

THE 1979 GENERAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN
IN SCOTLAND

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The days of the Labour Government were numbered from the moment the referendum result was declared in the counting centre at New St Andrews House, headquarters of the Government's devolved administrative machine in Scotland, in the late afternoon of March 2. Mr Bruce Millan, the Secretary of State for Scotland, looking tired and dejected, promised at a hastily arranged news conference that the Cabinet would closely study the outcome before reaching a decision. But in his heart he must have known that the Government's battle for short-term survival, since the ending of the Lib-Lab pact, had been lost; that there was little chance of whipping Labour backbenchers into line, even if the Government favoured such precipitate action.

The Scottish National Party, for a change, was relatively united on the tactics to adopt in Parliament the following week: a firm commitment from the Government to act speedily on the close-run "Yes" result, by imposing a three-line Whip on Labour MPs . . . or else. When, almost three weeks later, Mr Callaghan rose to make his long-delayed announcement on the future of the Scotland Act, followed by a special television broadcast to explain the Government's motives — surely one of his least impressive, and unconvincing performances? — there were those both in the parliamentary Labour Party and outside who thought the eleven SNP MPs were bluffing. In some quarters there were rumours that the group was sufficiently split to guarantee the Government's survival in any confidence vote. But, in the words of one moderate Nationalist member who has often differed with his colleagues over tactics and ideology: "Everyone by then was bloody weary — they had a couldn't-care-less attitude and didn't want to prolong the agony any longer."

Mr Callaghan's offer of bilateral talks, to determine "whether a measure of agreement might not be found to provide for the better government of Scotland", cut little ice. Mr Donald Stewart accused him of treating the Scots with contempt and promptly slapped down a no confidence motion, although some leading members of his party back home — notably Mrs Margo MacDonald and Professor Neil MacCormick — did appear to express doubts about the parliamentary's group's tactics. The Tories then jumped in behind the SNP to table the official opposition motion.

At the end of the crucial debate, six days later on March 28, the SNP MPs proudly proclaimed that, for the first time, a Government had been brought down on a Scottish issue by a group of Scottish MPs who were not prepared to see their country betrayed by Westminster yet again. Nevertheless, several SNP members — notably Mr George Reid and Mr Hamish Watt, who had recently rebelled twice against the group — did apparently have some reservations about the timing of the exercise.

The MPs, while bracing themselves for a setback, still expected to remain a reasonably influential force after the Election. They were genuinely undismayed by recent opinion poll findings, which put Nationalist support at less than 20% and falling, pointing out that in the two elections of 1974 SNP standing was consistently underestimated by around 10%. The predictions of Labour's Mr Willie Hamilton during the no confidence debate that "the SNP will soon be able to get their MPs into a single taxi, if not on a bike", were laughed out of the Palace of Westminster. As it turned out, a tandem would have been quite handy.

Although the campaign proper was still two weeks away, the gloves came off only hours after the Government defeat — by one vote — in a heated Radio Scotland discussion. Mr Millan, annoyed and somewhat puzzled by the Nationalist tactics, labelled the SNP — rather appropriately — the "suicide squad". Mr Donald Stewart, then leader of the parliamentary party, calmly puffed his pipe and maintained that the Scots were seething with indignation over Labour's "refusal" to honour its manifesto commitment. The SNP slogan, repeated time and again during the campaign — "we wuz robbed" — was already wearing thin. After all, how could the Nats expect to convince

voters that Labour was not to be trusted when they, not the Government, had effectively killed the Act by rejecting Mr Callaghan's offer of talks on the future of the legislation. Not surprisingly, there are now those in the SNP who think the party could have salvaged rather more from the Election, displayed a more credible image, had the MPs given the Government the benefit of the doubt — "a longer rope to hang themselves on", as Mrs MacDonald might have put it.

Of course, the great mass of the party, instinctively lukewarm towards devolution anyway, was quite pleased to see the back of the Scotland Act. At a rally on Edinburgh's Calton Hill, high above the splendid Royal High School that had been renovated to provide a home for the Assembly, only two-hundred activists turned up for what was billed as a major pre-campaign rally, the weekend after the Commons vote, under the slogan "Scotland Said Yes on March 1". A couple of years ago several thousand could have been expected. After a short time, it broke up in disarray as a more belligerent faction chanting "independence — nothing less" paraded down Princes Street, against police advice, to the embarrassment of more moderate elements. There was the odd scuffle and a couple of arrests.

Right at the start of campaigning it seemed that the subject which had topped the political agenda in Scotland for the last twelve years or so was destined to become the great non-issue in the Election, relegated to the bottom of the priority league by the overriding all-British issues — prices, jobs, the economy — which were to dominate the campaign. Perhaps there was some faint home-rule passion lingering in the subconscious, but as the *Glasgow Herald* reported in one of its regular System Three polls shortly before the Election, only 3% of those questioned put devolution as a key issue. It fell behind the power of the unions (4%) while law and order — to the amazement of Teddy Taylor — attracted only 8%. Right at the top were jobs and employment (28%) and the cost of living — predictably — with 47%.

Nevertheless, from the outset all the main British parties, for the first time, were determined to inject a noticeable Scottish dimension into the campaign with separate manifestos — differing in varying degrees from the main documents — and separate policies in certain areas. Until 1974, when the SNP shook the British Constitution to its foundations, the two main parties

did not see the need to campaign on a Scottish manifesto (although the Scottish Liberals, devolved from their London machine under a quaintly Liberal federal structure, have invariably gone their own way to some extent).

Labour experimented with a modest document in February 1974, then with a much bolder manifesto the following October, positively radical in tone compared with its successor last April. No mention, this time, of an irreversible shift in the balance of power in favour of working people and their families. The Tories, on the other hand, published a short, typewritten "Charter for Scotland" in October 1974. It was unimpressive in design, but near heretical in content by today's Tory standards: separate Scottish budget, oil fund, legislative Assembly, and generally much stronger on the Home-Rule front than Labour's commitment for an Assembly with substantial powers over the "crucial areas of decision-making".

This time both main parties were noticeably cooler on the subject. Labour naturally retained its commitment to devolution, although several prominent members of the Scottish party had been urging the Scottish executive to ditch its support for the Scotland Act at Labour's Scottish conference the previous month in Perth. But there was no mention this time of "crucial areas of decision-making", although Mr Millan claimed at a news conference to launch the manifesto that such a commitment still stood.

The Tories, after successfully mobilising much of the "No" lobby in the referendum campaign — and converting others with a little help from Lord Home ("vote no for a better act") — could afford to be vague. No wild talk about an Assembly this time, only a pledge to repeal the much-maligned Scotland Act because "fewer than one in three people" supported the Government's proposals. Perhaps so, but still a considerably higher level of support than the Conservatives achieved in Scotland on May 3.

Then there was, predictably, more waffle about the need for an all-party conference — the classic get-out from them — to see if improvements could be reached in the system of government: "We aim to bring government closer to the people and allow more decisions affecting Scotland to be made in Scotland." No one, least of all the party hierarchy, seemed quite sure what this meant although Mr Teddy Taylor, as the

Tories' chief Scottish spokesman, had privately canvassed the idea of bringing the Scottish Grand Committee from Westminster to Edinburgh (presumably with a suitable weighting of English MPs to reflect the party balance at Westminster) and televising its sittings.

Labour, like the Conservatives, did not rate devolution as a top priority: the former placed much emphasis this time not on creating "more and better jobs in Scotland", but on saving existing jobs; the latter, as in England, was largely preoccupied with cutting income tax, law and order — that is, setting up anti-vandal squads, reviewing the working of children's panels, etc. — selling council houses and reforming trade unions.

Yet, unlike the party south of the border, Labour effectively managed to set the tone of the campaign from day one, to drive the Tories into a corner from which they found it difficult to escape. The only way out for them, it seemed, was compromise, and by the end of the campaign the seemingly aggressive Tory industrial policy had been considerably tempered north of the border. "Forget what Sir Keith Joseph and his allies are saying — we'll be much different in power up here", they were implying at the end of Press conferences.

Mr Callaghan began the assault in his opening speech to 3,000 supporters in Glasgow's Apollo Centre on 9 April. (He warned that Scotland could become an industrial desert — more and more jobs at risk — if the Tories practised what they were preaching. Mr Millan, two days later, elaborated. "We take the very simple view that we shall save jobs wherever we can," he said. "The Tories, as I understand it, are fighting this election on the basis that where jobs are uneconomic and profits are not being made the Government should stand back . . .".

The following week Mr Millan drove the message home further as the Tories desperately searched for a new initiative to counter this onslaught: there was not a single industrial project in Scotland, he said, that did not depend on Government support of one form or another. As if to underline this point, he then persuaded the Secretary of State for Industry, Mr Eric Varley, to keep open two plants run by Prestcold Refrigeration (a subsidiary of British Leyland employing almost 1,000 on the doorstep of his Glasgow constituency) which the parent company wanted to close, pending an investigation by the National Enterprise Board. The Government, he said, would foot the bill to

keep the factories open in the meantime. Mr Teddy Taylor, fighting for his political life in a predominantly working-class seat, naturally found it extremely difficult to condemn the exercise, although Sir Keith Joseph was more forthright; "a shabby political manoeuvre", he thought.

Labour had more ammunition in its armoury. What was the Tory attitude towards the Scottish Development Agency, created by the Wilson Government with the awesome task of regenerating the Scottish economy? Mr Denis Healey, visiting East Dumbartonshire — then Britain's most marginal seat with a majority of twenty-two — claimed the Tories would cripple the agency, then litter Scotland with bankrupt firms. In fact Conservatives, although hostile to the concept of the Agency, had only promised to issue it with new guidelines to ensure that investment was channelled towards assisting industries with a "viable" long-term future — exactly what the Agency had been trying to do anyway. No doubt aware that she had to counter the Labour onslaught before it got out of hand, Mrs Thatcher, at a subsequent news conference in Glasgow, was rather more explicit: the Agency, she said, had a tremendous advantage over its big brother — the National Enterprise Board — because it had to open its books to the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee. Then in her first speech since assuming office, the week after the election at a truncated Scottish Tory conference in Perth, the new Prime Minister actually accepted that investment through the SDA was necessary — in the short term at least — to plug an equity gap for venture capital which private institutions were unable to fill. With some justification, Labour claimed afterwards that its vigorous campaign had at least educated Mrs Thatcher in the economic facts of life in Scotland.

Meanwhile the Scottish National Party, which had become used to forcing both main British parties onto the defensive over the previous five years, found that it was actually being pushed onto the periphery of the campaign — squeezed out, as frustrated party leaders finally conceded — as Labour and the Tories slogged it out on the economic front. Ruefully they remembered Callaghan's jibe on 28 March that if the SNP voted for the no confidence motion "it would be the first time turkeys had voted for an early Christmas". Indeed, there were times when the SNP almost seemed an irrelevance, which just

goes to prove that when the tide is running against a party no amount of publicity can put it back on course. Party election funds had been swelled by two sizeable bequests. Tens of thousands of pounds were spent on a series of advertising hoardings, SNP election broadcasts were snappy, even impressive on occasions. But the advertising was often long-winded, indigestible and certainly not eye-catching. And, of course, there was little or no mention of independence. The message, simply, was that the SNP had put Scotland at the centre of the Westminster stage — and wouldn't the electors be foolish to throw all that away by reinforcing the tired, discredited, two-party system. Well, they did.

SNP election addresses were often uncharacteristically defensive, pointing out that the party was pro-NATO, pro-Queen and pro-Commonwealth, in favour of an association of British states, for a mixed economy and the *status quo* and certainly against customs posts at Gretna Green and Berwick upon Tweed. Mr Douglas Crawford, defending Perth and East Perthshire, even managed to dig out a photograph of himself shaking hands with the Queen during her jubilee visit to the constituency.

The Nationalist campaign really got off to a disastrous start. Mr Willy Wolfe, the retiring chairman, was forced to take the opening Press conference in Glasgow single-handed. Party officials, at times, found it difficult to hide their embarrassment at the absence of some of the former MPs. Suddenly, rather pathetically, the SNP was portrayed as a crankish party, on the fringe of politics, which was not to be taken too seriously. "If I was watching them for the first time I would dismiss them as a bit of a joke," remarked one seasoned observer despairingly afterwards.

Valuable television time had been wasted by the party leader's uninspiring performance. In the final week of the campaign the SNP attempted to repair the damage by persuading Mr Donald Stewart to venture into the Glasgow conurbation for a brief visit from his Western Isles outpost. He reckoned the pundits had it all wrong, and that the party would do considerably better than the opinion polls suggested. Few took him seriously, although the scale of the party's collapse exceeded the most pessimistic forecasts.

By the end of the campaign, both main parties could afford virtually to ignore the Nationalists although Mrs Thatcher made

a token visit around North-east Scotland to rally the Tory troops in the region where the SNP made its most significant breakthrough in 1974. At a preceding rally in Edinburgh, she repeated that the Tories would never lumber the Scots with what she called "fresh and costly layers of bureaucracy". As for constitutional change: "The devolution in which we believe above all is the devolution of power from politicians and the state to the people themselves." When Mrs Thatcher glanced at *The Scotsman* that same day, she no doubt noticed the findings of an Opinion Research Centre poll. It showed that since the referendum, support for scrapping the Assembly had declined; two-thirds of those questioned said they would back moves to either improve the Scotland Act, or find an alternative for it. Ah well.

Then, six days before the Election, the Tories produced what they hoped would be their trump card: a Labour convert — well, he actually hadn't been a party member for some time — in the shape of Lord Wilson of Langside, one time Solicitor General for Scotland, who had been sitting in the Lords as a crossbencher. He had been joint chairman of the wealthy Scotland Says No group during the referendum campaign. Mr Teddy Taylor could not hide his excitement, on a Press conference platform, when he introduced Lord Wilson as the latest in a long line of Labour Ministers who had been forced out of the party by the Left. In fact, when questioned, Lord Wilson stressed that he would not be joining the Tories, only working for them for the first time. He admitted at one stage that he had no real objection to the Labour manifesto. Indeed, he conceded that the 1945 manifesto, on which he originally campaigned, was a far more radical document. But, said Lord Wilson, times had changed since then.

However, this ingenious little public relations exercise did not seem to benefit the Tories greatly. As expected, they picked up seven seats from the Nationalists, by slender majorities, but failed to make any great impact in the areas that mattered: the industrial heartlands of West Central Scotland, where the Tories were so (relatively) strong in the mid-50s. Their share of the vote rose from 24.7% to 31.3%, almost entirely at the expense of the SNP. Writing in *The Daily Telegraph* the following week, Mr Teddy Taylor — who lost Cathcart because Labour, for the first time, managed to pull out their vote in

the hugh Castlemilk scheme, and put against him John Maxton, nephew of the legendary Jimmy Maxton, leader of the ILP in Scotland — said the Tories would only become acceptable again in the West when they were judged by their deeds, not their words:

"The inherent suspicion of Conservative policy . . . can in my view, only be overturned by a Conservative Government in action showing that its policies of enterprise and incentives can help to create the new secure enterprises and jobs which Labour policies have so singularly failed to bring about."

Liberals, who were surprisingly the only party to campaign on an ecological theme — they called for restrictions on nuclear power and on private cars in cities — increased their vote slightly from 8.3% to 8.5%. Like the SNP (down from 30.4% to 17.2%) they found it impossible to convert thousands of newcomers in North-east Scotland — where they had high hopes of taking West Aberdeenshire from the Tories — to their cause.

Labour (up from 36.2% to 41.8%) was naturally pleased, but certainly not overjoyed with its performance. It gained three seats — two from the SNP — to give the party exactly double the Tory number of twenty-two. But party officials are convinced they could have done even better had Mr Callaghan gone to the country the previous autumn, when Labour did particularly well in the Berwick and East Lothian by-election.

The tiny, breakaway Scottish Labour Party, as expected, was all but obliterated although Mr Jim Sillars, its founder, while losing his seat, polled more than 12,000 votes in South Ayrshire. Afterwards, he came close to conceding, in a Scottish Television interview, that the whole exercise, in retrospect, might be considered questionable. "An historical mistake?" asked the interviewer, Colin Mackay. "Oh, that's possible," replied a surprisingly cheery Mr Sillars, who said he was now finished with politics. "Time alone will tell." Mr George Reid, the ex-television journalist who masterminded the SNP's election broadcasts, was also reflective. Sad, he thought, that Scotland would not now be getting a fair share of her resources. Then, in apparent disillusionment, he called for a new political initiative by supporters of Home Rule. Time, perhaps, for a new "third force" in Scottish politics?

The problem for the Conservatives was how to govern

Scotland when they were so far behind Labour, although the Tories would undoubtedly have been seen in a more favourable light under a system of proportional representation. Even then, however, they would probably still have been eight seats behind Labour, whose representation could have been cut from forty-four to thirty. Mr George Younger, the new Secretary of State for Scotland, was undismayed, although mildly conciliatory on the social and economic front. There had been several times in the past, he recalled, when Labour had come to power nationally solely on the basis of its strength in Scotland — and the English hadn't complained then.

But, as the normally moderate Mr Donald Dewar implied in an untypically hard-line speech in his Glasgow Garscadden constituency a couple of weeks afterwards, there would be a limit to the patience of a Labour-dominated Scotland over the next year or so as a Thatcher Government pursued policies against the wishes of a large number of voters. The clamour for some form of self-government was still strong, indeed would get stronger during the lifetime of the present Government, he thought. "It may be that many who did vote No, or who abstained, may come to regret the indecisive result of the referendum as Mrs Thatcher's shock troops ride rough-shod . . . over Scotland," he predicted.

Perhaps Home Rule, once again, will become increasingly popular inside a Labour Party which, ironically, strongly resisted pressure from Transport House to accept devolution in the first place six years ago. Sadly, this time, Labour will be in no position to deliver. It has had its chance.