

# In From The Fringes?

## The Scottish Liberal Democrats

*Peter Lynch* examines the development of the Scottish Liberal Democrats and assesses whether the party can emerge from the fringes of Scottish politics to become an important player in the Scottish Parliament.

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It is not only the Federal Liberal Democrats who celebrate their tenth birthday this year, but also the Scottish Liberal Democrats, created by the merger of the Scottish Liberal Party and the Scottish SDP in 1988. Scotland has always been important to the Liberal Democrats and the Liberal tradition in general, both historically and in recent times.

After all, it was Scotland which provided Jo Grimond and David Steel, in addition to around a half to one third of the party's MPs at Westminster, many of them in prominent front-bench positions, such as Malcolm Bruce and Menzies Campbell, or holding important positions within the federal party organisation, such as Charles Kennedy and Bob Maclennan. Clearly, without their Scottish MPs, the Alliance would have been a much weakened force from 1983–97. In addition, since 1997, given the new intake of MPs, the Scottish contingent provides the party with some of its most experienced parliamentarians.

It can also be argued that it is the Scottish Liberal Democrats (SLD) that make the Liberal Democrats (and the Liberals before them) a genuinely federal party. This may sound an exaggerated claim given the existence of the Welsh and English parties, but can be appreciated given the size, political impact and autonomy enjoyed by the Scottish party within the federal structure both before and after the 1988 merger. The Scottish party has a clear identity, distinctive policies and an entirely separate organisation and membership structure – and a greater level of autonomy – than its counterparts in Wales and England. In part, this is a result of Scotland's political and governmental distinctiveness within the UK, with different education and legal systems and distinctive government arrangements through the Scottish Office. However, it is also a result of the lengthy development of the Lib-

eral Democrats as a determinedly Scottish party committed to home rule historical roots in Scottish culture and politics. Undoubtedly, the party's role in the future Scottish Parliament will serve to make it even more distinctive from the federal organisation.

### The Liberal Tradition

It would be no exaggeration to say that Liberalism was *the* political movement of nineteenth-century Scotland. The Liberal Party dominated elections from 1832 until the 1880s, when the splits within the party over Irish home rule created the break-away Liberal Unionists to divide the Liberal vote. However, even then, support for the Liberals never dipped below 50% in Scotland from 1832–1918, with the result that the Liberals were almost always able to harvest a substantial majority of Scottish seats until the end of the First World War. After 1918, however, the party went into what seemed like a permanent decline, fuelled by the UK-wide divisions of the 1920s and 1930s, only briefly reviving in the 1960s before experiencing a much more substantial renaissance in the 1980s.

Ironically, the Liberal tradition lived on after 1918 in the shape of the Scottish Unionist Party, with some of its inheritance reflecting previous divisions over Irish home rule and the merger of the Liberal Unionists with the Conservatives in 1912. This brought a radical, liberal element into the Unionist Party in addition to a working-class electorate opposed to Irish home rule and Irish migration into Scotland. Whilst the Liberals survived as a minor party after the 1930s, reconstituted as the Scottish Liberal Federation in 1945, a broader liberalism successfully operated through Unionism and the experience of the National coalition of the 1930s. Significantly, National Liberal candidates were still standing for the Unionists in the 1950s (indeed, eight of them were elected in Scotland at the 1955 gen-

eral election), reflecting the extent to which liberalism remained a viable political force in Scotland, though not one which actually helped the Scottish Liberal Party itself. The Unionists were also careful to maintain good relations and tacit electoral alliances with local Liberal parties in a number of Scottish constituencies, in order to avoid splitting the anti-Labour vote.<sup>1</sup> Thus, as the Liberal Party withered away across the UK from the 1920s, it was the Scottish Unionists who were able to appear as a replacement party and the natural home for disaffected and disenfranchised Liberals as Liberal organisation declined – though Labour was also able to benefit from an ability to attract former Liberal voters.

The Unionists' success mirrored the Scottish Liberal Party's failures in the period from the 1920s to the 1960s. Party-political liberalism declined across Scotland, and the party confined itself to contesting a limited number of seats at general elections due to its organisational weaknesses. For example, in 1951, the Scottish Liberals only contested nine of the seventy-one seats, followed by only five in 1955. Of course, such targeting yielded reasonable results in these seats. It helped to maintain local organisations and support bases in some rural areas which would provide the grounds for future success – as in Gordon, which the Liberals contested at every post-war election (except 1959), Russell Johnston's Inverness seat, which the party fought at every election from 1945 onwards (except 1951) and David Steel's seat in the Borders, which the party contested at every election from 1945.<sup>2</sup>

However, the inability to fight the majority of seats in Scotland between 1951 and 1974 meant that Liberal popular support fell away across large parts of the country, despite efforts to revive support by the party's grassroots. Significantly, it was only in 1983, with the advent of the Alliance, that the Liberals (together with the SDP) were able to contest all of Scotland's Westminster constituencies.

The party's weaknesses in organisation and membership provide part of the reason for the limited success of the party in later years – and why those successes only occurred in certain parts of Scotland – but the rise of the Scottish National Party is also an important factor. Unlike the Liberals in England, the Scottish party faced an important competitor for the third-party vote as Scotland developed into a four-party system in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, the Liberal revival in 1974 saw the party's support in England rising to 21.3% in February and 20.2% in October. In Scotland, the party was pegged back to only 7.9% and 8.3% at the two elections, whilst the Nationalists emerged to take 22.1% and 30.4% and become Scotland's second party.<sup>3</sup> The Liberals gradually coped with the Nationalist threat in their own heartlands, but the SNP has remained a long-term obstacle to the Scottish Liberal Democrats and has often appeared more capable of upsetting the two-party balance in Scotland than its older Liberal rival – often in dramatic style.

## Electoral prospects

Although in the past the Scottish Liberal Democrats can clearly be seen as the victims of an unfair voting system, over the last decade they have become experts at playing the first-past-the-post system. Indeed, the Scottish Liberal Democrats have not been disadvantaged by the FPTP system, through the party's ability to concentrate its support in a small number of constituencies. In the 1980s and 1990s, the success of the party's targeting was evident from its ability to win and retain seats in general elections, even while its support was declining in Scotland after 1983, and remained static at 13% between 1992 and 1997.

There are two problems with the party's electoral performance in Scotland. First, too much of it has come at the expense of one party, the Conservatives. Clearly, there have been special factors at work here in relation to the anti-Scottish image

of the Tories, but the SLD does remain vulnerable to a Conservative revival.

Second, there is the fact that the SLD's support is often non-existent outside its heartlands in the Borders, Highlands and Northeast. Besides Edinburgh West, the party has no urban seats and is a marginal force in the central belt, which contains the bulk of Scotland's population and seats. This reality makes the SLD appear as something of a 'regional' party in Scotland, represented in the rural areas and small towns, in competition with the Conservatives, but unable to challenge Labour or the SNP. Devolution and the use of the additional member system for elections to the Scottish Parliament is one route out of this electoral ghetto, as the SLD can expect to pick up votes and seats through the regional party lists in urban central Scotland, giving it a level of representation that has so far eluded it.

The SLD's opinion poll rating for elections to the Scottish parliament on 6 May 1999 have shown nothing of the volatility of support for the SNP and Labour, but they have demonstrated an opportunity to perform well. The fact that the election involves a two-vote system has demonstrated the party's ability to win support on the second ballot for regional party lists. For example, polling for the *Herald* in July 1998 suggested that the SLD would gain 8% of first votes and 12% of second votes, which would deliver fifteen seats, whilst by December 1998 this had risen to 12% on the first vote and 16% on the second, delivering nineteen seats.

Either result would put the party in a position to play a role in a coalition government. Also, such polls have been taken well in advance of the campaign itself. The SLD are formidable constituency campaigners, and can also be expected to gain from the new system through fighting a distinctive second-vote campaign as the balancing party, capable, through coalition, of radicalising Labour or, alternately, moderating the SNP.

## 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.