

# Scottish Liberals, Scottish Nationalists and Dreams of a Common Front

Sometimes allies, sometimes enemies: *Graham Watson MEP* analyses the history of relations between Scottish Liberals and Scottish Nationalists.

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From the passing of the Great Reform Act in 1832 to the end of Victoria's reign, the Liberals won every general election in Scotland. While there was often a Tory majority, in Scotland the Liberals' nadir (in 1841) was a majority of nine seats over the Tories; in November 1868 the Liberal Party won no fewer than fifty-three of the sixty Scottish constituencies. Every Liberal government of the period relied on Scottish Liberals.

Scottish Liberals demanded and achieved recompense in the devolution of government, with major pieces of reforming legislation including the creation, in 1885, of the post of Secretary for Scotland, and the establishment ten years later of the Scottish Grand Committee. The concern of many Liberals, that Scotland had been betrayed in the Union of the parliaments, was assuaged as definite steps were taken towards Scottish self-government within the Union.

To add impetus to the process the Scottish Home Rule Association was formed in 1886, and the break-away of the Liberal Unionists over Irish home rule shortly thereafter left the field clear for the Liberal home rulers. With the new century they founded the Young Scots Society, whose principal aim was to work towards self-government. In June 1910, some twenty Liberal MPs established the Scottish Nationalist Committee and historians have argued that, had it not been for the outbreak of the first world war, logic would have forced the Liberal government to follow Irish home rule with similar provisions for Scotland.<sup>1</sup>

As so often in history, however, the need did not call forth its own fulfilment; the Liberal Party went into decline and those opposed to London rule were divided on issues ranging from pacifism to social reform, many of which seemed more pressing after the Great War than the mechanics of governing Scotland.

In the 1930s the Liberal Party split, and although Herbert Samuel reiterated the commitment of mainstream Liberals to Scottish self-government, the party was by now powerless to put its policies into effect. The cause of home rule was destined, between the wars, to rely on the energies of a few outstanding individuals – John McCormick, Eric Linklater, Roland Muirhead, Sir Alexander MacEwen and others – as Unionist coherence triumphed over Liberal disorder.

After the second world war, home rule was briefly back on the agenda. In April 1945, Dr Robert McIntyre won an important byelection victory in Motherwell in a straight fight against Labour, becoming the first modern 'Scottish National' MP. In February 1948 John McCormick stood as a 'National' candidate in a byelection in Paisley, again in a straight fight with Labour, and was a close runner-up. In 1949, two million Scots put their signatures to the Covenant organised by the Scottish Convention. Despite these events, however, self-government was hardly an issue at the general elections of 1950 and 1951. Social reform and the welfare state were the orders of the day. Liberal energies were committed to seeing through the Beveridge reforms, which were being implemented badly by the Labour government, and to ensuring the survival of a Liberal Party whose decline seemed terminal.

## Jo Grimond and cooperative politics

It was not until the surprising Liberal revival of the early 1960s that home rule began once more to fire the imagination of the political class. Many Liberals saw in Jo Grimond, whose maiden speech in 1950 had majored on self-government for Scotland, and who assumed the leadership of the Liberal Party in 1957, a Westminster leader willing to champion Scotland's interests. They believed that however wide the difference between the home rule advocated by the Liberals and the complete independence of the emerging SNP, it was narrower than the gulf between two large unionist parties on the one hand and two small self-government parties on the other. Elected as Rector of Edinburgh University in 1961, Grimond inspired in a generation of younger politicians the idea that cross-party cooperation was the key to achieving their aims.

Little has yet been written about the way Grimond's proposals for a Liberal-SNP pact were continually to resurface in non-unionist politics until the 1970s. Now, with the advent of a Scottish parliament and the likelihood of Grimond's successors in the Scottish Liberal Democrats being coalition partners of either Labour or the SNP in the first Scottish government for 300 years, it seems appropriate to look back at the history of attempts by Liberals

to forge pacts with other parties to advance the cause of home rule

Grimond's thesis was that although the Liberal Party had lost much of its former glory, Liberals could expand their influence through seeking cooperation wherever possible with those of like mind. This could mean working together with different parties on different issues. At Westminster he sought a realignment of the left to put an end to thirteen years of Tory misrule. In Scotland, his supporters argued, he sought cooperation between all those in favour of self-government to complete the process of devolution begun by Gladstone and Rosebery.

The 1959 general election restored some Liberal confidence after the disappointment of the three general elections since 1945. The Liberal vote had started to creep back up and a byelection in North Edinburgh the following year showed a gratifying 15% support for the party. But it was the Paisley byelection in April 1961, before Orpington was even heard of, which set the Liberal heather alight. Paisley had traditionally been a Liberal stronghold<sup>2</sup> and John Bannerman, the Scottish rugby international, canvassed on a home rule platform 'like a thing possessed'.<sup>3</sup> He polled 41% of the vote, rocking (like John McCormick in the previous Paisley byelection in 1947) the foundations of a complacent Labour establishment.

In Paisley there had been no Scottish National candidate, a fact which had undoubtedly helped rally

the wider non-unionist vote to the Liberal cause. Seven months later, at a byelection in the Bridgeton division of Glasgow caused by the resignation of the sitting Labour MP, the absence of a Liberal candidate helped Scottish National candidate Ian Macdonald poll 18% of the vote

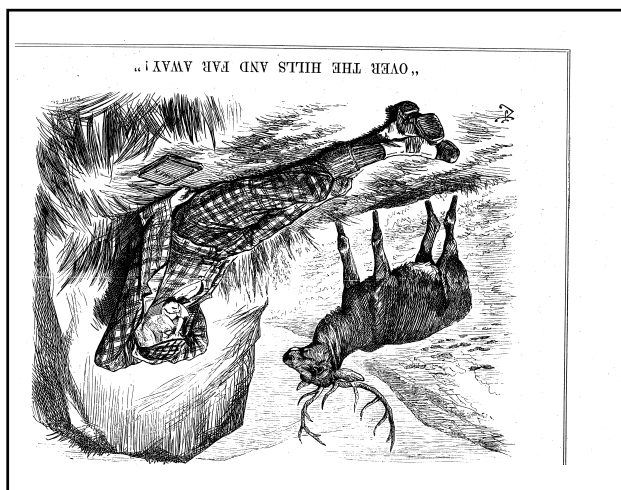
and almost topple the Unionist candidate from second into third place.

Derek Michael Henderson Starforth-Jones, a tertiary education adviser of colourful hue who travelled according to whim under different combinations of his name, was despatched as one of the Liberal representatives to the cross-party Scottish National Congress.<sup>4</sup> Though the SNP did not formally join the Congress, some of its members attended; and Starforth began talking with them about the idea of a possible Liberal-Nationalist pact. The byelections in Paisley and Woodside had shown each party's potential; if they had competed on the same ground such a strong showing would have eluded them. Did this not militate in favour of a formal agreement? That idea was subsequently to remain prominent on both parties' agendas for more than a decade.

The death of John Taylor MP caused a byelection in West Lothian in June 1962. An Edinburgh University law graduate and promising young Liberal called David Steel (soon to become Assistant General Secretary of the Scottish Liberal Party) called a meeting at St. Michael's manse in Linlithgow which decided to invite William Wolfe, a local chartered accountant and outspoken home ruler, to stand as the Liberal candidate. Mr Wolfe declined; he was to stand for election, but as the SNP's candidate. The Scottish Liberals, unaware that Wolfe had joined the SNP three years earlier, were not a little embarrassed. For the first time since 1929 they fielded a candidate of their own in West Lothian despite having only a skeleton constituency organisation. Unsurprisingly, and like many Liberals before and since (including the author), he failed even to save his deposit.

Starforth pursued the idea of electoral cooperation with a draft pamphlet entitled 'A Scottish Government and Parliament', advocating openly a pact between Liberals and the SNP. His enthusiasm was not shared by all his fellow Liberals, however. At a meeting in their Atholl Place, Edinburgh headquarters on 30

Gladstone's governments relied on Scottish Liberal MPs.



June the Scottish Liberals' executive committee refused to publish it.<sup>5</sup> But they agreed simultaneously not to adopt parliamentary candidates for the coming general election in North Aberdeen, Stirling or either of the Perthshire constituencies. The non-unionist opposition should not be split.

On 1 December the Liberals' executive gave 'sanction, but not approval', for talks between their Chair-

for contesting a byelection in the Labour-Liberal National marginal constituency of Dundee West, a contest in Kinross & West Perthshire with the chance of defeating or at least embarrassing the Prime Minister of the day<sup>7</sup> was a prospect neither could resist.

Alasdair Duncan-Miller, the son of a former member for East Fife, had previously spoken in favour of the SNP candidate Arthur Donaldson.

December he moved that the two parties' office-bearers should meet to negotiate a pact, though he was out-voted. But on 8 February 1964, at an extraordinary meeting of the SNP council, Wolfe moved successfully to gain a commitment that the matter would feature on the agenda of the party's next regular council meeting on 7 March.<sup>8</sup>

The SNP resolved in March 1964 to ask the Scottish Liberals whether they would put self-government at the head of their programme and require all general election candidates to pledge themselves to it and to forcing self government if the two parties between them held a majority of Scottish constituencies. Starforth responded warmly, but John Bannerman, quizzed by the press, replied that the issue ranked alongside other key priorities and that the Scottish Liberals, as part of a wider UK party, could not contemplate unilateral action. Bannerman would not allow the SNP to dictate the terms of cooperation.

The Scottish Liberals resolved in April to establish a study group to investigate measures that could hasten the achievement of self-government, 'not precluding discussion with outside bodies'.<sup>9</sup> That month the Liberals fielded their largest-ever slate of candidates for the local elections and prepared for what was by Liberal standards a major onslaught at the general election in October.

Alec Douglas-Home's return to the Commons had done little to revive Tory fortunes. A byelection in May in the Lanarkshire seat of Rutherglen, a Tory-Labour marginal, was to prove unappetising to both Liberals and Nationalists. The Conservatives entrusted Iain Sproat to maintain their narrow majority in a straight run against Labour. Not for the last time, he was to disappoint them.<sup>10</sup>

The Scottish Liberals entered the 1964 election on a platform of federalist fervour. They gained three new MPs – Russell Johnston in Inverness, Alasdair Mackenzie in Ross & Cromarty and George Mackie in Caithness & Sutherland – and took

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man, John Bannerman and the SNP President Dr Robert McIntyre. Meeting a fortnight later at the North British hotel, the Liberal Party council added the rider that 'there should be no appeasement'.<sup>6</sup> But in the light of the byelection in Glasgow Woodside the previous month, where the Liberals and the SNP between them had polled almost as many votes as the Labour victor, Bannerman was convinced that talks aiming at a non-aggression pact could prove fruitful. The meeting with McIntyre in March 1963 identified good will on both sides. The two men agreed to consider the respective strength of each party when deciding which seats to contest. Though both recognised that without the party discipline which the prospect of government can offer, the decision about whether to field a candidate would rest ultimately with the local constituency organisations, they nonetheless shared the view that the cause of home rule could best be advanced by maximising the third-party devolutionist vote.

## Discord

The balmy days of spring were not to last, however, and the autumn brought renewed discord. While neither party showed much enthusiasm

for contesting a byelection in the Labour-Liberal National marginal constituency of Dundee West, a contest in Kinross & West Perthshire with the chance of defeating or at least embarrassing the Prime Minister of the day<sup>7</sup> was a prospect neither could resist.

But Duncan-Miller himself was perceived by the Liberals and by some Nationalists as the candidate more likely to dent Tory prestige. Approaches were made to the SNP to allow Duncan-Miller a free run, but in vain. And though the Liberal bandwagon made much noise and achieved second place for their candidate, ('a gratifying result in difficult circumstances', as John Bannerman described it), the Tories romped home to victory with more votes than all the other parties combined.

The government decided that the time was opportune to elevate Niall Macpherson to the peerage, provoking a byelection in Dumfries the following month. The Scottish Liberals and the SNP again both fielded candidates; both lost their deposits, though their intervention almost cost the Conservatives the seat. John Bannerman noted that the SNP had now lost four deposits in succession, but with little satisfaction; he deplored the fact that the lack of agreement between the two parties meant 'the Scottish vote' remained ineffective. For the SNP, William Wolfe became similarly convinced that a pact was the way forward. In a letter to the *Scots Independent* in November 1963 he laid out his stall. At the SNP's national council on 7

Roxburgh, Selkirk & Peebles at a byelection less than a year later. Though these gains owed something to the successful appeal of Liberal plans for rural regeneration, presented in the Liberal pamphlet 'A better deal for the Highlands', their plans for Scottish self-government had featured prominently in their campaign.<sup>11</sup> Even the *Daily Record*, not known for its attention to Liberal politics, was moved to report on the Liberals' plans in a series of articles on the Liberal revival.

In the following general election eighteen months later, Scottish Liberals held most of their gains of 1964 and added to them West Aberdeen, though they lost Caithness to Labour (by just sixty-four votes). In none of the five constituencies they now held had there been a Nationalist challenger. The value of this was clear to Liberals, and a resolution from Ross & Cromarty Liberal Association to their national council in June 1966, calling again for a formal Liberal-SNP pact, was debated at length.<sup>12</sup> By September, Scottish Liberal Chairman George Mackie had received a letter from his SNP counterpart asking for a formal approach from the Liberals. There was division in the Liberal camp on the ripeness of the time, but renewed discussions on an informal basis were agreed 'to see what common basis there was for a joint effort to promote Scottish interests'.<sup>13</sup>

Clouds were gathering from the south, however. A joint meeting that summer between the office-bearers of the Scottish and English Liberal Parties and Liberal parliamentarians had reached no agreement on whether a pact would serve Liberal interests; whilst the Liberal Party in parliament relied on Scotland for almost half its MPs, the vanity induced by its victories across Britain had fuelled belief in a nation-wide revival and had drawn some of the fluid from the Scottish self-government boil.

The following month the SNP issued press statements to the effect that it would contest all seventy-one Scottish constituencies. In January the Liberals' executive saw no basis for

cooperation with the SNP, though one or two members dissented.

## 1967: Nationalist strength grows

If Liberal doubts about a pact had grown in the latter half of 1966, the following year was to produce two events which were to strengthen the hand of those SNP members opposed to a Nationalist-Liberal agreement. Parliamentary byelections in Pollok (March 1967) and Hamilton (November) were to change radically the SNP's perception of their chances of going it alone.

In Pollok a prominent Nationalist candidate in the shape of George Leslie, a local folk singer, polled more than 10,000 votes to the Liberals' 735. The SNP executive met three days later and decided to take no action on electoral pacts; instead they urged all who wanted a Scottish parliament to join the SNP.

A special meeting was called of the Scottish Liberals' executive to discuss the Pollok result and the SNP's move. Once again, Liberals favouring an agreement with the SNP pushed their case: James Davidson MP announced that he would try another approach to the SNP; Grimond, who had resigned the Westminster leadership of the Liberals, supported him. Broadcaster and prominent Liberal Ludovic Kennedy and his comrade-at-arms Michael Starforth handed round the text of a resolution to go to the SLP's annual conference in May, formally seeking links with the SNP.

The Liberal executive resolved to express its opposition to a pact, however, defeating the Kennedy-Starforth proposal by sixteen votes to two and resolving to release the figures to the press. The hard-liners, led by George Mackie and Russell Johnston, appeared to be in the ascendant, reasserting their distinctive Liberal identity. But it was clear the issue would dominate the Liberals' conference agenda.

The Scottish Liberal Party conference in Perth (18-20 May) was a

fissiparous affair. Party Vice Chairman Russell Johnston MP used a speech to a session chaired by Donald Wade to accuse Grimond for incoherence and lack of self-discipline, criticising especially Grimond's visit to the SNP headquarters in Ardmillan Terrace. The stage was set for a battle. In what the *Scotsman* described as 'the most lively and hackle-raising debate .... in the steaming political cauldron of the Salutation Hotel',<sup>14</sup> Kennedy and Starforth called for the drawing up of an electoral pact with the SNP 'to avoid splitting the self-government vote and to join in achieving a Scottish parliament before Britain's entry into the Common Market'. In a stormy session, with a number of close votes, the conference narrowly accepted a compromise amendment put by two of the Scottish Liberal MPs, Jim Davidson and David Steel, rejecting a Liberal approach to the SNP but inviting them to take the initiative 'if they recognised the need .... to place the national interests of Scotland before short-term party interests'. The SNP reaction was a statement from their Chairman, Arthur Donaldson, that any approaches for cooperation must come from the Liberals. Partisan pride had the upper hand: both sides were playing hard to get.

With Jo Grimond on the backbenches and John Bannerman in the House of Lords, Mackie and Johnston put out a statement the following month to all Liberal constituency organisations outlining the SLP's opposition to cooperation with the Nationalists. For the Liberals, it seemed that the matter was firmly closed. There were to be no dealings with a party which a young Liberal spokesman had derided in Perth as 'a motley collection of fanatics, ragamuffins and comic singers'. In the SNP, too, the advocates of a pact were losing ground. The cause of nationalism in the UK had been given a boost by a stunning victory for Welsh nationalist Gwynfor Evans in Carmarthen in July. The SNP themselves came tantalisingly close to winning a local

council seat in the Ruchill ward of Glasgow in a massive swing against Labour; they stormed to victory in a Stirling county council byelection in October. Their optimism about their own success grew.<sup>15</sup>

In the second of the two decisive events of 1967, the Hamilton byelection in November, the SNP polled 46% of the vote, returning Winnie Ewing to parliament in a spectacular victory and putting self-government back in the headlines. The absence of a Liberal candidate had been due not to any agreement between the two parties but to the absence of an active Liberal Association in the constituency. Ludovic Kennedy went to speak on Winnie Ewing's behalf but to do so he resigned from the Liberal Party, thus denting any hopes of a joint campaign.

Nationalist sentiment in Scotland seemed to be on the up, and on 2 December Jo Grimond broke silence. If hitherto some had doubted the amount of energy Grimond was prepared to invest in the cause of home rule, there doubts were now dissipated. Grimond calculated that despite the rise of the SNP and the development of a Nationalist theology, there had been no decline in the Liberal vote; indeed, the SNP was taking votes mainly from Labour. In a speech in Kirkwall, well-reported

impression that .... we are hostile to self-government itself'.

To grassroots Liberals in Scotland it was clear that the extent of the SNP's enthusiasm for complete secession from the UK had risen in direct proportion to their prominence. The SNP's substantial gains in the local elections in May 1967 had given many enthusiastic but inexperienced Nationalists a platform from which Liberals were frequently attacked. SLP Chairman George Mackie, on the brink of resignation, demanded that the MPs listen to the voices from the constituencies. He persuaded the Scottish Liberal Party's executive to state their unanimous agreement that 'the gulf between the separatist policy of the SNP and the federalist system of self-government proposed by the SLP shows no prospect of being bridged. The response from the SNP has been completely negative.'

By the summer of the following year, however, while blacks in America and students in Paris were caught up in a whirlwind of new ideas about how individuals could take power over their own lives, the mechanisms of self-empowerment in Scotland through a home rule pact were to erupt once again on the Liberal and Nationalist agendas. At a press briefing during a joint conference of Scottish and English Liber-

Johnston nor George Mackie had been consulted, and Lord Bannerman's attack on the Tories earlier that day for sending Ted Heath up to pronounce on Scottish problems looked mighty hollow. 'It is riot for Mr Thorpe to say what kind of government we should have,' stormed SNP president Robert McIntyre in an impeccably targeted reply, 'it is for the Scottish people'.

Scottish Liberal leaders convened a swift emergency meeting with their UK leader and a statement was issued saying: 'Mr Thorpe offered no pact, which he would not do without the approval of the Scottish Liberal Party ...' But Jo Grimond seized the opportunity, and two days later used the conference debate on federalism to appeal to the people of Scotland to unite in a quest for a Scottish democracy, 'ready to collaborate in equal partnership with the other nations of Great Britain'. Appealing to Nationalists and Liberals over the heads of their leaders, he seemed almost to propose a Scottish Party with the sole aim of self-government and to offer himself as its leader. Russell Johnston took the floor to launch a stinging attack on Grimond, and by thirty votes the Grimond plan was voted down. The joint conference backed a comprehensive plan for devolution, but wanted nothing of a Liberal-SNP 'dream ticket'.

Following Ludo Kennedy's lead at Hamilton, Starforth resigned from the Scottish Liberal Party and joined the SNP, and though scattered individuals in both parties made occasional rumblings, talk of a pact again receded.

In preparation for the general election of 1970 the SNP adopted candidates in eight of the most promising Liberal territories. As Chris Baur reported in *The Scotsman* in November 1969, 'The Scottish Liberals and the Nationalists have become so entrenched in their official attitudes towards cooperation with each other that .... a pact between the two parties .... to preserve and enhance the Home Rule vote is an almost hopeless proposition'.

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in the national press, he raised once again the banner of common cause between Liberals and the SNP. Hard on the heels of his speech came a letter to the Scottish Liberal headquarters from four of the five Scottish Liberal MPs arguing that the party 'should cease passing resolutions or making statements hostile to the Nationalists since it is impossible to do this without giving the

als in September in Edinburgh, Jeremy Thorpe chose as his subject the advocacy of a common front between the Liberals and Nationalists on limited home rule 'which could sweep Scotland and Wales at the next general election and bring about national parliaments within three or four years'.

Scottish Liberals were more than a little surprised. Neither Russell



At the election the intervention of an SNP candidate in Ross & Cromarty almost certainly caused the defeat of the sitting Liberal member, and in Caithness prevented George Mackie from recapturing the seat from Labour's Robert MacIennan. The Scottish Liberals refrained from contesting the SNP's best prospect seats, but to little avail: the Nationalists gained only one surprise victory, in the Western Isles, and lost their byelection gain in Hamilton. In two other seats, Banff and East Aberdeenshire, the combined vote for the Liberal and SNP candidates was greater than the number cast for the winner.

## The 1970s

Disillusion within both parties at their poor election performances sparked calls for a fresh look at the idea of a pact. The election to the SNP leadership some months before of William Wolfe, an admirer of Grimond's and an advocate of cooperation, and the insistence on the Liberal side of Grimond disciple David Steel, led to an exchange of correspondence between the parties' presidents and a meeting to discuss the matter in July. But if the matter caused dispute privately among the Scottish Liberals, Wolfe could not contain his dissenters. The Nationalists were publicly divided on the issue and it was an infinitely cautious team of Liberal leaders who confronted their SNP counterparts in Edinburgh. 'The SNP have asked for these talks', read a terse statement

from the Scottish Liberal HQ, 'and as a matter of courtesy the SLP executive will hear what they have to say. But in the light of recent press statements from the SNP the Liberal executive have not seen any great change in their attitude.' The Liberal delegation was led by Russell Johnston, who had already put on record his opposition to exchanging his Liberal birthright for a mess of unsalted secessionist porridge.

Wolfe and Steel saw two ways of bending the post-election circumstances to the purpose of their common cause. The first was to use the election results to persuade their respective parties to agree on a fist of constituencies where one party would stand down, easing the task of the holder or the best-placed challenger to the major parties; the second would be to seek common candidatures in seats where the combined vote of the two parties was substantial. Such agreements would rely heavily, however, on the good will of both parties' local constituency associations; as Steel was to discover in different circumstances a decade later, such good will would prove difficult to foster.

Despite William Wolfe's insistence at the three-hour meeting that

cooperation developed.

By the time the 1974 election approached, excitement in both camps had all but died. The cinders were to flicker briefly in January 1973, after ten SNP members and four Liberals met in Perth, at the initiative of SNP Angus candidate Malcolm Slessor and the Liberals' John Russell of Kingussie, reviving the proposal for a limited non-aggression pact. But the plan was thrown out by the SNP's conference in May and met a similar fate at the Scottish Liberal conference later the same month.

Why had the two parties failed, over the course of thirty years, to advance the cause of self-government, reborn in 1945? The failure of the non-unionist parties to agree a common front certainly prevented the issue from achieving the sustained prominence it would have required to elicit a government response. Prior to the 1960s, neither party had many candidates and there were few, if any, constituencies where both had a local organisation worthy of the name. While many in the Liberal Party were seized with the idea in the late 1960s, enthusiasm for pluralism within the SNP did not come to a head until after the 1970 general election. But by then the

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the two parties' views on self-government were less far apart than was thought, Johnston and his team politely showed the door to the SNP. A joint statement issued after the meeting reported that: 'The objections to making electoral pacts were recognised and the subject was not pursued'; and though scope was foreseen for cooperation at Westminster on Scottish issues, there is precious little evidence that such

idea had been soured for Liberals by the SNP's costly intervention in their best constituencies. Moreover, while the SNP could attract votes from the Scottish Liberals in rural constituencies, it was by no means clear that the Liberals appealed to the voters in urban west central Scotland among whom the SNP had found fertile ground.

In the 1960s, an electoral pact would have been a logical arrange-

ment between the third and fourth parties in an essentially two-party system. But did they share enough common ground? While both were unhappy with the Union, one advocated home rule, the other – increasingly – independence. The former cause held an intellectual attraction, the latter a more populist appeal. Both parties were divided about the wisdom of working together.

## 1974–79: An end to the debate?

The two 1974 general elections changed the fortunes of both parties in a way which silenced the debate. Though Scottish Liberal numbers remained constant, across Britain the Liberals more than doubled their number of MPs, vastly increased their share of the popular vote and looked on the verge of a breakthrough. Talk of coalition, first with Heath's Conservative Government and then with Wilson's Labour, hit the headlines. Liberal coalitionist energies were thus absorbed elsewhere. The SNP meanwhile gained six seats in the February election and a further four in October, taking their numbers from one MP to eleven within as many months. They were now substantially more important than the Liberals in Scotland. While the Liberals' David Steel, ever a dogged campaigner, clung to his mentor Grimond's idea of common fronts, the 1974–79 parliament was to deliver to him the prize of British Liberal leadership and the opportunity for a pact with the Callaghan

Government on a programme for national recovery.

Shortly after the October 1974 election, a split in the Labour Party in Scotland<sup>16</sup> put the issue of devolution back on the government's agenda. But the breakdown of talks between those in favour of self government meant that when the referendum finally came, at the fag end of a tired parliamentary term, the pro-devolution forces were divided into separate camps and unable to mount a campaign to inspire the electorate with the half-baked fare on offer from Labour in March 1979. Even the governing party could not unite its supporters in favour of its devolution proposals; Tam Dalyell's 'West Lothian' question was simply the most striking feature of its division into 'Labour says Yes' and 'Labour No' campaigns. Nor could pro-devolutionists rally four-square behind the plans. Scottish Liberal MP Russell Johnston and Conservative MP Alick Buchanan-Smith ran their own distinctive brand of 'Yes' campaign.

Although 52% voted in favour of devolution in the March 1979 referendum, a wrecking amendment inserted in the legislation by Islington Labour MP George Cunningham (requiring the support of at least 40% of those eligible to vote before the measure could proceed) saw the defeat of the plan for devolution worked out during the Lib-Lab agreement. The opportunity to unite those in favour of self-government and to drive forward a convincing agenda had been lost once again by its advocates.

## The democratic deficit

Much to the dismay of those who had believed Alec Douglas-Home's last minute promise, on the eve of the referendum, that the Conservatives would come up with a better plan for self-government, the Conservative victory in the 1979 general election under Margaret Thatcher ushered in nearly two decades of Westminster hostility to devolution. The SNP, reduced from eleven MPs to just two, was relegated to the side-

lines along with the issue of home rule. Though the Scottish Liberals entered the 1980s with the same three MPs as a decade earlier, their emerging pact with the SDP was to swell their ranks in Scotland before the 1983 general election, and the Liberal-SDP Alliance's performance was to take them into double figures.

Liberal leader David Steel became the country's second most popular politician. His campaign for merger between the Liberal Party and the SDP for the best part of the 1980s diverted Liberal attention from common fronts with other parties. But with the SDP led by Dr David Owen, the Alliance was doomed to failure. The new party which arose from its ashes saw public support fall to just three per cent in opinion polls in Scotland in 1988; yet despite this the Liberal Democrats retained in the 1992 general election the nine Scottish seats they had won in 1987.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats were born into a changed political climate. The economic recession which followed the Scottish oil-financed boom years of the mid eighties hit Scotland hard. While in the early years of her premiership Mrs Thatcher had allowed the Scottish Office to continue Keynesian economic policies, the re-election of the Conservatives in 1983 signalled the arrival of a new, harsher approach. It did not go down well with Scotland's voters. In 1987 the Scottish Conservatives suffered their worst defeat since 1910, returning only ten MPs out of seventy-two. A decade later they were to be eliminated totally.

Unrepentant, Mrs Thatcher addressed the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1988 and restated her opposition to devolution. She believed in the primacy of the individual over the collectivity. To some observers at the General Assembly, the forum which most closely approximated to a Scottish Parliament, the Prime Minister showed a lack of understanding and an incapacity for generosity. To one cleric, her speech was 'a disgraceful



travesty of the gospel.<sup>17</sup>

Scotland's 'nanny state' was increasingly under attack from London. Yet many took pride in the standard of social welfare provision. With government ministers such as Chancellor Nigel Lawson openly scolding the Scots for their 'dependency culture' and Scots being used as guinea pigs for measures such as the hated poll tax,<sup>18</sup> dissent grew. It found expression on a wider canvass too. While it had been in Scotland's interest to help the English run the British Empire, did not the gradual retreat from Empire and the imminent loss of Hong Kong, in which Scots had played a significant role, mean the English were fast outliving their usefulness? Moreover, the Single European Act of 1986, paving the way for a closer European Union, threw into sharp relief the measure of self-government enjoyed on the continent from Bavaria to Barcelona.

More and more Scots began to question the Conservative Government's legitimacy north of the border. The Scottish Grand Committee, composed of Westminster MPs rep-

and the Scottish Liberal Democrats. The election of John Smith as leader of the Labour Party in 1987 allowed the self-government question free expression in Scottish Labour circles. Suddenly, all opposition parties were advocating a change to the Union, backed by stronger voices in the churches, the trades unions and in local government.

## The Constitutional Convention

A century after the creation of the post of Scottish Secretary under a Liberal government, Home Rule was fully back in the spotlight of mainstream politics. The Campaign for a Scottish Assembly, erected from the debris of the 1979 referendum campaign, decided to repeat some of the tactics of the Covenant of 1949. It launched a Scottish 'Claim of Right' in July 1988 to demonstrate the breadth of support for reform. On 30 March 1989 the emerging Scottish Constitutional Convention, set up under the joint chairmanship of Sir David Steel and Lord Ewing

alist fundamentalists over the moderates who were genuinely in favour of a cross-party approach. In opposition to the Tories, many SNP members believed the key to success lay in differentiating themselves from Labour – thus independence rather than home rule.

The withdrawal of the SNP before the Convention began talks<sup>19</sup> worried the Scottish Liberal Democrats. Fearful of a Convention dominated by the much larger Labour Party, they had hoped the SNP's presence would allow Liberals to occupy the middle ground between minimalist and maximalist approaches to devolution. In fact they found allies in the smaller parties and the churches and discovered that the SNP's withdrawal actually increased Labour's reliance on the Liberal Democrats to give the Convention cross-party legitimacy. Moreover, Labour proved to be less monolithic than some Liberal Democrats had feared, with groups such as the STUC and the Scottish Labour Women's Caucus siding with the Liberal Democrats in favour of a proportional election system and tax-raising powers for the Scottish Parliament.

By 1992, however, prominent Scottish Liberal Democrats were losing enthusiasm for cooperation with Labour. As they had feared, they suffered by being perceived as too close to the larger party. They blamed the drop in their party's share of the vote at the 1992 general election on their involvement with Labour in the Convention. Liberal Democrat leader and Gordon MP Malcolm Bruce, who had seen his own parliamentary majority sharply reduced and a byelection gain in neighbouring Kincardine blown away like snow off a dyke, led the change of tack; but the new course was not to be long held, for concern for his own re-election led to Bruce handing over the leadership in 1993 to Orkney & Shetland member Jim Wallace, whose constituents' concerns about government from Edinburgh, which he understood, were balanced by the strong personal commitment to

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resenting Scottish constituencies, had seen its powers progressively reduced under the Conservative Governments since 1979; in 1987, having lost most of their Scottish seats, the Tories decided to boycott the committee, thus effectively killing it off. For Scotland this added insult to injury.

A 'democratic deficit' was becoming apparent. If Scotland voted consistently for left-of-centre government, why should it put up with right-wing governments foisted on it by the English? Opposition to the Union now found expression beyond the narrow ranks of the SNP

to draw up a practical blueprint for a Scottish Assembly, endorsed the Claim of Right.

The Scottish Constitutional Convention enjoyed the support of all opposition parties plus the churches and the trade unions. The SNP were concerned, however, that it would deprive them of identity and electoral advantage. In November 1988 they had overturned a Labour majority to win 48% of the vote in a byelection in Glasgow's Govan constituency. Their 1992 general election slogan, 'Free by '93', represented the triumph of Nation-



Scottish self-government bred in the scions of the Scottish establishment.<sup>20</sup>

Many felt that the SNP's refusal to join forces with other parties in the Constitutional Convention had delayed the project for home rule and played into the hands of the unionists. Frustrated by the surprising re-election of a unionist government in 1992 and the slow progress of the Convention following John Smith's untimely death, Scottish Liberal Democrats and leading Scottish Labour figures began to pool ideas about how to ensure that an incoming Labour government would deliver the devolved government which seemed to many axiomatic of the trend within the ever-more prominent European Union.

In December 1992 the forces in favour of home rule staged the largest political rally ever held in Scotland. The leaders of the Scottish Labour, Scottish Liberal and Scottish National parties led over 100,000 in a demonstration, at the Meadows in Edinburgh, against the democratic deficit. This was followed by a twenty-four hour vigil outside the old Royal High School on Calton Hill (the site of the proposed Scottish parliament) which was maintained until the passing of the Scotland Bill under the Labour government nearly five years later.

The Liberal Democrats' cooperation with Labour proceeded, but not without hiccup. The death of Labour leader John Smith in 1994 deprived the home rule movement of a powerful ally. In 1996, Labour leader Tony Blair declared a shift in his party's position on devolution. A Labour government, he said, would hold a referendum before proceeding to legislate. It would not support the terms of the 'electoral contract' agreed between Scottish Liberals and Scottish Labour under which the Scottish Parliament would be comprised of almost equal numbers of members elected under a constituency system plus proportional representation top-up lists. He also questioned the proposed Scottish Parliament's powers, causing widespread dismay by appearing to sug-

gest at one point that they would not exceed those enjoyed by parish councils south of the border. Any tax-raising powers were to require a separate endorsement in the referendum. The Scottish National Party seized the opportunity to accuse Labour of insincerity; even Scottish Liberals felt obliged to condemn Labour's new policy as 'a gross breach of trust'. To some, dreams of a common front seemed once again dashed.

## A nation again

The determination of a small group of prominent Scots politicians, however, brought together by institutions such as the John Wheatley centre, was undiminished. Under Labour front-bencher Robin Cook and Liberal Democrat President Robert Maclennan, a series of talks on constitutional reform narrowed down the options for a Scottish Parliament, building on the measure of agreement that cooperation in the Constitutional Convention had spawned. A new agreement on a voting system was drawn up allowing for the election of a reduced but nonetheless substantial number of Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) under proportional representation top-up lists. Professor Bernard Crick, for Labour, and the Liberal Democrats' David Millar of Edinburgh University's Europa Institute even prepared draft standing orders for the parliament. Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown used his growing relationship with Labour leader Tony Blair to coax him into viewing Scottish and Welsh self-government in domestic matters as necessary parts of the modernisation of Britain.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats were to approach the 1997 general election determined not to repeat their mistakes of five years earlier. They campaigned on the theme: 'one vote for the Liberal Democrats is the



one vote needed for a Scottish parliament', needing to differentiate themselves sharply from a Labour Party which they argued could not be trusted on home rule, and an SNP which now sought outright independence. In an important shift from previous election campaigns, however, they sought to concentrate their campaigning not on the constitutional issue but on issues of greater concern to the electorate such as health, crime and education.<sup>21</sup>

On the morning of 2 May 1997, Scotland woke up to a changed political landscape. Westminster had a Labour government with a landslide majority; just as importantly, there was not a single Conservative MP left in Scotland. The unionists had been routed. The Liberal Democrats themselves had more than doubled their Westminster representation to a total of forty-six MPs, ten of whom were from Scotland. Though halved as a percentage of their party's Westminster contingent, the Scottish Liberal Democrats were now without doubt the official opposition in Scotland. Despite significant tactical voting to oust the Conservatives, public demand for devolution had not swept the SNP to great prominence; their numbers had increased from three MPs to six, but the general election result was viewed by some in the SNP as a disappointment.

The new government moved quickly to introduce a bill on Scottish devolution and to set a date for a referendum. For Scottish Liberal Democrats, the referendum required

a 'double yes', since there were to be two questions, one on the principle of devolution and one on whether the new parliament should have revenue-raising powers. Could the three non-unionist parties decide to put aside their differences and to campaign together for a 'yes, yes' vote?

Prospects for cooperation between Labour and the Liberal Democrats were good: they had worked together in the Constitutional Convention and both had included a commitment to a Scottish parliament in their 1997 election manifestos. Se-

command a majority of votes in the parliament. Liberal Democrats officially remain neutral on their preference for a coalition partner, but many believe inevitably that the choice will be Labour. Labour and the Liberal Democrats both believe in devolution within the Union and worked together in the Scottish Constitutional Convention. The seats held by the Liberal Democrats are unlikely to be won by Labour, and vice versa. The SNP, by contrast, remained aloof from the Convention and see devolution as a stepping stone to independence;

Scottish Liberals their strongest negotiating position.

Whatever the outcome of the elections in May 1999, Scotland's parliament is likely to have a government in which parties are obliged to find common ground. It seems almost certain that Liberal Democrats will follow the advice of the now deceased Jo Grimond to 'expand their influence through seeking cooperation wherever possible with those of like mind'.

*Graham Watson was Chair of Paisley Liberal Association, and a member of the SLP executive, from 1981–83. He contested byelections in Glasgow Central in June 1980 and Glasgow Queen's Park in December 1982. From 1983–87 he was head of the private office of Liberal leader David Steel. In 1994 he became the first Scottish and British Liberal ever to be elected to the European Parliament – for a constituency south of the border!*

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## The system of proportional representation for the election of MSPs is only the most evident of the results of the common front with other parties which Jo Grimond and David Steel had advocated.

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curing the support of the SNP was more problematic; they opposed home rule, seeing independence as the only solution for Scotland. Eventually their leader Alex Salmond MP, under pressure from the other parties, decided to support the campaign since his party's constitution required it to 'further Scotland's interests'; home rule would be presented as a step down the road to independence. A cross-party umbrella group, 'Scotland FORward', was established to promote the new parliament, but the lacklustre nature of the opposition 'Think twice' campaign provided little competition. The Tories were in some disarray after their election disaster.

Scotland voted unequivocally in favour of a Scottish parliament with tax-varying powers. Through cooperation in the Constitutional Convention, the Liberal Democrats had achieved their aim of home rule for Scotland. The system of proportional representation for the election of MSPs is only the most evident of the results of the common front with other parties which Jo Grimond and David Steel had advocated.

The voting system, however, will mean that no one party is likely to

indeed they have pledged themselves to a referendum on independence if they gain office.

Liberal Democrat collaboration with Labour at Westminster adds to the likelihood of cooperation in the Scottish Parliament, though some argue that the Liberals have rarely gained from pacts with Labour, citing the 1920s and the 1970s,<sup>22</sup> and the prospect of a new Liberal Democrat leader may throw the party's cooperation strategy into question.

Many Scottish Liberal Democrats favour an agreement with the SNP and would support a referendum on independence within the lifetime of the first Scottish parliament. Donald Gorrie MP and party treasurer Dennis Robertson Sullivan are among the most prominent advocates of this position, which has also been discussed between MPs representing the two parties at Westminster.<sup>23</sup> A further option, favoured by some, would be to allow a minority government to operate, with Liberal Democrats lending support on an agreed programme. Most recognise that keeping their options open until after the votes have been counted and the MSPs are known gives the

### Notes:

- 1 G. S. Pryde, *Scotland from 1603 to the Present Day*, p. 223.
- 2 H. H. Asquith was MP for Paisley 1920–24, and it had been solidly Liberal before then; the Liberals held the seat again from 1931–45.
- 3 John McCormick, 'Flag in the Wind'.
- 4 The other Scottish Liberal representative was John J. Mackay, who fought Argyll as a Liberal in 1964 and 1966 before contesting the seat as a Conservative in 1974 and winning it for the Tories in 1979.
- 5 The pamphlet was subsequently published in October 1962 as 'Having been agreed by a panel of Scottish Liberals'.
- 6 Scottish Liberal Party Council and Executive Committee minutes, Edinburgh University Library.
- 7 The Earl of Home had assumed the premiership on 18 October and had resigned his peerage to seek election to the Commons.
- 8 The SNP's special council meeting had been convened to discuss a reorganisation plan drawn up by Gordon Wilson, later to lead his party. Towards the end of the meeting Tom Gibson, a prominent Nationalist, editor of the *Scots Independent* and an opponent of a pact, had to leave. Wolfe saw his chance to get his issue on to the party's agenda and seized it.
- 9 SLP executive committee minutes.
- 10 Despite the prestige of ministerial office, Iain Sproat was to fail in his bid to secure re-election to Parliament in Roxburgh & Berwickshire in 1983. In