patten. It had tartan edges. The Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) was to be broken up and the bit left in Scotland was to be merged with the Countryside Commission, to create a new agency: Heritage Scotland. This was another initiative devised to bamboozle the Opposition, and bamboozled they duly were. After some vacillation, Labour ended up taking a lead from the environmental groups and opposing the scheme on the grounds that it might weaken the effectiveness of Britain's main Conservation agency, the NCC. This allowed Malcolm Rifkind to attack Labour for opposing a form of devolution, and the creation of a well-funded Scottish conservation body (he said he would find whatever funds were necessary).

For the Scottish Secretary, things were going much as expected. Mr Rifkind's game plan for this parliamentary session had been to present the Opposition parties with as little ammunition as possible to throw at the Scottish Office. Moreover, he hoped that the content of the Scottish legislative programme might cause some difficulties for the Opposition. Mr Rifkind clearly relished the presentational problems which Labour have faced with a programme which they would either have to support or, as Mr Rifkind saw it, oppose on unsound grounds out of unthinking knee-jerk oppositionism.

There was a real sense in which Labour did not know what they were fighting when they opposed the Enterprise Scotland Bill. They didn't like the SDA being mucked about, certainly, but it was difficult for them to argue that there was anything wrong in principle with creating a 'single door' agency for job training and state support. The pragmatic Scottish TUC found themselves able to approve of the new agency, while asking questions about how it was to be set up. Similarly, while the Labour Party worried about the loss of a powerful Conservation Agency, the NCC, they had no principled objection to a devolved Scottish Conservation and Heritage agency. It also appeared odd, to say the least, for the Peoples' Party to be standing four square in defence of the restrictive practices of the Faculty of Advocates—a body of workers which has yet to seek membership of the STUC. In the end, Labour tabled a 'reasoned amendment' to the Law Reform Bill, which allowed them to oppose the legislation, while distancing themselves from the Faculty of Advocates and the solicitors. Labour argued that there was no threat as such to the Scottish legal system in allowing non-advocates to plead in the Court of Session or letting Building Societies do conveyancing work. But they felt nevertheless that the Government's Bill did not help the consumer of legal services to get a better deal than that on offer under the status quo.

Cross Party Issues

Labour were as divided as the Tories over the Prestwick Airport's monopoly on transatlantic flights. Prestwick lost its transatlantic gateway status in March, when the Government adopted the 'Open Skies' policy advocated by the CBI Scotland. The decision was vigorously opposed by the Labour MP for Carrick Cumnock and Doon Valley, George Foulkes. He was joined in the struggle against the BAA and Glasgow Chamber of Commerce by the former Scottish Secretary, George Younger. But this coalition failed to persuade the Transport Secretary, Cecil Parkinson, that the airport should retain its special status. The failure of the Prestwick defence may be the last straw for Mr Younger's Conservative seat of Ayr, which has a majority of only 182 votes.

Another cross-party campaign emerged over Government proposals to change to European Time, sometimes called 'double summer time'. This was almost universally condemned by Scottish MPs, essentially on the grounds that it would mean Scottish farmers having to get up and work in the dark. The Labour MP, John Home-Robertson, tabled an Early Day motion entitled 'Darkness at Ten'. Arguments for changing the clocks so that there would be more light hours for recreation in the evening, and even the safety argument that fewer schoolchildren would be killed on the way home from school, cut no ice. In June the Government quietly dropped the idea of tampering with the temporal status quo.
As with the legislative programme for Scotland itself, these issues were ones in which there was no fundamental issue of principle dividing Government and Opposition. But the UK Bill to reform the Health Service was different. There was deep anxiety amongst all the opposition MPs and some Conservative MPs, that the scheme to introduce Self-Governing Hospitals, and introduce market practices into areas like the prescribing of medicines by GPs, was a precursor to outright privatisation. Labour's UK health spokesman, the Livingston MP, Robin Cook, made his party's position clear during Health questions on June 5th. Any hospitals which opted out under the Government's scheme, he warned, would be brought back into health authority control by the next Labour Government. This applied with particular emphasis to Scotland, where there has been historically a much smaller private health sector than in England.

Government insistence that self-governing hospitals would in no way be opting out of the NHS, that they would remain wholly financed by the state, and that health provision would remain free at the point of need, did nothing to quell opposition suspicion that the Government's real aim was to privatise health. The fact that the Scottish end of the NHS Bill was being handled by Labour's number-one hate-figure, the Scottish Health Minister, Michael Forsyth, added to the fears.

The Forsyth Factor

During the Committee stage of the Health Service Bill a curious row blew up over the alleged business interests of the Scottish Health Minister, and then Scottish Tory Chairman, Michael Forsyth. The Labour MP for Workington, Dale Campbell-Savours, accused him of a conflict of interest. He said the Health Minister maintained contact with a Public Relations company he had run before he became a minister called "Michael Forsyth Associates" which had clients in private health. The Chairman of the Committee, Dame Janet Fookes, suspended the sitting of the Committee, and took the matter onto the floor of the Commons, where a furious row ensued, all of course, under the cloak of parliamentary privilege. Sensibly, Mr Forsyth did not call in the libel lawyers but simply issued a terse statement explaining that he had severed all contact with the company after he became a minister.

In his dual role as Health Minister, and Scottish Conservative Party Chairman Mr Forsyth was rarely out of the headlines. He became the subject of 'intense speculation', as we say in media land, that he was about to gravitate to the post of Scottish Secretary. During April and May, rumours were seeded in the parliamentary lobby that Mrs Thatcher was thinking of ditching the liberal-minded Mr Rifkind, and replacing him with the true-believing Mr Forsyth. The theory was that Mr Rifkind was in danger of going native in the Scottish Office. For many years the Scottish Office has been regarded by many English Tory MPs, and some Scots ones too, as a last bastion of the interventionist, begging-bowl, subsidy-addicted corporatist culture of the old liberal wing of the party - mobilised by the chairman of the Scottish Tory Reform Group, Arthur Bell - pressed for his removal. Mrs Thatcher was finally obliged to accept Forsyth's resignation in August, but she promptly elevated him to Minister of State at the Scottish Office, and made it clear that Michael Forsyth remains her eyes and ears in Scotland.

Poll Tax Versus Roof Tax

The poll tax, and its Scottish dimension, was to prove Mr Rifkind's and nearly Mrs Thatcher's undoing, and also, curiously, Labour's.

At the 1989 Scottish Tory Conference, many in the party said they would welcome a lighter legislative load - which they got - so that Scotland could concentrate on the benefits of the Community Charge. Some representatives in Perth that year were convinced that the revival of the Tory fortunes in Scotland would begin with the Regional Elections in 1990, as people in Scotland overcame their prejudices against Conservatism, and started voting with their pockets. It was a political miscalculation of massive proportions.

Things appeared to be going to plan even as late as February when the Labour Party unveiled its alternative to the poll tax, a property tax based on capital values and dubbed a 'roof tax' by the Tories and the media. Why Labour in Scotland decided to put their heads above the parapet six weeks before the Regional Elections remains a mystery. When they saw the reaction to the roof tax in Scotland, Labour in the UK hastily dropped any idea of
One of the facts of political life is that no tax is popular, and new taxes are the most unpopular of all. Better by far, said the political sages, to luxuriate in the irresponsibility of opposition, and say nothing. But Donald Dewar, Labour's Scottish Leader, a man with a highly developed sense of moral and intellectual purpose, was unhappy at the lacunae in Labour policy on local taxation. And so the roof tax was launched, under the prosaic official title, 'Local Government Tax' – "A tax whose name is too long" opined The Scotsman.

Labour's reasoning was sound enough. A property tax makes sense. Most European countries have one. The domestic rates though, were an anomaly, because they were based on notional rental, when there was virtually no private rented sector to use as a base. The logical course, therefore, seemed to be to go for a property tax based on actual house prices, or capital values, with a rebates system to prevent hardship. But the Conservatives accused Labour of proposing a new tax which would not only penalise the elderly pensioner in a big private house, but also be a tax on home improvements.

Labour's roof tax has not been universally condemned. But the immediate problem for Donald Dewar arose when the UK Labour Party appeared to disown it, shortly after it was launched. The Labour Leader, Neil Kinnock, said he "didn't think there was much enthusiasm" for the idea of capital value rates. And there was criticism from within the Party in Scotland at the way the issue was handled.

Labour's UK poll tax spokesman, Bryan Gould, retreated to the formula of a revised rating system based on ability to pay, which seemed to involve a dual system of taxation, involving capital value rates combined with a local income tax. This scheme had been considered by the Scottish Party, but had been dismissed on the grounds that you could not sell the idea of 'two taxes' (property and local income) to the electorate. At the time of writing, Mr Gould is promising to explain Labour's new system of local finance, "in a couple of months".

In the run up to the May Regional Elections, the Scottish Tory Chairman, Michael Forsyth, kept up the pressure on the Scottish Labour Party's roof tax. He demanded that Labour give figures for how much their new tax would cost. On the 22nd of May, John Maxton, Labour's Scottish poll tax spokesman, suggested that it might be around six hundred pounds a house. A curious game of fiscal poker ensued.

Mr Forsyth replied by estimating one thousand eight hundred pounds. Labour became confused. Their Scottish Home Affairs spokesman, Brian Wilson, promised proper figures by the Regional Elections on the third of May. Labour then announced that they had commissioned some academics to research the matter. But Donald Dewar appeared to pre-empt their findings by holding a news conference a week before the Regional Elections in which he asserted that the true figure would be four hundred and eighty-seven pounds. The press were sceptical. The leader of Labour's largest Council, Charles Gray of Strathclyde, disputed Mr Dewar's arithmetic, and said the average householder would be paying five hundred and fifty pounds. Now everyone was confused, except Mr Forsyth. "Donald where's yer figures", taunted Tory posters in the Regional Election campaign.

To exploit Labour's troubles before the Regional Elections, the Tories bought billboards across Scotland depicting vultures sitting atop a Scottish roof, with the legend: "Labour's Answer To The Poll Tax". The media were unimpressed by the Tories advertising campaign. But then they were also unimpressed with the roof tax, which was panned in journals usually sympathetic to Labour, like the Glasgow Evening Times.

Conservative MPs in Westminster were jubilant that at last they had something to distract voter attention from the frankly unpopular poll tax, or community charge, as they still vainly tried to call it. A MORI poll for the BBC and The Scotsman in April, indicated that more Scots approved of the community charge than Labour's alternative. But by far the largest group wanted a return to the rates. The roof tax was finally laid to rest in July, when Labour's Scottish Executive announced that they would return to the domestic rates, if they win the next election, as an 'interim measure'.

**England Discovers the Poll Tax**

Throughout the winter there had been rumblings on the Tory backbenches as the introduction of the charge into England in April approached. The crusty rightwinger, Sir Rhodes Boyson, called it a "political cyanide pill". When the actual poll tax figures began to leak out of English town halls, anxiety turned first to anger, then to rout. Conservative backbenchers in the 1922 Committee started to demand action as they realised the likely impact of the tax on their slender majorities in the Midlands and the North of England. Labour began a long march up the opinion polls which led them to a twenty-one point lead in March. In their desperation to mitigate the effects of the poll tax in England the Government seemed to forget that the community charge had already been in operation in Scotland for a year.

This was illustrated towards the close of Chancellor John Major's 1990 Budget speech. As expected, he had delivered a 'stand still' Budget, which endeavoured to keep the lid on inflation by keeping interest rates high. The SNP economic spokesman Alex Salmond had already left the Chamber, to deliver his verdict on the impact on the Scottish economy of the television news programmes. Then, out of the blue, Mr Major announced that there was to be a concession to sweeten the introduction of the community charge in England. The savings limit for rebates was to be raised from £8,000 to £16,000. Instead
of the expected murmers of approval, the roof fell in.

In 1988 Alex Salmond had attempted to disrupt the Budget speech. In 1989, his colleague Jim Sillars had attempted to as well, by moving the writ for a by-election. In 1990 the tradition was kept alive by, of all people, the arch-constitutionalist Donald Dewer, a man with an almost mystical respect for the institutions and conventions of Parliament. Afterwards, Mr Dewar insisted that his action was entirely spontaneous. He said he had no prior knowledge of the clause in the Budget, and that he had risen to his feet in genuine anger when he realised that this concession was not going to be applied retrospectively in Scotland. The sight of Mr Dewar on his feet demanding to be heard, and refusing orders from the Deputy Speaker Harold Walker to sit down so astonished the Scottish opposition MPs, that in no time they were jumping up almost in unison.

Afterwards, the Scottish Office Minister, Ian Lang, was on the Green outside the Commons telling television cameras that Labour anger was “entirely bogus”. They had not understood the legislation, he said. There was no unfairness to Scotland, since the savings limit had applied over the previous year in England, under the old rating system. There could be “emptily” no question of backdating or compensation. Mr Lang had to eat his words. The day after the Budget skirmish, the Treasury Secretary, Norman Lamont, tried to maintain the line in the debate on the Finance Bill. Labour’s Shadow Chancellor, John Smith, ridiculed his argument that nobody in Scotland had lost out. That day, reaction within the Scottish Tory Party, communicated directly to Mr Rifkind by telephone, seemed, on balance, to favour Mr Smith’s assessment. The U-turn was beginning.

Later, Malcolm Rifkind sought a meeting with Mrs Thatcher. He explained the horror of the response in Scotland. He was told there was great reluctance to change policy at this late stage. Still later, Mr Rifkind was called to a second meeting with Mrs Thatcher. The crisis was getting out of control. Something had to be done. But there would be no Treasury money for the Scots, who — according to Mrs Thatcher — were already getting more than their fair share of public funds.

The Number Ten Press Secretary, Bernard Ingham, gave a colourful account of this meeting to lobby correspondents. All Mr Ingham’s briefings are off-the-record and supposedly never take place, but The Scotsman reported that Mr Ingham had told the lobby that Mr Rifkind had been “carpeted” by the Prime Minister, who was furious that he had landed John Major the Chancellor in this mess. The Scottish Office refused to confirm that any meeting had taken place. The next day it was made known, by sources close to the Scottish Secretary, that Mr Rifkind had been prepared to put his job on the line if concessions had not been made. He had not actually threatened to resign. That was not necessary. In the higher reaches of Government it is possible to communicate quite clearly the importance of an issue without having to make actual threats.

Mr Rifkind got his way. Following the resignation of Chancellor Nigel Lawson, and the departure of the Welsh Secretary, Peter Walker, and Employment Secretary, Norman Fowler to “spend more time with their families”, Mrs Thatcher could not afford to lose another Cabinet Minister. It was the ultimate weapon, and Mr Rifkind won. But his long-term future must be in doubt, as long as Mrs Thatcher remains in office.

When Mr Rifkind announced the details of the four million pound ex gratia package to a bored House of Commons on the eve of the Easter recess two weeks later, it was difficult to remember what all the fuss had been about. Four million is, in fiscal terms, a drop in the ocean. The Scottish Office Budget is nearly ten billion, and the sum over which Mr Rifkind had to contemplate resignation was so small as to be lost in the underspend of a couple of departmental programmes. So, why had the crisis happened?

Well, one reason was television. It was the first televised Budget, and Donald Dewar’s intervention, and his lather of righteous indignation was relayed live to Scotland, as were the contributions of the other MPs, on what appeared to be the Government responding to English anger over the poll tax, when they had ignored Scottish outrage in 1987.

Throughout the Winter of 1989/90 there had been a succession of recalculation, safety-nets and transitional arrangements, which few understood, but which looked, to suspicious Scots, like special treatment for the English. The failure to make the cash limits to poll tax relief retrospective was at least comprehensible, and gave justification to the wider suspicions. The Government had been caught out at last. And since moderate Donald Dewar himself had been the one to cry ‘foul’, the Scots could feel confident that a genuine case of governmental double dealing had been exposed.

Throughout that springtime, the Government slid further into confusion and disarray over the poll tax. The riots in London at the beginning of April — called the “Battle of Trafalgar Square” by the tabloids — were condemned on all sides. The Home Secretary, David Waddington, tried to blame Neil Kinnock personally because he hadn’t expelled from his party the MPs — twelve of them Scottish Labour MPs — who were refusing to pay the poll tax.

One of them went of his own accord. Dick Douglas, the non-paying MP for Dunfermline West, resigned the Labour whip in April and went on to found his own one-man Independent Labour Party in the Commons. During the debate on the riots, he pointed out that no-one in Government had commended Scotland for mounting one of the largest post-war demonstrations in Glasgow on April 1st without a riot shield or a police horse in sight.
Scotland, said Mr Douglas, would not bend the knee to Mrs Thatcher's poll tax. But clearly, the Scots were not going to set fire to the streets over it either. The Scots doggedly continued to express their discontent through the ballot box.

In the Regional Elections, the state of the parties remained largely unchanged. Labour problems over the roof tax seemed cancelled out by Tory problems over the poll tax. Tory claims of success were dismissed by Bochel and Denyer's analysis published in May (1). According to John Bochel and David Denyer, Tory claims of a recovery, were a "mirage". They just "made a successful preparation for a poor result", and remained at their dismal 1986 position. Only the Nationalists made any significant advance, mainly in the North-East. The Scottish Liberal Democrats did rather better than their opinion poll scores might have predicted. Labour did slightly less well than the polls indicated. One wonders, however, how these elections would have turned out had they been held three weeks later.

Exit Ravenscraig

The week after the Scottish Tory Conference in Aberdeen in May – the one where Mr Rifkind had survived an attempted coup by some of Mr Forsyth's followers – the Scottish Secretary found himself landed in an even greater crisis than the poll tax reliefs in the Budget. It was announced that British Steel were planning to close the hot strip mill at the Ravenscraig Steel Works in Motherwell.

No single industrial plant has ever had such political significance in Scotland as Ravenscraig. Since it was located North nearly three decades ago by Harold Macmillan, the steel plant has symbolised both Scotland's industrial heritage, and her economic ambitions. But many politicians and economists had always seen Ravenscraig as a 'cathedral in the desert' – a plant located for political reasons too far from its markets to survive.

The plant had been under threat for most of the previous decade, as British Steel rationalised its operations in favour of Llanwern and Port Talbot in South Wales. In 1987, the Scottish Secretary had persuaded British Steel to keep the hot strip mill open for at least another two years, and keep the steelmaking plant in operation until 1994. But that was when the company was in state hands. In 1988 it was privatised. Very soon afterwards it became an open secret that Ravenscraig did not have a role in British Steel's grand private design.

Mr Rifkind realised that while Ravenscraig was no longer the lynchpin of the Scottish economy, it still had great political importance. In a statement to the Commons, on 16th May, the Scottish Secretary said that he "deplored" the decision by British Steel and he called for all-party action in Scotland to have it reversed. Eyebrows were raised in the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), where the Secretary of State was the dusty Thatcherite, Nicholas Ridley. Sources in the DTI started briefing the lobby to the effect that Rifkind had gone too far; and had gone "over the top" with his "interventionist Labour-speak". Number Ten appeared to agree, at least in that it did not actually endorse Mr Rifkind's words. Once again it appeared that Mr Rifkind was isolated in the Cabinet, and that his job was on the line.

But the Scottish Secretary also won considerable support for his stand. Not only did the Ravenscraig shop stewards under Convener Tommy Brennan sit with him for photo calls, Mr Rifkind's backbenchers, some of whom had been plotting against him only a week before, rallied round, and put their names to a Labour Early Day Motion deploring British Steel's actions. In the June opinion polls, the Tories slipped a couple of points, but not as much as might have been predicted. It was nothing like Gartcosh fours year before. However, it rapidly became apparent to MPs on both sides of the House, that there really was very little that could be done to save Ravenscraig. The whole point of privatisation had been to put companies beyond the reach of meddling politicians. Mr Rifkind could demand an explanation from British Steel, but in the end he knew that neither he nor the Cabinet could coerce or bribe the company into reversing its decision.

The Labour leader, Neil Kinnock also seemed to take the "realistic" view, and to the disappointment of many Scottish Labour MPs, declined to raise Ravenscraig at Prime Minister's Question Time. Realists in the Labour Party admitted that, had they been in power, there would have been little more they could do, since the party had ditched nationalisation and subsidies in their policy review the previous year. The SNP MP for Govan, Jim Sillars, tormented Labour left-winters in the Commons by challenging the opposition to threaten British Steel with renationalisation if they closed the mill.

Of course, the point was that Ravenscraig was far from being a lame-duck. It had achieved an impressive productivity record over the last ten embattled years, and it was one of the most productive in Europe. This inspired MPs in and out of the Government to hope that a foreign White Knight would appear and save the plant. This solution – an independent Scottish buy-out – which was enthusiastically canvassed by the Scottish Liberal Democrats, might have won the backing of the Government, who were embarrassed by British Steel having been privatised as a monopoly. It was thought the Japanese might have been interested as a means of getting into Europe. As yet, however, no credible buyer has been located.

Labour emerged from the Ravenscraig debate on May twenty-first in some gloom and despondency. Nominally socialist MPs realised that in the absence of their old policy of state socialism, they had little to offer of any philosophical substance to counter the free market rationality of the Government. If you accept markets, and Labour now does, you have to accept their logic, and renounce the right to interfere in the affairs of private
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companies.

It seemed also that the Scottish people had, to some extent at least, come to accept that Governments no longer have the right to dictate to private companies. The public reaction to the Ravenscraig crisis was muted; there was none of the emotion that had met the closure of Gartcosh four years previously. A number of Labour MPs noted that they did not seem to be getting the same degree of public outrage, and that there was no apparent wish for Labour to re-nationalise Ravenscraig. However, that does not mean that Scots had ceased to care.

One of the disturbing by-products of the Ravenscraig affair was the emergence of an ugly neo-racism in the London Press. The London Evening Standard ran a leader shortly after the announcement about the strip mill headlined “Ravenscraig Must Close”. The Scots, it declared, had become “subsidy junkies”. The message, echoed in a number of editorials in the UK press, was clear: it was time the Scots were taught a lesson. If this view gains ground, and it was inspired by backbench Tory scorn of the “whingeing jocks”, then curtains for Ravenscraig might also lead to curtains for the Union.

Whither Rifkind?

The political downside for Mr Rifkind of the Ravenscraig affair has yet to be assessed. His remarks in the House on the day of the closure announcement certainly will have done little to shore up his Thatcherite credibility. The next week in the Commons debate on Ravenscraig, he went to considerable pains to emphasise that he had not meant to suggest that he would intervene in a commercial decision made by a private company, whatever may have been inferred from his remarks in the House the previous week. But by then the damage had been done.

Tory MPs remembered his defiance of Mrs Thatcher over the poll tax relief concessions in the Budget, how he had said that he would be around long after Mrs Thatcher had retired and boasts of high levels of public spending in Scotland. There were mutterings in the bars of the House that ‘Rifkind must go’.

Rifkind’s highly publicised difficulties over the Law Reform Bill did nothing to help his reputation. At best it looked as if he couldn’t control his own troops; at worst, that he had handled the legislation incompetently.

However, Mr Rifkind is a clever and extremely able politician. Whatever her inclinations, Mrs Thatcher would not easily be able to sack him. He is probably the most popular Tory MP in Scotland and his abilities are well known in Whitehall. One theory is that Mr Rifkind will remain in place until after the General Election, and then will be moved to another department, say Health or Social Services, while Mr Forsyth is installed as Scottish Secretary.

Of course, this assumes that Mrs Thatcher will still be Prime Minister, and that Mr Forsyth will be returned as the member for marginal Stirling, neither of which are racing certainties.

Rifkind Versus Forsyth

Malcolm Rifkind’s original project for “listening Conservatism” was premised on the continued relevance of the Scottish Dimension. It has taken a considerable battering, in a political year remarkable for its volume of crises. But he stuck to it throughout. He clearly felt that on both the poll tax and Ravenscraig, he had to make a break with the doctrine of collective Cabinet responsibility to show that he was still aware of Scottish sensibilities. He did not seem unduly alarmed at the “Rifkind isolated in Cabinet” headlines. However, while Mr Rifkind may be pursuing the listening course, it is clear that not all of his colleagues are listening quite as hard.

When Mrs Thatcher made Michael Forsyth Chairman of the Scottish Party in July 1989 she risked creating a competing power centre in the Scottish Tory organisation. Mr Forsyth is a very different kind of politician from Mr Rifkind. He is a true Thatcherite, a radical iconoclast, who is eager to break with the corporatist traditions of the Scottish Tories, which to some extent, Mr Rifkind embodies.

Some commentators claim to have detected a faltering confidence on the part of Mr Rifkind, that his judgement is not as sharp as it was. If that is the case it would not be surprising, given the proximity of Mr Forsyth. Needless to say, Mr Rifkind, and many of his colleagues, deny that there is any rivalry, or personal bitterness between them. However, nobody disputes the difference in style between Mr Rifkind and Mr Forsyth. In the coming months, Scottish politics will be determined by the dynamics between them. There is a contest for the soul of the Scottish Tories, and it’s not at all clear yet who is going to win. Michael Forsyth may have lost the party chairmanship, but as Minister of State, he remains favourite to succeed Malcolm Rifkind as Scottish Secretary.

Mr Rifkind’s manifold crises led to much idle speculation in Westminster watering holes over what a Forsyth Scottish Office might look like. This was given added piquancy in May when two former Scottish Office Ministers of the Rifkind persuasion said goodbye to Scottish Tory Politics: Michael Ancram (Scottish Local Government Minister till 1987) off to Devizes; and John McKay (ex-Education Minister, ex-Chief Executive of the Scottish Tories) off to anywhere beyond the reach of Chairman Forsyth. Ex-Whip, Gerry Malone, went to the safe seat of Winchester. The absence of former Servants of the Party – including ex-Scottish Secretary George Younger who is off to the Lords – poses any future Secretary of State with an even more difficult staffing problem than faced Malcolm Rifkind in 1987.

The five remaining Scottish Tory MPs outside government are all
confirmed backbenchers, with the exception of Alick Buchanan-Smith, the 'liberal' Tory MP for Kincardine and Deeside, who is 'not one of us'; and Allan Stewart, the Tory MP for Eastwood, who has been there before, but denies any wish to return. That would logically leave the so-called "Anglos" – the Scottish Tories who sit for English constituencies. Could Eric Forth, the junior Industry Minister, be persuaded to come North as Minister of State?; or Michael Fallon, perhaps, as local Government Minister?

The speculation is not wholly idle. Mr Forsyth's task at the Scottish Office, should Mrs Thatcher place him there, would be to make radical departure with the tradition that the Scottish Secretary is Scotland's representative in the Cabinet. He would be the other side of the dialectic – Thatcher's man in Scotland. His aim would be to mount a social revolution in Scotland. He would attempt to transform Scottish political attitudes by altering their social and economic supports.

Tories of Mr Forsyth's persuasion have an almost marxist understanding of politics. The radical Tory project for Scotland is based on the theory that Scots vote Labour, not because of any ideological disposition, or any feeling of national particularity, but because most Scots live and work in the public sector, and therefore vote for the party of the state. Material circumstances determine political consciousness. The first acts of the Forsyth administration in New St Andrews House would be to privatise and roll back the state – Thatcher's man in Scotland. His aim would be to mount a social revolution in Scotland. He would attempt to transform Scottish political attitudes by altering their social and economic supports.

The Scottish Dimension in Westminster – Towards a Post-Unionist Consensus?

But bar room speculation aside, where does Scotland stand in Parliament after this eventful year? All the indications are that there is a process of fundamental change taking place in Scotland's relationship with Westminster, and the union with England.

After 1987, when the Conservatives lost eleven Scottish seats, including two Scottish Office Ministers, the Scottish Whip, and the Solicitor General, commentators talked of the "Doomsday Scenario". But Doomsday never came. The Scottish Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, had some difficulty filling his Scottish Office posts. The depleted band of Scottish Tory backbenchers had to stay up late at night to keep the Standing Committees going. The Scottish Select Committee lapsed. But overall it was "business as usual". Mr Rifkind's achievement was described by a Cabinet colleague as a "remarkable feat of political levitation". But mind can't prevail indefinitely over matter, however high-powered the intellect.

The Scots have continued to tell the opinion pollsters, and more importantly, the ballot boxes, that they are dissatisfied with the constitutional relationship with England. That much is constant. But what seems to have been happening in this parliamentary session is that an important sector of English opinion is beginning to weary of the Union as well.

Mrs Thatcher may have said (at the 1988 Scottish Tory Conference) that there will "be unequivocally no legislative devolution for Scotland while I am leader of the Conservative Party", but other members of her party seem to be having second thoughts. A conviction has arisen amongst some English Tory backbenchers that the only way to stop Scottish "whingeing" over such as the poll tax, public expenditure and industrial closures, is to let them get on with it themselves. It is time for the Scots to be made accountable for the expenditure that takes place in their name. For too long, goes this thesis, they have been cannily waving the begging bowl and threatening England with the SNP if the Treasury doesn't toss more tax-payers' money into it. Time to call the Caledonian Bluff.

This change in English Tory thinking was encapsulated in an editorial in The Economist magazine on 26 May. It described Malcolm Rifkind as "a truculent tribal emissary" for the Scots in Cabinet. "To dispel the mists of romanticism", it went on, "will require more than closures... sooner or later this must entail the end of Scotland's Union with the rest of Britain". What was interesting about the Economist's assessment was not the ritual attack on Scotland's dependency mentality, but the way the magazine coolly appraised the possibility of outright Scottish independence with hard-headed economic logic.

Scotland, The Economist concluded, could manage perfectly well on the税收 it collects plus around one billion a year from a division of the North Sea Oil revenue, calculated on the basis of internationally accepted conventions. "The Scots might flunk the challenge, over-tax themselves and establish a patriotic northern slum. Or they might seize their new freedoms to build a model mini-state. Either way, it would be their choice". Clearly, it is now becoming intellectually respectable in right-wing London circles to think the unthinkable.

And in addition to the wearying of many English Tories with the Union, we have a new constitutional hardness entering Labour thinking on the Scottish Question. No longer is "devolution" a more or less cynical project for frustrating the Nationalists. Indeed, Labour MPs now avoid use of the word whenever possible. According to Labour's latest distillation of their new revisionist policies, "Looking to the Future" published in May, the Scots are to have their own parliament with tax-raising powers within a year of Labour coming to office. This would be the leading edge of a constitutional reformation involving regional parliaments for Wales and the English regions, and a new elected Upper House. The document even contemplates the Scottish Parliament being elected on proportional representation. Even with Labour drifting back down the opinion polls, a Labour Government in the
1990's is more plausible than at any time since 1979, and their commitment to Scottish Home Rule has never been firmer.

But what of that voice we all know so well, which says “No”. Well, the inducement offered by the emerging post-unionist right is the prospect of cutting Scotland's representation in the Commons, and thus making it even more difficult for Neil Kinnock to enter Number Ten. The Kilbrandon Report twenty years ago noted that an Assembly for Scotland would logically entail a reduction in the number of Scottish MPs. This could be by as much as fifteen on a strict votes-per-seat calculation. When the Tory MP, John Butcher, asked Mrs Thatcher about Scottish “over-representation” in the Commons on May seventeenth, the Prime Minister replied, enigmatically, that there would be no such legislation “before the next General Election”. Was this merely a confused reference to the continuing work of the Boundaries Commission, or was it an indication of a new open-mindedness about the constitution? Almost certainly, Scottish Home Rule, if it comes, will come after Mrs Thatcher has left Downing Street. By then, a post-unionist consensus might have been established, which her successor, Labour or Tory, would not be able to ignore.

But whatever intellectual right wingers may be saying in their London salons, back in Scotland, Michael Forsyth has not given up on the Union. In Scotland, the Home Rule forces ranged in the Constitutional Convention, will be challenged at the next General Election by the most vigorous, expensive, best organised and most street-wise Conservative Campaign in Scottish history. The Tory agenda for 1992 will be headed by the slogan, “overtaxed Scotland”. ‘Labour’s Assembly Tax’, as the Conservatives call tax-raising by a Scottish Parliament, will be added to the roof tax to make Scotland the highest taxed area in Europe, an extra twenty pence in the pound on income tax according to Mr Forsyth. He warns of average families paying six thousand pounds in various taxes a year. He'll be singing “Donald Where’s Yer Figures” all the way to 1992.

All General Elections are decisive in one way or another. But some are more decisive than others. It looks like the next election – the campaigning for which has already begun – really will be the final conflict over Scotland’s constitutional destiny.

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