Introduction

Six months is a long time in politics. It is also the gap between the summer deadline of the Yearbook, and its winter publication date. Between August 1990 when I submitted my last review of the Year, and its emergence in January 1991 so much had changed in Scottish politics as to render the chapter radically and rather comically incomplete.

Mrs Thatcher had left Number Ten in November 1990, after a Cabinet coup. Malcolm Rifkind had left his bed of nails at the Scottish Office for another uncomfortable resting place at the Department of Transport. In had come the emollient John Major, and his new Scottish deputy, Ian Lang. Allan Stewart, the right wing Tory MP for Eastwood, had returned to the Scottish Office as a junior minister with responsibility for industry and the Community Charge. Notice had been given by the new Environment Secretary Michael Heseltine that the poll tax, probably the worst fiscal innovation in modern times and Mrs Thatcher’s self-proclaimed “flagship”, was to be scrapped.

These changes were seismic, and sudden. There was no indication in August 1990 that the world was going to be turned upside down in November 1990. This year I write with even greater trepidation, since it is possible that a general election may occur between the deadline for this contribution and its final publication. That election – however it goes – is certain to change the Scottish political landscape in all manner of unforeseen ways. Political journalism is a transitory, ephemeral product, with a limited shelf life; this chapter is something like a time capsule.

But we are getting a little ahead of ourselves. This piece is intended to be a review of a political year in Westminster, and that year began in the autumn of 1990, when Mrs Thatcher was still in office, and God was still in His Heaven. The Scottish Conservatives, though, were experiencing their worst internal divisions in over a century.
Autumn 1990: “Conservatism in Crisis”

One of the many curiosities of Westminster life is the way that Parliament always begins its working year with the end of the previous one. Before the Queen’s Speech can outline the Government’s legislative intentions, there is the so-called “spillover”, a few weeks in which loose ends of Commons business from the last Session are tied, or left unravelled.

This practice inevitably means that the new political year is dominated by the issues and passions that dominated the end of the previous one. The outstanding issue as Scottish MPs returned from the Summer break in October 1990 was the fallout from the Scottish Law Reform Bill affair, and the extraordinary divisions that had rent the Scottish Conservative Party over the summer of 1990.

It is difficult to overemphasise how distressing this experience was to a party unused to fratricidal political strife, nor, indeed, how startling the divisions over the Scottish Office Minister, and one time party chairman, Sir Nicholas Fairbairn, undoubtedly had to observers, accustomed to more anodyne politics from the Scottish Tories. The tensions within the Scottish Tory Party had reached breaking point over the The Law Reform (Misc. Prov.) (Scotland) Bill which had been put before Parliament in the dying weeks of the 1989/1990 Session. It revealed bitterness and division in Tory ranks which was unparalleled in the history of the Scottish party.

The Bill finally made it, battered and threadbare, onto the statute books, in November 1990, but not before it had almost taken the Scottish Tories down with it.

The legislation created a focus for the conflict between the older, liberal Scottish Tories, and the abrasive new right led by the then Scottish Party Chairman Michael Forsyth. The party split over the Bill on left-right lines. The left, fronted by the chairman of the Scottish Tory reform group Arthur Bell, mounted a surprise attack upon the right over the Summer of 1990. After assiduous canvassing of the Tory Reform Group in the UK, and approaches to senior Tories like the former deputy Prime Minister Willie Whitelaw, the left succeeded in undermining the position of the Scottish Tory Chairman sufficiently to force his resignation.

Mr Forsyth had had nothing directly to do with the Law Reform fiasco. But it was difficult to shake off the suggestion that the right wing backbenchers were operating with his sanction and in his name. The vice chairman, Bill Walker, one of the principal Law Bill rebels, had made no secret of the fact that he preferred Forsyth to Rifkind as Scottish leader. The Law Reform affair looked, to many in the party, to be a nothing short of a conspiracy to undermine the position of the Scottish Secretary Malcolm Rifkind by destroying his legislative programme.

It is impossible to determine whether or not there was in fact any conspiracy. On the face of it, Mr Forsyth had nothing to gain from the affair, which frequently descended into farce. Moreover there were genuine grievances among the Tory backbenchers over the way the Law Reform legislation had been put before them at the tail-end of the parliamentary session. One of the principal rebels, Sir Nicholas Fairbairn, undoubtedly had profound objections to the content of the Scots Law Bill and the prospect – as he saw it – of the Scottish legal system being amended to correspond to the dictates of English law, and the Department of Trade and Industry. Sir Nicky is no-one’s stalking horse, as any who knows him will testify.

But there was also bitterness against the Scottish Secretary personally. This manifested itself in a series of acrimonious meetings in the House of Commons, at one of which the Secretary of State was accused of being a liar by one of his own backbenchers. Mr Rifkind was criticised – privately even by some of his own supporters – for failing to gauge the extent to which he was alienating his backbenchers by what they saw as his intellectual arrogance and hauteur.

But the real damage from the Law Reform Bill affair was inflicted, not in Westminster, but in Scotland. The left of the party saw in the backbench rebellion an opportunity to turn the tables on the right, which had been in the ascendant for most of the previous two years. In August 1990, after a series of resignations, the leader of the new guard was cast from his redoubt in the Scottish Tories’ headquarters in Edinburgh’s Chester Street.

When Michael Forsyth had taken over the reins of the party in July 1989, he had wasted little time in reshaping the organisation in his own image. He had brought in a series of young radicals – many from the now-disbanded Federation of Conservative Students – to ginger up the Scottish party. But he was to be embarrassed as, one by one, his young lieutenants deserted the party in the first year of the new regime. The resignations of Simon Turner, Russell Walters, and the organisation director Douglas Young, were costly as well as disruptive. The bill for redundancy payments alone was reported to be around a hundred and fifty thousand pounds. This fact was brought to the attention of the Scottish Tory business group, the collection of business leaders who were bankrolling the Scottish Tories. They demanded that heads be banged together. They were.

Malcolm Rifkind had private meetings with the then Prime Minister Mrs Thatcher in August at which he apparently persuaded her that her recently-appointed chairman, Michael Forsyth, was a damaging and divisive influence on the party in Scotland. He got his way. Michael Forsyth dramatically resigned from his post in September 1990.

But just in case the left felt the urge to celebrate, Mrs Thatcher simultaneously promoted Forsyth to the status of Minister of State at the
Malcolm Rifkind put the best gloss possible on this. He pointed out that Forsyth had been restored to his previous status as a "junior minister" in his Scottish Office. Rifkind also declared that there would be a halt to radical innovation in Scottish policy until after the next General Election. Mr Forsyth kept his own council.

**Green Bill**

The Queen's Speech in November 1990 contained only one piece of legislation for Scotland. A Bill was to be moved to merge the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) and the Countryside Commission in Scotland to create a new agency to oversee Scotland's heritage. Most of the arguments over this piece of administrative restructuring had been aired the previous year, when the Nature Conservancy Council had been split up into components for Scotland, England and Wales as part of the Government's Environmental Protection Bill.

Labour had been equivocal about the principle of breaking up NCC. At first they appeared to support the idea of creating a devolved agency unifying the Scottish arm of the NCC with the Countryside Commission. But latterly they had inclined to the view of the environmental lobby, that it was not worth weakening the NCC to do this.

It was only when the Government supported a Lords' amendment to the Scottish Natural Heritage Bill in June that allowed for a review of the hundreds of Sites of Special Scientific Interest in Scotland, that controversy flared. Opposition MPs claimed that the measure would effectively give Scottish landowners a veto over SSSIs. Some Labour MPs staged a late night sit-in in the division lobby in protest at the inclusion of the amendment following the Bill's committee stage. It remains to be seen whether Scotland's unique heritage of wild land is to be sacrificed to the interests of the sportsmen and the developers.

The legislative programme was intentionally light. The decks were being cleared for a pre-election year, and the Scottish Office did not want to risk any repetition of the Law Reform chaos by giving the Scottish Standing Committee too much work to do.

However, one of the Scottish Ministerial team was eager to take on more work. As the new Minister of State, Michael Forsyth had to be given something more to do. A year before, he had relinquished many of his briefs, so that he could spend more time with his party in Scotland as Chairman. Now relieved of that post, and on return from the Summer Recess, he was left with only one real function, health. So, responsibility for education was taken from the then deputy Scottish Secretary Ian Lang, and given to the new Minister.

Malcolm Rifkind sought to calm anxieties in the teaching profession over this appointment, by announcing that there would be no radical changes in policy. But Mr Forsyth had been here before. Two years previously as parliamentary secretary at the Scottish Office he had been responsible for promoting the policy of self-government, or "opting-out", for schools. The new Minister of State provoked controversy almost immediately by telling teachers' leaders in October that he wanted a "bloody revolution" in Scottish education, a cry he repeated in the Scottish Grand Committee later that month.

With the ambiguity in the role of the new Minister of State, the divisions in the Scottish Conservative Party, the lingering acrimony from the Law Reform fiasco, and Malcolm Rifkind's apparent alienation from Number Ten, MP's and journalists were looking forward to an interesting season of Westminster politics.

However, hardly had the new Session properly got under way when another Tory leadership crisis eclipsed Scottish politics altogether. The Scottish dimension went on hold until the crisis over Mrs Thatcher's leadership was resolved.

**Exit Thatcher**

The events of November 1990 have been well documented elsewhere. Mrs Thatcher resigned, bringing to an end eleven years of her unique rule. The immediate result in Scotland of John Major's elevation to Number Ten was the loss to the Scottish Conservatives of the politician who has arguably been their best asset, Malcolm Rifkind, who went off to the Ministry of Transport. His successor was Ian Lang, his former deputy.

Mr Lang was clearly an element of continuity in the Scottish Office. While difficult to place ideologically, there was no doubt that his views were close to those of his predecessor and it seemed clear he was not likely to change the political centre of gravity in the Scottish Office. But his deputies were of a different character.

After much speculation that he might depart with his mentor Mrs Thatcher, the Scottish Minister of State, Michael Forsyth, remained firmly in place. Indeed, he was to be supplemented by the former Scottish Office Minister and Tory MP for Eastwood, Allan Stewart, who, like the Minister of State, was a luminary of the Thatcherite "No turning Back" group of MPs. Mr Stewart was brought in as Under-Secretary, with special responsibility for the Community Charge. This might have been regarded as a curious appointment given the express determination of the new Prime Minister to conduct a "fundamental review" of the poll tax. Indeed, there was some disquiet amongst
creating record numbers of bankruptcies, mortgage arrears and closures of estate agents.

But across Scotland, voices were soon raised against the Pangloss scenario. Scottish fishermen in the North East complained at new EC imposed restrictions on their catches, and the infamous eight-day tie-up. Labour claimed that the Naval base at Rosyth was about to be axed, with the loss of around two thousand jobs. And the death knell finally rang for Ravenscraig. The Motherwell steel plant didn’t go quietly, however.

The British Steel Chairman, Sir Robert Scholey, was given a hard time by the Trade and Industry Select Committee in January. The chairman, Tory MP Kenneth Warren, averred that the Ravenscraig shop stewards were a “pretty fine bunch of chaps”. Sir Robert told the committee that he could not trust the Scottish Office, let alone shop stewards, with the “commercially sensitive” figures that condemned the hot strip mill. The Committee demanded that he tell them in private session; which he did.

But by then it had become academic. The recession had overtaken the political world was changing so rapidly that it would be some time before normal plotting could be resumed.

The passing of Mrs Thatcher was greeted with celebration in most Scottish political circles, including some Scottish Conservative ones. They hoped that, at a stroke, their main electoral disadvantage – the personality of Mrs Thatcher – would be effaced. Mrs Thatcher had been one of the most unpopular Prime Ministers in Scotland since pollsters started recording these things. There was something about Mrs Thatcher – her Englishness, her stridency, her Unionism – which Scots voters appeared to find politically unbearable. Even at the height of her power Scottish Conservatives would admit to encountering the ‘TBW’ factor (“that Bloody Woman”) on the doorsteps. However, Mrs Thatcher’s disappearance from office did not transform Scottish Tory fortunes overnight.


The new year brought little cheer for the Scottish Tories. The first System Three opinion poll of 1991 put them back three points to 21 percent, number three again after Labour and the SNP. Of course, this set-back was more statistical than actual; given the limit of error of all opinion polls, it counted as virtually no change on their last poll of 24 percent. But psychologically it was demoralising to a party which was hoping for great things now that the incubus of Thatcherism had been lifted from its shoulders. It seemed that the honeymoon period of the new regime was going to be very short-lived indeed.

In Scotland, the new tenant of Bute House, Ian Lang, found himself faced in the New Year with a catalogue of awkward economic problems. Thus far, Scotland had escaped the worst of the economic recession that had hit the South. Indeed there was more than a hint of crowing about this from St Andrew’s House in the obligatory New Year message. Scotland’s economic future was looking better than for some years, relative, that is, to the South of England, where what was being called the “white collar recession” was...
and swallow the rest. It was their mess after all, and they would have to live with the consequences of the most unfair, inefficient, costly and arbitrary tax introduced by any Government in modern times.

However, as the recession deepened, and the poll tax quagmire got more and more difficult to move in, the Government and the Scottish Office did benefit from the focus of political attention moving to foreign affairs: the Gulf War had begun.

Scotland's War

Despite initial indications that Scotland was not going to endorse the war with quite the enthusiasm of the South (as had happened in the Falklands conflict), by February, the country appeared to have resolved unequivocally in favour of the international effort to liberate Kuwait. According to a System Three poll(2), 77 percent of Scots supported military action. The voters' apparent enthusiasm for the war appeared to benefit the Conservatives too. In the same poll they were back up to thirty percent, their best showing since 1983. But these polls had to be taken with the utmost circumspection, since Governments notoriously tend to benefit from wars, and popular support for "our boys".

However, while the Scots appeared to be sanguine about the attempt to oust Saddam from Kuwait, that unity did not extend to the Scottish parliamentary group of the Labour Party. In the first week of the war, two Scottish MPs resigned from their seats in the shadow cabinet in protest at Neil Kinnock's endorsement of the war. Like many Labour MPs, John McFall, the MP for Dumbarton, and Maria Fyfe, MP for Maryhill, believed that sanctions should have been given longer to work before the order was given to invade Kuwait, and bomb Baghdad. They formed a group, Scottish Labour Against the Gulf War, which attracted the support of between eight and fifteen Scottish MPs, depending on accounts.

The total number of Labour MPs in the Commons who had reservations about the war - but who were not prepared for outright conscientious objection - was difficult to determine. Some prominent members of the Shadow Cabinet, including Labour's health spokesman and MP for Livingston, Robin Cook, were reported to have severe reservations, and to have antagonised Neil Kinnock by their determination to voice them. The so-called Supper Club of anti-war Labour MPs which included front-benchers like the Transport spokesman John Prescott, claimed that it had the support of around a hundred Labour MPs. A poll of Labour MPs by the New Statesman magazine in the first week of the war suggested that seventy five percent were opposed to military action before sanctions had been demonstrated as ineffective. (3)

This dissent was largely muted, except amongst the Scots. The least muted Labour MP of all was Tam Dalyell, the indefatigable member for Linlithgow. Throughout, he kept up a barrage of points of order, and demands for emergency debates, on what he regarded as the terrifying ecological threat posed by war in the Gulf. He warned that Saddam's threat to ignite the oil reserves in Kuwait could inflict environmental catastrophe on the entire globe. Many dismissed him as a Jeremiah, but this warning proved to be well-founded. We have yet to determine the full ecological cost of the Gulf war.

Labour discovers PR

Labour were not only divided about the prosecution of the war in the Gulf. In the early months of 1991, controversy grew about the merits of proportional representation. At the March 1990 Scottish Labour conference, the party had resolved to examine the feasibility of electoral reform for a Scottish Assembly. Though the wording carefully avoided using the term proportional representation, it was generally accepted that this had been a vote in favour of changing the electoral system.

It was a remarkable step for the Labour party to take, and arose directly from Labour's participation in the Constitutional Convention with the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. Labour won fifty seats in the 1987 General Election on forty three percent of the vote. Under first-past-the-post, Labour dominated the political map of Scotland. But under any form of PR you cared to mention, Labour would not do nearly so well. Indeed, Labour hegemony over Scottish politics would be at an end were their seats in a Scottish parliamentary group of the Labour Party. In the first week of the war, two Scottish MPs resigned from their seats in the shadow cabinet in protest at Neil Kinnock's endorsement of the war. Like many Labour MPs, John McFall, the MP for Dumbarston, and Maria Fyfe, MP for Maryhill, believed that sanctions should have been given longer to work before the order was given to invade Kuwait, and bomb Baghdad. They formed a group, Scottish Labour Against the Gulf War, which attracted the support of between eight and fifteen Scottish MPs, depending on accounts.

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Mr Lang's Last Stand

The argument for the poll tax or community charge had proved to be unsupportable. The tax manifestly did not get everyone to pay for their local council services, since only about half actually paid the charge in full. The tax was demonstrably failing to impose fiscal accountability and therefore responsibility on local government. On the contrary, it was getting central government even more involved in local finance, as ever more complex structures of capping and transitional relief were introduced.

The poll tax was doomed. But it took a horribly long time to die. Partly this was because of Mr Lang's refusal to bow to the inevitable.

The Scottish Conservative leader's apparent enthusiasm for retaining the poll tax is one of the more puzzling aspects of Mr Lang's tenure at Bute House. Why should the leader of the Scottish Conservative Party be so enthusiastic about retaining the policy which had done so much to destroy the Scottish Conservatives as an electoral force in Scotland? When opinion poll after opinion poll had registered profound disgust among the Scottish electorate at the poll tax; when even his own leader, John Major, had become convinced that the poll tax was an electoral liability and had to go, why did Mr Lang try to dissuade him from doing so, and why did he become the leader of a rearguard action to have the poll tax principle retained?

There are two reasons for Mr Lang's actions; both had to do with internal party politics rather than the wider political situation, and they indicate the extent to which the Scottish Conservatives are in danger of becoming an inward-looking political sect, rather than a popular political party. Two of Mr Lang's Scottish Office lieutenants were closely identified with the poll tax. Allen Stewart, the MP for Eastwood, had been drafted into the Scottish Office shortly after Mr Rifkind's transfer to the Department of Transport. His chief responsibility was the operation of the poll tax. In this, he was ably assisted by a researcher, Douglas Mason, who had 'invented' the poll tax, under the auspices of the Adam Smith Institute. Mr Stewart's constituency, Eastwood, had benefited from the Community Charge, and his constituency association had threatened a split in the party if the rates were restored.

The other of Mr Lang's deputies was, of course, the former Scottish party chairman, Michael Forsyth. He had no departmental responsibility for the poll tax, but as one of Mrs Thatcher's strongest supporters, he remained a defender of the policy she had described as her "flagship". Mr Forsyth had also been identified as the right's champion for Scottish Secretary, and had been implicated in the Law Reform fiasco.

Mr Lang was not known as either an ardent Thatcherite, or a particular enthusiast for the poll tax. But he had been local government Minister under Malcolm Rifkind in the crucial years of its introduction in Scotland. Like all politicians, he did not relish the thought of having to eat his words in such volume. This was a political mistake that may cost him dear. He would have been better by far to have cut his losses and disowned the community charge just as his political leader was doing in the poll tax review exercise, instead of fighting a losing battle.

Of course Mr Lang does not openly accept that he was a last ditch defender of the Community Charge, and he now insists that he is more than happy with its replacement. But he did nothing to deter press speculation at the time. Indeed, there were innumerable reports in the press during February and March 1991 that the cabinet subcommittee charged with reviewing the community charge was meeting determined opposition from Mr Lang to any suggestion of a return to a property tax. Mr Lang did nothing to deny these reports.

In the members' lobby of the House of Commons, where nothing of course is attributable, it was conventional wisdom that the Scottish Secretary was determinedly trying to save the principle of the community charge - that everyone should pay something for local services. Mr Lang held out for that principle, against any return to the rates, and claims that the new council tax does precisely that. However, the capitation element in the new council tax is a figleaf. Far from everybody paying, vast numbers who (like students) were previously obliged to pay at least twenty percent, are now exempt. A twenty five percent discount for a single-person household is a long way from the "everyone pays" principle of the poll tax. In trying to claim that there is continuity Mr Lang did himself no service, and merely provided ammunition for the opposition, who were able to claim - with the authority of the Scottish Secretary himself - that the council tax was "son of poll tax", and that there remained confusion in the Government's mind about the new system of funding local authorities.

Mr Lang has not had an easy time as Scottish Secretary. But it is not an easy post, as Malcolm Rifkind no doubt would testify, from his current vantage point elsewhere on the Cabinet table. Malcolm Rifkind was driven to the brink of resignation after the 1990 Budget over the operation of the poll tax reliefs system in Scotland. His administration was nearly driven onto the rocks over the Law Reform Bill, in July 1990, thanks to his supposed supporters on the Scottish Tory backbench. But Mr Rifkind survived to find a new incarnation in Cabinet, essentially because he was prepared to face down his own troops, and on several occasions refuse to listen to their counsel. It appears that, on the poll tax at least, Mr Lang was too prepared to listen to his own backbenchers, to the exclusion of the clamour for reform coming from the Scottish electorate. That selective reception may have done the Conservative cause, and Mr Lang personally, some considerable damage.

In April, the opinion polls showed the Conservatives in the UK reviving on the strength of the effacement of the poll tax. But in Scotland, they
remained stuck in the mid twenties, and Ian Lang personally registered badly. On 29th April 1991, according to the Sunday Times, MORI placed Mr Lang's satisfaction level unchanged at 17 percent, while his dissatisfaction rating had risen from fifty two percent in March to fifty eight percent, a trend that was to continue.

That same MORI opinion poll showed that sixty percent of Conservative voters were in favour of some form of separate Scottish Assembly. One of the remarkable features of the last year has been the ability of the SNP to drop off the agenda, despite both Mr Lang and Mr Major ruling it out. The first big mistake of Ian Lang's spell in charge of the Scottish Office was his attempt to save the poll tax; the second may well be his refusal to contemplate devolution.

The MORI poll followed an extensive survey by the same organisation for the Rowntree Trust. That poll indicated that eighty three percent of Scots now supported devolution or independence. Fifty one percent said they backed the Constitutional Convention's formula. The Rowntree poll didn't tell Scots anything they didn't already know. Between three quarters and two thirds of Scots have repeatedly told the opinion pollsters over the last decade that they want a change in the constitutional relationship with England.

The Rowntree poll had its greatest impact in the South. It prompted an editorial in the Financial Times the next day which announced that devolution was "only a matter of time". Another editorial in July, remarked that the Scottish Question was the most important constitutional issue facing the country. One of the more intriguing developments of the year was the apparent discovery of the virtues of Scottish home rule by a section of the intellectual right in the South of England. While, in Scotland, the right of the Tory party had been echoing Mr Forsyth's doctrine - expressed at party conference - that "devolution sucks", in London, curiously, self-government has become a more than respectable topic of debate in and around Smith Square. The Economist has been in the vanguard of the move to get Scotland to give up the "culture of dependency", and stand on her own two feet, free from "featherbedding" from the UK exchequer. The Sunday Times has also been producing editorials demanding a rethink on the constitutional question. One of that paper's chief columnists, the historian Norman Stone, believes that Scotland should be released from the grip of the Union, so that she could compete with England - culturally as well as economically - on her own terms. The Thatcherite Institute of Economic Affairs has been flirting with devolution. The IEA's deputy director, Frank Vibert, has said that the operation of the free market implies decentralisation; that applies as much to the UK as it does to Europe, or the Soviet Union. In the Scotsman, Mr Vibert added that "The nation state has been the most successful political and economic unit. What has not done well is the supra-national union - the Soviet Union has been spectacularly unsuccessful. If one views the UK as in some sense a supra-national organisation, it is entirely right to ask: have we got it right?" The Institute also noted that in a Europe of "subsidiarity", where government is decentralised to regions, the constitutional status of Scotland would be open to question.

So far in Scotland, this new wave of post-Thatcherite devolutionism, sometimes called "Post-unionism", has not so far found a constituency. The proponents of devolution remain, by and large, the Tory Reform Groupers. However, in the course of the year a few individual Tory mavericks have raised the flag, like the Edinburgh South PPC Struan Stevenson, a long-standing devolver; the party Vice-chairman Bill Walker, who proposed an elected Senate in January 1991; and Lloyd Beat, a Borders PPC and free-marketeer, who produced a discussion paper for Border's Conservatives, which puts the case for devolution all round, along the lines of the German Länder.

It is difficult to know what all this means, except that argument over the Scottish Question in the Conservative Party is far from dead, even if the present incumbents of the Scottish Office have set their faces against any change in the constitutional status quo.

Summer 1991: "Status Quo Ante"

A momentous political year drew to a close in the Summer of 1991 with a strange quietness settling over Scottish politics. The Constitutional Convention - the cross-party campaign for a Scottish assembly which had set the legislative agenda in the late eighties - had gone on hold. The SNP's support in the polls - a rough and ready index to Scottish feeling about the Union - dwindled through the wet summer. Labour held up; and the Scottish Tories recovered marginally. But the vibrancy that had marked Scottish politics for the previous four years seemed to fade.

In part, this was because of the failure of the new Prime Minister's plans to stage a general election in June. The legislative decks had been cleared for just such a contest to provide him with the 'mandate' he needed to complete his revision of Thatcherism. But the omens were reluctant to oblige. Following the disastrous Monmouth by-election, the opinion polls remained doubtful for the Tories, as the party squabbled over Europe. Plans for a Summer poll were scrapped.

MPs and journalists were left with a sense of anti-climax. The House of Commons became a dead place; shutting up shop early; going for long holidays at Easter and Whitsun recesses. It made life doubly difficult for Scots MPs, and especially for the SNP. Scottish politics as a whole seemed to become sidelined as, indeed, it had been for much of the political year. Since the Thatcher leadership crisis, and the Gulf War, Scottish politics had been finding great difficulty fighting its way onto the front pages of even the Scottish press. Even the economic recession, which began seriously to bite in the Spring of '91, was largely perceived to be a South East phenomenon. This time it was the service industries, finance and estate agents which were going out of business, unlike
previous recessions which had hit the manufacturing sectors in the North.

The Home Rule Debate

Perhaps the prevailing ennui explains the decidedly lacklustre character of the debate on the constitution staged in June by the Scottish Grand Committee. It should have been the scene-setter for the next general election; an opportunity for the champions of devolution, independence and the status quo to battle for dialectical supremacy. In the event it was a dismal affair; fetid and uninspired. The Secretary of State tried to demolish the case for home rule by ridiculing its proponents. “Most Liberals think that the German Länder is a Berlin building society”. To the “ersatz deceit” of the Convention proposals, Mr Lang counterposed his own “true devolution”, which, he explained, involved “diffusing power to the people: ... school boards...right to buy...the Citizen’s Charter”. It was intriguing to learn that the Citizen’s Charter was to encompass national aspirations, as well as inefficient councils. Clearly, it is a policy of the utmost potency, which will reach the parts ordinary government cannot.

Mr Lang’s dismissal of devolution might have given the opposition an opportunity to claim that they were in closer touch with the aspirations of the Scottish electorate than the Government. But Labour’s Scottish leader, Donald Dewar, did not appear to have his heart in his contribution to the Grant Committee. He mechanically, and rather hesitantly, restated the aims of the Constitutional Convention, insisting that the intention was to strengthen the union with England not weaken it. He also tried to puncture the current Conservative scare that a tax-raising assembly would inevitably lead to Scotland becoming the highest-taxed area of the UK.

In this he was only partially successful. It is in truth difficult – not impossible, but difficult – to conceive of a Labour-dominated Scottish parliament not raising taxes to a higher level than they would be under a UK Tory administration, if only because of the need to finance Labour’s more ambitious social programmes. On the other hand, proportional representation would presumably limit Labour’s dominance of the assembly, so there is no need necessarily to equate devolution with higher taxes.

The Scottish National Party’s constitutional affairs spokesman Jim Sillars repeated the Independence in Europe refrain, “why be a second class citizen of the UK when you can be a first class citizen of the European Community?” provided, of course, that Europe lets you join, and that they are prepared to accord you the same status as the other nations of the EC. Most of Mr Sillars’ contribution – as with so many of his utterances in the last year or so – was designed to deepen the gulf between his party and Labour over home rule, by accusing the latter of “duplicit”, and “betrayal of Scotland”.

The Liberal Democrat’s spokesman Sir David Steel, used the occasion to draw parallels between the debate in Scotland and the debate raging at the time in the Conservative Party – after the Luxembourg Summit of European leaders – over the durability of British sovereignty in Europe. For a change, he noted, it was the English who were agonising about the national question.

Mr Major discovers subsidiarity

In the summer of 1991, the UK Conservative Party was deeply divided over the issue. Mrs Thatcher was warning of “federalism by stealth”. Her successor, John Major, was attempting to negotiate monetary union, without saying whether or not his government had an opinion one way or another on the merits of a single European currency. The very meaning of national sovereignty was at issue.

The terms with which the Prime Minister tried to defuse the sovereignty issue in June 1991 were most interesting from a Scottish point of view. During Prime Minister’s Question Time that month, Mr Major tried to explain his approach to the current hate word: “federalism”. The word was unacceptable, he said, if it were taken to mean a “European superstate”, the bogy of the Thatcherites. But “federalism”, he argued, is much more acceptable “to the British public” if it is taken to mean “subsidiarity”.

Now, “subsidiarity” is, of course, Euro-speak for regionalism – the doctrine that power should be devolved to the lowest possible level. In the institutions of the community, “subsidiarity” is seen as a good thing. It makes sense – goes the argument – to counter the bureaucratic and centralising tendency inherent in the EC, by positively devolving aspects of government to the level of the German Länder, or the French Departments. Regional identities, be they Catalan or Scottish, are thus to be encouraged.

Now, one suspects that the Prime Minister would not endorse the doctrine if expressed in quite these terms, but it is difficult for him to embrace subsidiarity without also embracing the essential argument for Scottish devolution, which has always been that it would be to the benefit of the British constitution, and not only Scotland, for the overcentralised and bureaucratic state apparatus in overloaded Westminster to be broken up and devolved. It was Major’s first specific reference to subsidiarity, and his willingness to endorse it should logically mean a change to his attitude to the Scottish Question. There is, as yet, no sign of this at the time of writing.

Mr Major had told Scots on his first visit north as Prime Minister in January 1991 that he was willing to “listen” to Scottish grievances on the constitution or other matters. On his second visit, in March, he evidently had not liked what he had been hearing. Mr Major said he was not prepared to listen to calls for a tax-raising assembly for Scotland. He even appeared to rule out consideration of his Scottish vice chairman, Bill Walker’s idea of an elected Scottish Senate with no taxation powers at all.
Mr Major had taken his lead from his Scottish Secretary, Ian Lang, who evidently had concluded that devolution was a Pandora's Box best left unopened, as it had been through the Thatcher years. This rejection tout court of any constitutional change in Scotland remains something of a puzzle. With over eighty percent of Scots wishing it, (according to MORI's "State of the Nation" poll), one might have thought that the constitution would be something on which the new post-Thatcher Tories could capitalise. An offer at least to reconsider constitutional change could have been an opportunity to mark the shift back from Thatcherism to traditional Conservatism. For, of course, devolution, in its post-war manifestation, was largely a Conservative creation. It was more or less invented by the former Prime Minister Edward Heath in 1968, as part of his "Declaration of Perth". Even at the time of the devolution referendum in 1979, the former Tory Prime Minister Lord Home had called on Scots to vote "No" on the strict understanding that the Tories, if elected, were going to offer something better if they became the Government of the UK. They were, but they didn't. It is a rich historical irony that the Conservatives' main grievance about Labour's plans in the Scotland Act 1978 was that it did not give the proposed Scottish Assembly any tax-raising powers. Tax-raising is now cited by Mr Lang as the most disagreeable aspect of Labour's current proposals.

Though he was never a conspicuous enthusiast for home rule, Mr Lang was prepared to go along with the devolutionists in his own party in the 1970's. But not in the 1990's. The likeliest explanation for this is simply that with two powerful right wing anti-devolutionists in his Scottish team - minister of state Michael Forsyth, and junior minister Allan Stewart - Mr Lang probably felt that it would strain the loyalty of his team to breaking point if, on top of scrapping the poll tax, they started to appease the home rulers. Whatever the cause, the Scottish Conservatives have apparently decided to reject devolution in terms almost as unequivocal as Mrs Thatcher's.

**Tory U-turn on Devolution?**

It should be noted however that there are some respected commentators in the Scottish press who believe that there is shortly going to be a sudden policy shift to devolution by the Scottish Conservatives, and that John Major himself is about to endorse devolution for Scotland. The logic goes thus: In the review of local government currently under way by the Environment Secretary Michael Heseltine, the scrapping of the regional tier of local government will leave a 'gap' in government which will have to be filled. The Conservatives will eventually realise this, they go on to say, and will try to kill several birds with one constitutional stone. They will cut the number of Scottish MPs at Westminster (Scotland has more MPs than her population strictly justifies); scrap the regions; and then set up a non-tax-raising Scottish regional government to oversee strategic planning on such functions as roads and other infrastructure. This will be offered as 'prudent' devolution.

Now, it has been an open secret since 1987, that there is, in the bowels of New St Andrew's House, a "plan B" along these lines, which has been kept in reserve for use in a constitutional emergency. But so far, no-one has found it necessary to break the glass. It is difficult to know whether the idea that the Conservatives will do a U-turn is inside knowledge or wishful thinking. We await developments, but at the time of writing there seems little evidence that change is imminent.

Which at least makes the next election a simple and clear-cut contest between home rule and the status quo. After the last General Election in 1987, the then Scottish Secretary Malcolm Rifkind insisted that, whatever the causes of the Conservatives' electoral unpopularity, devolution was not one of them. "Devolution" he said, on the day after the poll in which the Tories lost eleven seats including two Scottish Office Ministers, the Scottish Whip and the Solicitor General, "Devolution was not an issue on the doorsteps".

This was a difficult argument for Labour to counter, since it corresponded to their own canvass returns. In 1987, devolution, as such, was, indeed, not much of an issue 'on the doorsteps'. Mrs Thatcher was; so too unemployment, the NHS, the Englishness of the Tories, even defence, but devolution was not. However, this is not particularly surprising. Devolution is not a life or death issue, because it is not a life or death matter. Anyone who put devolution - an abstract constitutional concept - above health or jobs would have a strange set of priorities. However, the fact that it is not uppermost in people's minds when opinion pollsters ask them what matters in life does not mean that it is irrelevant; or for that matter, that the many other opinion polls registering massive support for home rule are wrong. The fact is that many people in Scotland are deeply frustrated with how they are governed, but are not familiar enough with the discourse of constitutional affairs to be willing to discuss it on the doorsteps. Indeed, it is fortunate for all of us that we live in a time and a place in which the constitution is not a life or death issue, as it has been in other parts of the world, like Yugoslavia. Every sane person should earnestly wish that in Scotland home rule remains well down the priorities of the ordinary voter. But if the Government takes that as cause to neglect the Scottish question they risk making a grave mistake, and could be endangering the very Union they wish to protect.

The purpose of the Constitutional Convention was to ensure that devolution became an issue in the next General Election, which, at the time of writing, is expected in Spring or Summer 1992. It has endeavoured to do this in as peaceful and unemotive a way as is possible, the aim being to ensure that Mr Lang will not be able, on the morrow of the next General Election, to insist that devolution was irrelevant to the outcome.

As we prepare for this election, which is already being dubbed "Doomsday II", after the prophetic doomsday scenario of 1987, how do the Scottish parties stand? Well, in short, the answer is much as they did last time.
Indeed, as far as Scottish politics is concerned, the more things change, the more they appear to remain the same. Despite the Gulf War, the civil war in the Conservative party, the coup against Mrs Thatcher, the eclipsing of her Scottish protege Michael Forsyth, the death of Ravenscraig, the departure of Malcolm Rifkind, and even the loss of a couple of Scottish regiments, the party's standing in the polls as of September 1991 remained remarkably similar to their standing four years before. If the Scottish Tories are to stage their much-predicted revival, they are leaving it desperately late.

However, the Scottish Conservatives enter the election campaign radically altered from the party that went into the '87 scrap. They have lost Mrs Thatcher, the single greatest handicap to electoral progress in Scotland. They've lost the second greatest handicap too, the poll tax. Yet there are few signs of a significant revival of Scottish Conservatism. The party remains stuck in the low to middle twenties in the Scottish opinion polls, exactly where they stood after the 1987 disaster. John Major is undoubtedly more popular than Mrs Thatcher, but Mr Lang has not made a great impact on Scottish electors. He has had the odd success: his closeness to the Prime Minister, whose campaign he assisted, may have helped win a reprieve for Rosyth naval dockyard, which was marked down for closure by the Ministry of Defence. However, his access to Mr Major didn't prevent Ravenscraig being destroyed. Nor did it prevent two Scottish regiments being proposed for merger out of existence in July 1991. This latter is no minor issue for the Conservative party; it does no good for them to enter a campaign in which they are under fire from ex-servicemen and Tory backbenchers over their failure to defend a vital part of Scotland's cultural as well as military heritage from a defence review perceived as biased in favour of regiments in England.

More ominous for Mr Lang, the recession which Scotland has escaped for most of the last two years, is now creeping inexorably North. In the first six months of 1991, more than four thousand Scottish businesses went bust; up eight percent on last year. Unemployment is sure to rise as a result. The Scottish economy is now highly dependent on services and finance, which are being hard hit in the South. Scotland could not remain immune indefinitely.

The economic recession does not automatically benefit Labour. In the South of England, there is evidence that fears over the economy make voters more inclined to stick with the Conservatives, the party of business. Nevertheless, it seems probable that Labour will consolidate its hold over Scottish politics. It can expect to gain Ayr, where the former Scottish Secretary, George Younger (a strong critic of the cuts in Scottish regiments) is clinging on with a majority of 182 but is retiring. Labour could also gain Stirling from the Conservatives. The incumbent, Minister of State Michael Forsyth, has a slender majority, and despite his much-lauded campaigning flair, he must be a likely candidate for the chop given four years as Scotland's representative of Thatcherism.

However, Labour could conceivably lose the odd seat as a result of the revival of the Liberal Democrats, though the latter are unlikely to be the beneficiaries. The Liberal Democrats are on the up. They have a strong leader in Paddy Ashdown, who will get good coverage in the media during an election campaign, as well their nine Scottish MPs. Historically, they have been the most consistent supporters of devolution. They are unlikely to win any more seats, but they could drain votes from Labour in areas like Edinburgh Central and Edinburgh South, which could cause the socialists problems on the night, and might let the Tory candidate come through the middle.

Which leaves the Scottish National Party. It has not been a good year for the Nationalists. Despite the election at their Conference in September 1990 of a fresh new leader, with a convincing mandate, and an executive cast in his own image, the SNP have been becalmed. Their opinion poll graph has been falling, more or less, since 1989, when they reached their highest showing since the heady seventies, with 32 percent, only four points behind Labour. For most of 1990-91, they appeared to have bottomed out at between 15% and 20% (see David McCrone's article on opinion polls in this edition of The Yearbook). They fell out with the shop stewards at Ravenscraig over the future of the plant. They lost two of their strongest campaigning issues in 1991: the Gulf War, Thatcher, Major, Europe, all pushed them from the front pages. They have been becalmed. Their opinion poll graph has been falling, more or less, since 1989, when they reached their highest showing since the heady seventies, with 32 percent, only four points behind Labour. For most of 1990-91, they appeared to have bottomed out at between 15% and 20% (see David McCrone's article on opinion polls in this edition of The Yearbook).

The nationalists also suffered their own internal split over sovereignty in Europe. A group of fundamentalist activists launched a grouping called Sovereignty '90, which was dedicated to scotching the Independence in Europe line promoted by the Govan MP Jim Sillars. Sovereignty '90 argued that, just as Scotland wanted to be independent of England, so it should be independent of Europe; why jump from the frying pan after nearly three hundred years of trying to escape the fire? Prominent figures like executive member Jim Fairlie publicly criticised the policy, and the leadership.

In July 1991, there were mutterings about the quality of leadership provided by Alex Salmond. His bitter rival, Jim Sillars, announced that he was to stand as vice-convener of the party, though he insists that he has no wish to become leader. His election as deputy leader, however, leaves the SNP with, effectively, two leaders instead of one, such is the power of Sillars' political personality. This could double the party's campaigning strength; or it could cause confusion and disarray. The 'double David' leadership of the SDP-
Liberal Alliance in the 1987 general election serves as a dire warning to the nationalists.

Despite the spectacular recruitment of Scotland's favourite Special Agent Sean Connery, the SNP's internal disarticulation means that their election chances must be marked down. There is a possibility that they may lose one or two of the former Conservative seats they gained in 1987. Angus East looks vulnerable.

Conclusion: "Towards Doomsday II"

Looking at the prospects for the parties illustrates how the momentous events of the 1990/91 season in Westminster, have not, as yet, made a great deal of difference to the physiognomy of Scottish politics. The Conservatives have yet to experience the long-forecast electoral revival now that Mrs Thatcher is set for another place. The SNP have yet to topple Labour's hegemony. The Scottish Liberal Democrats refuse to give up. It is almost as if Scotland has been marking time; standing on the sidelines of UK politics for the last year, watching the action, but not being over-much affected by it all.

Yet, that inertia does not reduce the importance of the next General Election in Scotland, whenever it comes. It will be the closest fought in the UK for over a decade. In Scotland, though the outcome is more predictable, the campaign will be just as bitterly fought. The Conservative party realises that a few Scottish seats could make the difference between a hung parliament and a Conservative Government. It could also mark the beginning of the end of the Union as we know it.

One does not have to endorse the SNP's slogan of "Independence in Europe" to recognise that the European dimension is adding new urgency to the Scottish Question. John Major is not a root and branch, life or death Unionist, like his predecessor. He is a "listening" Prime Minister, not a conviction one. He is inclined to consensus, not confrontation as was Mrs Thatcher. Moreover, he says he believes in the virtues of "subsidiarity" in Europe, of decentralisation and empowerment. It is reasonable, therefore, to suppose that if the Scottish voters give him a clear enough message at the next election he will listen, reopen the debate on the Constitution, and establish a Scottish Assembly, though it may not be the one proposed by the Constitutional Convention.

That scenario – Doomsday II – assumes, of course, that Mr Major and the Conservative party will still be in government after the next election, which is by no means certain. The English electorate is more volatile than before any previous General election since the War. It could go either way, or neither, since many MPs believe a hung parliament is increasingly likely. If there were to be a coalition of Liberals and Labour, then an assembly for Scotland should in theory be the first piece of legislation they could agree upon for the Queen's Speech.

So, while all General Elections are crucial in one way or another, it seems that the forthcoming contest really will be the final conflict over Scotland's constitutional destiny. That is exactly how this chapter ended in last year's Yearbook. As someone, somewhere said, it's a funny old world.

Iain Macwhirter, Scrutiny Programme, BBC Television.

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