After the fairly volatile year 1988-89, the last twelve months have shown little variation in the public opinion polls, possibly to the disappointment of the Conservatives and the SNP in particular. Labour continues to dominate Scottish politics, and manages 50% support in the opinion polls with seeming ease. Following their good showing in the European elections, the Green Party have begun to register on the polls with around 3%, about half that of the Liberal Democrats whose election results continue to outstrip their poll showing.

VOTING INTENTIONS

System 3 carries out a monthly poll for the Glasgow Herald, and its polls consistently place the SNP in second place over the Conservatives (figure 1) with an average of 20% over the year compared with 18.5% for the Tories. These performances were largely translated into local government election results in May 1990.

Figure 1: VOTING INTENTIONS (System 3)

The 'gender gap' in voting intentions has all but disappeared, with Labour being the only party to garner more votes from men than from women. The Conservatives’ appeal to older people, and its lack of appeal to the young, remains a significant feature of Scottish politics. Whereas 29% of those over 55 intend to vote Tory, a mere 12% of the 18-24 year olds intend to do so. This is in contrast to the SNP which has almost the mirror-image with 23% of 18-24 year olds, but only 11% of those over 55. Labour’s strength in Scotland is reflected in its overwhelming appeal to both age groups (57% and 54% respectively).

The Conservatives continue to appeal to social class AB, but their advantage over Labour disappears if we group AB and C1 together. Indeed, the February 1990 poll gave Labour a significant lead in the ABC1s. Nevertheless, both Labour and the Tories remain class-dominated parties: Labour does twice as well among manual workers (DE) than among AB workers, whereas the Conservatives are three times as popular among ABs as they are among DEs. The SNP has fairly uniform support among C1, D and E,
Scottish Government Yearbook 1991

but does less well among AB workers. In fact, Labour picks up twice as much support among this group as the SNP. Further evidence of Labour's broad appeal in Scotland is marked by its success among home owners. While Labour remains the party of working class tenants, it is now the largest party among home owners too, suggesting that housing no longer confers much differential advantage for the Tories, at least north of the border.

The government continues to be deeply unpopular in Scotland. Eight out of ten Scots are dissatisfied with its performance, an all-time low in recent years, as are 8 out of 10 with Mrs Thatcher's performance. The other UK party leaders – Neil Kinnock and Paddy Ashdown – do not strike a chord with Scots, and in each case more people are dissatisfied than satisfied with their performances. Scots, it seems, don't think too much of their Scottish political leaders either. Donald Dewar does moderately well, but still fails to make the 50% satisfaction threshold. Gordon Wilson of the SNP had as many enemies as he had friends; Malcolm Bruce struggles to make an impact with Scottish voters; and Malcolm Rifkind's troubles are reflected in his personal standing (64% are dissatisfied with his performance as Secretary of State for Scotland). He might take consolation from the fact that he is nowhere as unpopular as his party leader, who continues to elicit strongly negative assessments from Scots. Seventy-two percent think she is 'out of touch with ordinary people'; 44% that she talks down to people' and 38% that 'she is too inflexible'. Neil Kinnock does not evoke such strong opinions: 33% thought him 'down-to-earth'; 31% that he was 'rather inexperienced'; and 30% that he was 'a capable leader'.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL QUESTION

Scottish Government Yearbook 1991

There are few surprises among preferred constitutional options. Around 10% want Scotland to be Independent outwith the EC, a quarter to be Independent within the EC, the largest number – about 45% – prefer a Scottish Parliament within the UK, and the status quo struggles to appeal to a fifth of Scots (figure 3).

Despite the fairly consistent pattern over the years, it appears there has been some internal realignment along party lines. The February 1990 poll produced the following results:

Table 1: Voting Intentions by Preferred Constitutional Option

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cons</th>
<th>Labour</th>
<th>SLD/SDP</th>
<th>SNP</th>
<th>Green</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indep ex EC</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indep in EC</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assembly in UK</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status Quo</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DK/No Opinion</td>
<td>-3%</td>
<td>-3%</td>
<td>-4%</td>
<td>-4%</td>
<td>-3%</td>
<td>-3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N)</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1080</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among Tories, support for an Assembly has firmed up, so that more now support this option than the party's policy for the status quo. During the year, there has been a drop in support for an Assembly among SNP voters, and a rallying to the party's policy of Independence in Europe. Whereas 36% of Nationalists in February 1989 opted for an Assembly, by September 1989 it had fallen to 24%, possibly reflecting the political battle waged over the SNP's attitude to the Scottish Constitutional Convention in that period. By February 1990, support for an Assembly had risen again to 30%.

If we calculate the data in a different way so as to identify the political support for each constitutional option, we reach surprising results:

Table 2: Constitutional Option by Voting Intention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Indep ex EC</th>
<th>Indep in EC</th>
<th>Assembly</th>
<th>Status Quo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLD/SDP</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNP</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N)</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data plainly show that Labour voters, not Nationalists, represent the major block wanting Independence. It is, of course, the size of Labour's support in Scotland which makes it such a dominating presence among all categories, but it is significant that a considerable number of Labour voters
Scottish Government Yearbook 1991

Support for the Independence option. This is also an option which has strong support among the young, for a majority (57%) of those aged 18 to 24 prefer some form of Independence to an Assembly within the UK (32%). Support for some form of Home Rule is, however, strong among all age groups and social classes: only 27% of AB voters, for example, opt for the constitutional status quo, 46% for an Assembly, and 23% for outright Independence.

The MORI poll of June 1989 asked questions about Scotland within a devolved UK. Forty six per cent thought that an Assembly would mean their own standard of living would rise; 13% that it would fall; and 30% that it would stay the same. A larger majority (61%) thought that a Scottish Assembly would better represent their own interests, and only 11% that these would deteriorate under devolved government.

The setting up of the Scottish Constitutional Convention seems to have had little impact on public consciousness in Scotland. Whereas 46% claimed to have heard of it in February 1989, by September of that year, the figure had dropped to 26%, a remarkable degree of public amnesia. By April 1990, only 18% were aware of the Convention. Nevertheless, the aims of the Convention were approved of. Fifty eight per cent thought it right for the Convention to take place, including 47% of Conservatives and 64% of Nationalists, whose parties do not support the Convention. Fifty six per cent thought the Convention would help to improve political arrangements in Scotland, and only 25% thought the SNP was right to leave the Convention, and 48% that it was a mistake. SNP voters were virtually evenly split between those 39% who approved of the party leaving the Convention, and 37% who disapproved.

THE EUROPEAN DIMENSION

The poll carried out in June 1989 by MORI focussed on the European elections. The rising tide of interest in matters European was reflected in the percentage intending to vote – 73%, contrasted with a mere 62% who had done so in 1984. The European Parliament, however, remained a bit of a mystery. Fifty seven per cent could not name any members of the European Parliament, though 22% managed to mention Winnie Ewing.

Suspicion of Europe remained. Only 32% thought that membership of the EC had made Scotland more prosperous (53% that it had, not); 48% thought it had reduced Scotland’s control over its destiny (37% thought it had not); and 65% that food prices had gone up more than was necessary because of the EC (20% denied this). Nevertheless, there was support for the SNP’s policy of Independence within Europe, 37% saying there would be a rise in Scottish living standards (23% that this would not happen); and 53% claiming that Scottish interests would be better represented (with only 18% saying they would not).

A further poll in February 1990 by MORI revealed a majority of Scots, 52%, supported EMS membership (25% were opposed); that 49% supported a European passport (35% opposed); and that 39% supported the equalisation of taxes in Europe (31% against). Nevertheless, most Scots (54%) opposed giving more powers to the European Parliament at the expense of the UK parliament (26% were in favour).

PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

A majority of Scots (58%) opt for proportional representation for elections, while 31% are content with the present system, a majority of roughly two to one (MORI: September 1989). Support for change is strongest among AB voters (66%), and supporters of every party except the Tories (36%) are in favour of PR: 60% Labour; 66% SNP; 77% SLD; and 73% Greens.

THE POLL TAX

Opposition to the poll tax is firm: 74% of Scots in the September 1989 poll disapproved of it, an identical figure to the one in April of that year when the tax was introduced. The same proportion (58%) are opposed to a campaign to withhold payment, and only 11% intended not to pay (compared with 19% in April 1989).

Comparing these data with the results of the poll carried out for Radical Scotland (No.45, June/July 1990) suggests that the fierce campaigning over poll tax payment has had little effect. While the two polls do not ask identical questions, the results are broadly comparable. The SNP’s campaign against payment seems to have had no effect on its supporters (76% have already paid or intend to pay, the same figure as in the September 89 MORI poll).

The poll tax fared badly in comparison with the rates: 52% thought it worse, and 24% better. Only Conservatives thought it was better (42% – a minority nonetheless). The February 1990 poll caught the headlines by indicating that Labour’s property (or roof) tax was just as unpopular as the poll tax (16% and 15% respectively). A system of local income tax was approved of by 31%, and the old rates system topped the bill with 34%, suggesting, perhaps, a preference for the devil people knew.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The MORI poll of April 1990, the last one carried out for The Scotsman, focussed on the forthcoming regional elections. Unsurprisingly, the poll tax figured as the key issue with 24%, and discouragingly for local politicians, ‘party’ was judged more important as a determinant of voting (with 22%) than the candidates themselves (18%).

There was general satisfaction with regional councils (51% compared...
with 33%), even among Tory voters (50%) although their party was nowhere in control of any region. The SNP voters appeared to be the most dissatisfied of all (only 45% approved). In specific terms, twice as many thought the councils ran the schools well as ran them badly (40%-21%); and similarly with public transport (57%-28%), although in strict terms these are no longer 'public' bodies. A majority (59%) thought that their councils wasted money in response to a question which seemed to invite the response 'yes'. It would be interesting to observe the effect of turning the question round to imply the negative.

An overwhelming proportion of respondents (69%) wanted the poll tax charged at the present level, only 13% wanted a cut in both tax and services, and fewer (6%) opted for a higher tax and improved services.

CONCLUSION

MORI and System 3 continue to provide a valuable contribution to the study of Scottish public opinion. At the time of writing, The Scotsman has to find another polling organisation to take the place of MORI which has 'defected' to the Sunday Times. Understandably, the sponsors will be interested in their own sets of questions, but a degree of continuity is vital if we are to continue to monitor changes (or the lack of them) in Scottish public opinion. It is hoped that a properly balanced sample will be employed, for, as we pointed out above, the overall sample size has effectively been reduced by over 20%, from 1020 to 850, with an enhancement on voting intention only.

The May 1990 poll also contains a major howler. Part of this survey focussed on newspaper readership, showing that Scots are largely thirled to the Sunday Mail (54%) and the Sunday Post (47%). On a daily basis, 55% read the Daily Record, 15% The Sun, and 10% The Express. Six per cent read The Scotsman. How many read the Glasgow Herald (and the Dundee Courier, and The Press and Journal)? We don’t know, because they didn’t ask! What makes this particularly reprehensible is that the pollsters used a showcard, which did not include these vital organs. Two theories come to mind: the conspiracy theory, that it’s one proprietor or editor trying to airbrush another; or the other theory – more likely – that someone thought these were ‘regional’ newspapers in Scotland. Some mistake, surely.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & TECHNICAL DETAILS

We are indebted to MORI and their sponsors, The Scotsman, and The Sunday Times, as well as to System 3 and The Glasgow Herald for permission to use their polls.

MORI carried out representative quota samples as follows:

(a) For The Scotsman