

## From constructive opposition to equidistance to government?

The Scottish Parliament seem likely to deliver a governing role for the Scottish Liberal Democrats. The combined effects of the electoral system and the balance of electoral support for the four parties in Scotland is likely to produce a coalition government after the first elections in May 1999. Given that the Conservatives remain *persona non grata*, and the fractious relations between Labour and the SNP, it is the Liberal Democrats who could emerge as the king-makers. The party's involvement in a coalition in Edinburgh has been generally assumed to involve Labour, in a reconstruction of the coalition within the Scottish Constitutional Convention from 1989–95. However, the emergence of the SNP as a more credible force, and evident dissatisfaction with Labour in office (especially in Scotland) has presented a considerable opportunity for the Liberal Democrats, as the party now

has two potential suitors rather than one. In 1998 the SLD had private discussions with the Nationalists as potential coalition partners.

Of course, the different political situations in Scotland and the rest of Britain requires a careful balance to be struck between the party's strategy in Scotland and at Westminster. The SLD's strategy has become one of equidistance between the SNP and Labour, rather than of constructive opposition to Labour.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, constructive opposition at Westminster could start to unravel if the SLD enters government with the SNP at Holyrood, and could also be undermined if the SLD aligns with Labour in Scotland and drags the party too far into government with Labour.

However, Liberal Democrats in Scotland and in London have been adept at managing these types of problems before, and the autonomy of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, and its experience in local government in particular, should provide it with a range of high-calibre Scottish parliamentary candidates capable of holding their own as either government or opposition in Edinburgh. Devolution therefore offers the Scottish

party a bright new future and a potential power-sharing role in government, with more than an echo of David Steel's 1981 rallying cry to the party assembly at Llandudno, to go back to their constituencies and prepare for government.

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### Notes:

- 1 I. Hutchinson, 'Scottish Unionism between the two world wars', in Catriona MacDonald (ed), *Unionist Scotland 1800–1997* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1998).
- 2 Richard Parry, *Scottish Political Facts* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988).
- 3 Peter Lynch, 'Third-party politics in a four-party system: the Liberal Democrats in Scotland', *Scottish Affairs* 22 (Winter 1998), p.19.
- 4 Before 1997, equidistance could not have worked in Scotland. The SLD could never have argued it was equidistant between Labour and the Tories, as it was involved in a tacit coalition with Labour in the Scottish Constitutional Convention. In addition, the Tories were *persona non grata* in Scotland and all the opposition parties combined against them.

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## No Docking of Horses' Tails

### The fight for an independent Cumberland

By Mark Egan

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Cornwall is not the only English county for which independence has been claimed by parliamentary candidates. In the 1950s, William Brownrigg twice contested Penrith & the Border on the platform of 'Home Rule for Cumberland'.

Born in 1897, Brownrigg was a well-known, rather eccentric, farmer at The Flatts, Kirkbampton, Cumberland. Prominent within the local farming community, Brownrigg put himself forward as an In-

dependent candidate at the 1951 general election, securing just 158 votes. Aside from his call for home rule, he argued for the legalisation of 'cock-fighting [during December], sweepstakes, card-playing and

gambling', as well as 'no docking of horses' tails'. Other distinctive policies included increased salaries for mole-catchers and the return of land confiscated from Jacobites to their descendants.

Undaunted by his disappointing result, Brownrigg emerged again in 1955, challenging William Whitelaw as an Independent Conservative. His poll improved to 368 votes but he again lost his deposit. This was of little concern to Brownrigg, who covered his election expenses on this occasion by means of wagers with fellow farmers that he would again stand. Sadly, Brownrigg did not pursue his political career further and was unable to capitalise on the increasing popularity of nationalism in the 1960s.