

The Scottish Conservatives, 1997–2001: from disaster to devolution and beyond

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William Hague's four years of leadership of the Conservative Party coincided with a revolution in the political opportunity structure of Scottish Conservatism. First, the Scottish Tories were wiped out at the 1997 general election, their worst electoral performance of all time and their lowest share of the vote since 1865. Second, the party's constitutional position was heavily defeated at the devolution referendum of September 1997, so that Conservative opposition to a Scottish Parliament became an anachronism and devolution was set to become a reality. The party's prospects took an upward turn when it gained seats in the new Scottish Parliament in the May election of 1999 and from then on, it has faced a radically different political environment to that which existed previously. After 1999, bereft of Westminster representation, the devolved parliament was the only show in town for the Tories north of the Border, with an untested leader, a weakened party organisation, declining levels of political support and a reduced status in that Parliament as the Scottish National Party (SNP) were the main opposition party. Adjusting to this new environment was a major task for the Scottish party.

The combined impact of the 1997 general election wipeout and the onset of devolution brought three fundamental challenges for the Scottish Tories. First, the party had to adjust to devolution within Scotland in terms of party organisation, policy, autonomy and campaigning. It was required to act as an autonomous entity in the Scottish Parliament and gain credibility as a Scottish party – and reverse its image as an anti-Scottish party.¹ Organisational change and a reinvention of the Tories as a Scottish party were high priorities after 1997. Second, the electoral wipeout of 1997 required the party to rebuild electoral support in Scotland and do so rapidly because of the proximity of the devolved elections of 6 May 1999. Third, the lack of Scottish Conservative representation at Westminster, the onset of devolution and the election of William Hague as UK party leader markedly altered the relations between the Scottish and UK Conservatives. Hague's attitude to devolution and to a more autonomous Scottish Conservative Party was not easy to discern in 1997. Were he to have been a centralist, it would have undermined

the efforts of the Scottish Tories to appear ‘Made in Scotland’ in advance of the 1999 elections. Similarly, were Hague to play the English nationalist card through excessively deploying the West Lothian Question or Barnett formula, then Scottish Conservatism would have faced major strategic problems. This third challenge therefore had the potential to seriously undermine Scottish Conservative efforts to recover from the 1997 wipeout.

Dealing with devolution

Since the 1960s, the Scottish Conservatives struggled to deal with the rise in national consciousness in Scotland that manifested itself in electoral support for the SNP and support for a Scottish parliament. The mood of Scottish voters has travelled very far in recent decades, yet Conservatives – the party of the nation – failed to deal with the onset of Scottish Nationalism with a capital ‘N’ or the more widespread nationalism with a smaller ‘n’. The essential Conservative error was to treat these nationalisms as the same thing, which would lead to the break-up of Britain. Whilst Labour came to a *rapprochement* with rising national sentiment in Scotland, through electoral and internal pressure and attitudinal change, Conservatives stuck to a hard-line position of opposition to constitutional change after the 1979 devolution referendum which contributed to the party’s unpopularity and anti-Scottish image. This image has proven difficult to shift and will likely prove a long-term legacy for Scottish Conservatives regardless of the impact of devolution in actually establishing a more ‘Scottish’ Conservative Party north of the Border.

Active Conservative management of the Union was almost non-existent during the 1980s. Indeed, with the exception of the establishment of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs and some slight rejigging of the Scottish Grand Committee in 1979, there were no distinct Scottish initiatives until the Major government’s ‘Taking Stock’ process from 1992 to 1993. The ‘Taking Stock’ exercise was a minimalist reform which briefly raised expectations but failed to address public demand.² It transferred some policy areas to the Scottish Office and gave more powers to the Scottish Grand Committee, neither of which impressed a Scottish electorate seeking ‘actual’ devolution as opposed to symbolic initiatives that retained centralised control. The second set of reforms under Major were the much-trumpeted changes to the Scottish Grand Committee instituted by former Scottish Secretary, Michael Forsyth, in 1995, which strengthened the role of the committee whilst taking it on a high profile (and extremely expensive) tour of Scotland in order to bring the government of Scotland closer to the people. Forsyth was also responsible for adopting a range of consensual and symbolic concessions during his tenure as Scottish Secretary through an all-party anti-drugs campaign, more open appointments to non-departmental public

bodies, various initiatives for the crofting community, the Council for the Highlands and Islands and the Scottish Economic Council, as well as the return of the Stone of Destiny. However, though these initiatives were an indication that the Conservatives had learned from some of their previous mistakes, they came too late to restore much semblance of a Scottish identity amongst an electorate distrustful of the party, especially when efforts at accommodating Scottish opinion excluded more substantive concessions such as devolution.³ The party therefore had severe image and identity problems to deal with after 1997 which directly clashed with devolution and the onset of 'Scottish' politics.

A new pragmatism?

Despite an uncompromising Unionist stance at the 1997 election, Scottish Conservatives demonstrated a more pragmatic and cautious face in dealing with constitutional issues ever since. The party supported the 'No' campaign at the devolution referendum in September 1997, but took a backseat role in the campaign.⁴ The fact that *Think Twice* emerged as an umbrella organisation for the 'No' campaign allowed the Tories to sit back from the 'No' campaign and focus on the second referendum on tax-raising powers rather than simple hostility to a Scottish parliament. Of course, realistically, the Scottish Tories had no money, no elected representatives and a grass roots still shattered by 1 May 1997. The extent to which they were willing or able to involve themselves in the 'No' campaign was always going to be problematic. However, by sitting back from the campaign itself they did not make things worse for themselves in Scotland by appearing more anti-Scottish, though equally, they didn't make things much better either as they were the sole party identified with the 'No' campaign.

Post-referendum, the Scottish Conservatives sought to demonstrate a new-found populism in relation to Scottish issues in a calculated attempt to fly the flag for Scotland on as many occasions as possible to erase its anti-Scottish past. For example, the party sought to capitalise on the divisions within Labour over the temporary siting of the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh or Glasgow by proposing the decentralisation of the Scottish Office throughout Scotland – with the Scottish civil service departments moving to Aberdeen, Perth, Inverness and Glasgow.⁵ In addition, Conservative peers in the Lords sought to amend the Scotland bill to allow the Scottish Parliament's First Minister to nominate a Scottish representative to the monetary policy committee of the Bank of England. In time, such efforts led to more consistent Conservative stances in Scotland, such as those over tuition fees and state-funded care for the elderly, but it is interesting to note how Tories were keen to demonstrate a break with the past very early on after the 1997 general election. Of course, under Hague's leadership, the

Conservative Party entered its ‘apologetic’ phase in an attempt to distance itself from the Thatcher era and the fact that it lost touch with the public in different parts of the UK. However, saying ‘sorry’ to Scottish voters for eighteen years of rule by an insensitive Conservative steamroller – which delivered the poll tax – and expecting to be forgiven in time for the first elections to the Scottish Parliament seemed optimistic to say the least.

Moreover, in contrast to moderating its position towards devolution and to Scotland, the Conservatives also sought to make political capital from the rise of the English question. And this situation illustrated the Conservative political dilemma: how to appear pro-Scottish in Scotland when the party at Westminster resembled an English nationalist party in terms of political composition, outlook and opportunities. Thus, achieving some form of accommodation with devolution and lessening the anti-Scottish image of the party was partly undermined by efforts to exploit the West Lothian Question, Barnett formula and Scotland’s share of UK public expenditure. Such incoherence in territorial politics was hardly likely to assist the Scottish Conservatives, even though it may have assisted Tories in England. Though Scottish and Westminster priorities were in direct conflict under Hague, he did loosen the ties between the two sets of parties to allow the Scottish Tories to act autonomously in the devolved policy areas. Similarly, as a result of devolution and the 1997 general election, the Conservatives at Westminster become more Anglo-centric in policy orientation as a result of the migration of Scottish and Welsh issues to Edinburgh and Cardiff. Allowing some Scottish and Welsh autonomy was easier to do in opposition than in government, but Hague did so nonetheless. Whether Iain Duncan Smith adopts a similar approach to devolution remains to be seen.

Made in Scotland: reorganising the party after 1997

One substantial development within the Scottish Conservatives from 1997 to 2001 involved the reorganisation of the party in Scotland. The main reason for organisational reform was the establishment of a Scottish Parliament, and the need to prepare the party for life after devolution, though other factors were also important. For example, the Scottish reforms of 1997–98 have to be considered in light of Hague’s reform agenda for the UK party generally, though devolution gave these reforms a very specific context and form. Similarly, organisational reform has been a characteristic response to electoral failure amongst Scottish Conservatives for many years and the 1997 general election certainly marked a substantial electoral failure. The 1997 reforms were in the tradition of the reforms of 1965 which created the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, and removed the Scottish Unionist Party label,⁶ the Fairgrieve reforms of 1977 that instituted closer relations between the Scottish and UK Conservatives with a Scottish Party Chairman and

increased central funding for the Scottish party,⁷ and the 1987–88 reforms which sought to make the Scottish Conservatives more autonomous from the UK organisation with the appointment of a Chief Executive and financial autonomy for the Scottish party.⁸

The post-1997 Scottish Conservative reorganisation offered an interesting insight into the party's internal life and factional intrigues. Within a week of the 1997 election defeat, both the Scottish leadership and the small band of pro-devolution dissidents within the party had begun to consider the future of Scottish Conservatism. This included organisational reform and some kind of *rapprochement* with devolution as a means of restoring the party's fortunes in Scotland – even though the party remained committed to opposing devolution at the 1997 referendum. Jackson Carlaw, the party's deputy chairman, expressed the deep-seated reforms necessary:

There needs to be a complete redefinition of the party, including a different approach to the constitution, to the electoral system and to party funding. There has to be a comprehensive realignment of the party in Scotland. I look forward to the time when the leader of the Scottish Conservative group in the Scottish Parliament is elected by One Member One Vote. I am very firmly of the view that the party which emerges should, to coin a phrase, be 'New Tories, New Scotland'.⁹

However, rather than wait for the party leadership to address the issue some party activists sought to kick-start the party's organisational reorientation by presenting an agenda for radical reform. Prominent figures from the (small and shrinking) devolutionist wing of the party proposed that Conservatives should found a completely new party in Scotland by making a unilateral declaration of independence from London and break links with the UK party.¹⁰ This proposal was modelled on the relationship between the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) and Chancellor Kohl's Christian Democratic Union.¹¹ Under this proposal the Scottish party would set itself up as a party standing solely in Scotland, with Scottish policies and interests, which would form a coalition with English and Welsh Conservatives at Westminster. The rationale for the year-zero option was outlined in stark terms by one of the pro-devolution dissidents, Brian Meek:

We need a new party with a changed name, linked but not handcuffed to the English Conservatives. It would be a party which raised all of its own finances, paid its own workers, elected by one member one vote all its own office-bearers from the leader down, wrote its own contract/manifesto with the people. Consider the alternatives. We could simply stick with the status quo.¹²

However, the radical Bavarian option was widely dismissed within the party, not least by the leadership. The Bavarian option was unpopular for a number of reasons. First, it involved a Downsian strategy to reconnect the

party with the bulk of the Scottish electorate similar to the old cross-class, centrist Scottish Unionist Party. This suggestion was opposed by the right wing of the party and a renewed bout of faction-fighting ensued. Second, the fact that the Bavarians were pro-devolutionist fed into a more substantial issue than party reform – namely, dropping opposition to a Scottish parliament at the devolution referendum and reversing Conservative policy which had existed since 1976: something that Tory activists could not stomach. Third, many party members opposed the proposals because they would break-up the Conservative Party and there was a general feeling that the Bavarian wing had jumped the gun on party reform at the Scottish and UK levels. The fact that the Bavarian wing sought financial support from the Konrad Adenauer foundation to institute a study of the CSU's political and organisational autonomy,¹³ with the intention of setting up a Scottish CSU as a rival to the Conservatives only enflamed passions within the Tory leadership and rank and file.

The party leadership responded to the fractious debate through establishing a party commission under former junior Scottish Office minister, Lord Strathclyde, to examine the changes needed to be made to the party organisation with devolution. The Strathclyde Commission comprised key figures associated with the party leadership, a large number of parliamentary candidates from 1997 and a few councillors and constituency activists: most of whom were identifiable as party loyalists rather than dissidents. The Commission issued its recommendations in January 1998, which were discussed at seven consultative roadshows for party members around Scotland from 16 to 31 January before deliberation at the party's special conference on 7 March, which would institute the new party structures in time for the main conference in June which would herald a new organisation. The Strathclyde Report made recommendations in seven main areas, most of which were adopted at the party conference in March. These changes were of both major and minor importance. The minor issues involved the merger of the professional and voluntary wings of the party, new procedures for consulting party members over the Scottish manifesto and the creation of centralised membership lists (all UK-wide Conservative reform initiatives) as well as the establishment of a Scottish Conservative Executive with its own elected convenor.¹⁴ The major reforms proposed by the Strathclyde Report involved the election of a Scottish leader, candidate selection procedures for the Scottish Parliament election and the creation of a Scottish Policy Commission to research and consult on policy for the first devolved elections: though this latter initiative was only partly instituted and Tory policy was generated by the leadership in consultation with grass roots activists.

Before devolution, the leadership of the party in Scotland was in the gift of the party leader in London: who appointed the party chairman in Scotland and the (Shadow) Secretary of State for Scotland who also acted

as the party leader. After devolution, the Scottish party leader was to be a member of the devolved parliament and elected by an electoral college of party members and MSPs. However, party members were to have only 30 per cent of votes within the electoral college, with the remaining 70 per cent going to the MSPs. This division was to look extremely bizarre given the limited numbers of Conservative MSPs elected at the devolved election in 1999. As only eighteen Conservative MSPs were elected, it meant that this small number controlled 70 per cent of the vote: hardly an exercise in intra-party democracy. Moreover, the Strathclyde proposals for electing the Scottish leader were deficient as they ignored the fact that the party needed a leader in advance of the devolved election in 1999 – unless it was to be completely leaderless in the year before the election and throughout the campaign.

Therefore, the Conservatives had to amend the Strathclyde proposals to conduct an ad hoc Scottish leadership contest in September 1998. This contest involved David McLetchie and Phil Gallie. McLetchie was President of the party in Scotland from 1994–97, but never held public office. Gallie was the former MP for Ayr from 1992–97 and a combative right-wing populist who stood in the leadership election to ensure a proper contest. Neither of these two contenders were substantial figures in the party: a fact indicative of the state of the party itself.¹⁵ Moreover, the special electoral college established to elect the Scottish leader was hardly an exercise in intra-party democracy. The college comprised constituency delegates plus parliamentary candidates, rather than an OMOV ballot of party members, with McLetchie winning with ninety-one votes to Gallie's eighty-three. The fact that only 174 people took place in the leadership election – as opposed to the 176,391 members who participated in Hague's 1997 membership ballot – was an illustration of the gap between the rhetoric and reality of party democracy in Scotland that contrasted with the UK reforms.

The proposals for candidate selection to the devolved parliament were the second main change proposed by the Strathclyde Commission and intended to produce an entirely autonomous selection process and to ensure that candidates reside in Scotland. This latter aspect caused some controversy – as it banned English candidates from selection in Scotland – however, the move was long overdue. The large number of hopeless seats in Scotland requiring a candidate and the competition for safe(r) seats in the Conservative south,¹⁶ tended to make Scotland a proving-ground for English Conservatives who descended, fresh from the candidates list, on areas they had never heard of, at short notice. This development further contributed to the party's image as anti-Scottish and pro-south-east. Continuing this practice in the context of devolution would have provided a rather unique solution to the West Lothian Question – English residents standing for a Scottish parliament – but was absurd in relation to the devolution issue. However, the problem for

the Scottish Conservatives, which to some extent underlay the proliferation of non-Scots serving as parliamentary candidates, was a lack of candidates at various electoral levels from local government to national and European elections. Scottish Conservatism does not have the quantity or quality of personnel to compete in elections in Scotland at any level, so that limiting candidate selection for the Scottish Parliament had the potential to illuminate the threadbare nature of the party's Scottish candidates list, despite allowing the party to adopt a more distinctly Scottish face. The low profile and limited impact of many Conservative MSPs in the Scottish Parliament since 1999 seems to have illustrated this problem rather well.

The Scottish Conservatives also debated changing the party's name as part of a strategy to make it more Scottish. From 1912 to 1965, the party was known as the Scottish Unionist Party. This name was replaced because of the demise of Unionism (as in Ireland) as a mobilising force and the preference for a more middle-class, modern Conservatism that developed with Heath's leadership of the Tory Party in the 1960s. Options for a new name post-1997 included a return to Scottish Unionist Party, the Scottish New Unionist Party (proposed by Malcolm Rifkind), the Scottish Conservative Party, the Progressive Conservative Party, the Scottish Tory Party and the Scottish Democratic Conservative Party.¹⁷ This fixation on a new name was intended to allow the party a symbolic break with the past and a more distinctly Scottish identity – even if the best ones have already been taken by the plethora of Unionist parties in Northern Ireland. The party also sought to emerge as 'New' in a similar style to New Labour, with some assumption that the key to electoral success was to place 'New' somewhere in the party's title. However, as there was not consensus on a name change, the party decided to stick with the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party. Rebranding had its limits.

The 1999 Scottish election

The 1999 Scottish election was a unique and ironic experience for Scottish Conservatives. With few exceptions, the party's candidates went into the campaign seeking election to an institution they vehemently opposed and likely to succeed through a proportional electoral system they abhorred. The campaign had a degree of novelty, as it was the first Scottish election in which all parties were faced with the additional member system of seventy-three first-past-the-post (FPTP) and fifty-six regional list members. Given the Scottish Conservative performance in 1997, in which the party lost all of its Scottish seats (on FPTP), it was likely to be the regional lists that saw Conservatives elected. And, this situation was exactly what transpired on 6 May 1999, with the Tories winning eighteen seats on the regional list system and none by FPTP (see Table 9.1).¹⁸

Table 9.1 The 1999 Scottish election

Party	<i>First-past-the-post</i>		<i>Regional list</i>		Total seats
	% Vote	Seats	% Vote	Seats	
Labour	38.69	53	33.64	3	56
SNP	28.72	7	27.31	28	35
Conservative	15.55	—	15.35	18	18
Liberal Democrat	14.23	12	12.43	5	17
Others	2.81	1	11.27	2	3

The Scottish Conservatives were effectively marginalised at the 1999 election, which may become their fate at subsequent Scottish elections too. As a contest, the election was fought out between Labour and the SNP, much as Westminster elections are viewed as two-party affairs between Labour and Conservatives. Support for the Nationalists had risen dramatically in the year before the Scottish election to challenge Labour to be Scotland's leading party.¹⁹ Thus, much of the political focus of the campaign dealt with the SNP-Labour contest and issues such as Chancellor Gordon Brown's budget, the use of the Parliament's tax powers (especially after the SNP announced its 'Penny for Scotland' policy), student tuition fees, Alex Salmond's controversial stance over NATO's bombing of Kosovo (which he described as 'unpardonable folly'), Labour's plans for private finance initiatives, etc. Even though these issues were of the 'tax and spending' variety which Conservatives had utilised in the past, the party itself was marginalised from such questions by the dominance of Labour and the SNP in the media. Second, the Conservatives marginalised themselves from the election campaign by ruling themselves out of participation in any post-election coalition. As coalition was the only game in town and Tories were not going to play it, then there was little scope for the party to promote itself in 1999. Instead, political attention focused on the Liberal Democrats and whether they would align themselves with the SNP or Labour after the election.

Where the Tories did do well in the 1999 campaign was in TV debates, where party leader McLetchie performed well. Expectations of McLetchie were low, largely because he was an unknown quantity within Scottish politics, so his sharp performances came as a surprise. Also, in such debates, the Tories found themselves in an entirely new political position. Pre-1999, the Tories had found themselves on the wrong end of the anti-Conservative alliance of Labour, Liberal Democrats and Nationalists. In 1999, this position had changed markedly. The Conservatives were no longer in government and no longer subject to the three-against-one arithmetic. Indeed, if anything, it was the SNP, which suffered from an anti-Nationalist alliance amongst the other parties.²⁰ The Tories also distinguished themselves in a very surprising way

at the 1999 campaign: with their sense of humour. The party's leaflets and billboards poked fun at the other parties, especially in their depiction of Alex Salmond as a Tellytubby. Humour, combined with 'attack politics', as opposed to constructive policy engagement, gave Scottish Tories some prominence in the campaign, though this profile did not translate into too many votes.

Conservatives had prepared for the 1999 election by composing a manifesto through the medium of the 'Listening to Scotland' meetings. Hague had convened 'Listening to Britain' meetings with party members and supporters to discuss the Conservative policy platform and this practice were adopted in Scotland as a means to produce the 1999 manifesto. It was designed to show a more open and inclusive Scottish Conservative organisation, which adopted policies through consultation and widespread discussion with supporters and non-supporters alike. The exercise involved over 500 'Listening' meetings across Scotland, with 15,000 participants and sought to demonstrate that the Conservatives were 'a new party'.²¹ Such a claim was an essential outcome of the party's rebranding efforts since the Strathclyde Commission and an attempt to give credence to the party's claim that it was 'Made in Scotland'. Moreover, the title of the party's manifesto was 'Scotland First', which aped the SNP's former slogan of 'Put Scotland First', which had first surfaced at the Kilmarnock by-election in 1946 before being used widely in the 1960s.

The content of the 1999 manifesto was not notably Scottish however, despite the quasi-Nationalist sloganeering. Out of the party's seven main pledges, only one – to lift the ban on beef-on-the-bone – was a distinctly Scottish initiative. The remainder, were largely UK-wide initiatives on taxation, health and education: such as no tax increases, the re-introduction of matrons on to hospital wards and the abolition of student tuition fees though this latter policy had a strong Scottish dimension.²² The Scottish Conservative manifesto contained a range of other specific policy pledges, though often other parties shared such pledges. Thus, the Tories supported zero tolerance of crime and drugs, directly elected council leaders and council house stock transfer, which were also Labour policies and its position on student tuition fees was shared by the SNP and Liberal Democrats. In a positive vein, the party committed itself to the decentralisation of Scottish Executive departments, an enhanced road-building programme, establishing a voucher system for post-sixteen education and training, restoring a voucher system for nursery schools and removing schools from local authority control. The Tories also committed themselves to opposing road tolls, tourist taxes, stealth taxes, abolition of the pound and seeking lower fuel prices: with the latter two policies being UK initiatives. However, none of these policies or initiatives were particularly bold or original and, moreover, as the Tories had put themselves out of the coalition game, none were given serious attention at the election.

Autonomy in action: Scottish Conservatism, 1999–2001

Conservatives in the Scottish Parliament face a very different political opportunity structure to their colleagues at Westminster. For example, the party in Scotland exists in a multi-party legislature in which it is the third or fourth party rather than the government or opposition. This situation has two facets. First, as the Tories are *persona non grata* in Scottish coalition politics, ruled themselves out of coalition and are electorally weak in Scotland they have no prospect of power. Exclusion from government office and permanent status as an opposition contrast with the party's prospects at two-party Westminster. Second, the Scottish Tories found themselves as the second opposition party in the Parliament after the 1999 election rather than capable of filling the shoes of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition as at Westminster. The SNP are the official opposition with priority at First Minister's question time, Scottish Executive question time, more time for party-sponsored debates in the Parliament, shadow Ministerial portfolios, more time speaking in debates, the leading role as opposition and a host of other advantages denied to the Conservatives. In addition, not only are the Tories the second opposition, but they face a coalition government of Labour and Liberal Democrats. This is an advantageous position compared to Westminster, as it allows the Scottish Tories to attack two opposing parties at once, rather than finding themselves outflanked or undermined by the Liberal Democrats taking a middle-way position of opposition to Labour. However, all of these factors make for a complex, multi-party politics.

The Scottish Conservatives in the Scottish Parliament are very much a mixed bag as a parliamentary group. Very few had Westminster experience and, those that had were the very ones that lost their seats in 1997: Phil Gallie and Lord James Douglas Hamilton. The MSPs thus have few links with Westminster, with implications for relations with the UK party as a whole. Two further distinguishing characteristics of the parliamentary group are notable. First, the Tory group is middle-aged to elderly, with an average age of forty-nine at the 1999 election: joint highest amongst the parties with the Liberal Democrats. Second, the Tory parliamentary group is predominantly male, with only three female MSPs. Though the party has one more female MSP than the Liberal Democrats, the SNP and Labour easily eclipse it, with much more equal (and numerous) numbers of male and female representatives. Thus, the MSP's group does not resemble the inclusive party that Conservatives modernisers have sought to promote in recent years, which is important as it is the MSPs who are the leading figures within the party in Scotland.

The political activities of the Tories within the Scottish Parliament have had four distinct characteristics. First, the party has concentrated on acting as a strong opposition to the coalition parties in the Scottish Executive. This

has meant playing 'attack' politics on a large number of occasions to oppose most of the Executive's legislative programme but not making common cause with the SNP. At times this approach has pitched the Tories against all other parties in the Parliament – such as over the proposal to abolish Section 28 and land reform – and further enhanced the party's unpopularity. However, this strategy allowed the party to set out distinctive positions and avoid the soggy centre-ground of political consensus in the Parliament: providing it with a clear, uncompromised political identity and a cutting edge. Second, the party also sought to focus on public services and the failure of the Scottish Executive in delivering adequate public services: the type of sensible position that the Tories at Westminster have adopted post-Hague. This focus on issues of everyday concern to voters – as opposed to ones which get party activists hot under the collar – does not show any great strategic perceptiveness that set Scottish Tories aside from their British counterparts. Rather, it is the logic of devolution itself, which established a Parliament responsible for education, health, transport, local government etc. However, the situation allowed the Tories to connect with the everyday concerns of Scottish voters.

Third, the Tories sought to push particular policy positions that were shared by other parties in the Parliament, were capable of dividing the Executive and could assist the Tories to develop a new image in Scotland. For example, the Conservatives' support for state-funded personal care for the elderly – and thus the implementation of the Sutherland Royal Commission on Care for the Elderly – was an issue supported by a majority in the Parliament but initially opposed by the Scottish Executive. Conservative support for the issue enabled it to appear pro-pensioner, pro-public services, capable of supporting a policy that was not supported by Tories at Westminster and also in a position to force the Executive to adopt the policy through parliamentary pressure. Fourth, the party has engaged in ideological repositioning to some extent through support for the abolition of student tuition fees and for funded care for the elderly. Similarly, the issues the Scottish Tories have not picked up in the Parliament have helped the party to attempt to renovate its image. For example, the MSPs adopted a moderate stance over immigration and asylum seekers that contrasted with the more fevered approach of Hague and the Westminster party. Indeed, Scottish Conservatives avoided adopting a populist approach to such issues and took a more centrist ideological position in Scotland, in spite of the presence of right-wing MSPs within the Scottish parliamentary group.

However, such limited repositioning did not constitute a substantial ideological change. The party remains committed to attracting a centre right electorate, even though it constitutes a very limited electoral 'hunting ground' for the party in Scotland.²³ Indeed, the party's low level of electoral support and the electoral system for the Scottish Parliament seem set to cement the Tory's position as a party representing a limited constituency rather than

seeking support from a broader electorate.²⁴ Such representation, without the prospect of government participation appears an unattractive prospectus over the medium to long-term as it leaves the party bereft of a coalition potential.²⁵ Unless the Tories can find a viable coalition partner, then it is likely to remain marginalised in the devolved parliament and only capable of exercising influence through one-off coalitions on specific issues such as care for the elderly. And yet, even then the party's abilities are limited by its lack of flexibility. Two issues illustrate this point. Despite some of the party's MSPs expressing support for fiscal autonomy for the Parliament, the Tories have not picked up this issue officially and sought to form alliances with the SNP, Liberal Democrats or sympathetic Labour MSPs to promote the issue. Thus, an issue which could trump Labour over devolution and commit the Tories to improve the Parliament and appear pro-Scottish has been neglected. Second, in spite of the damage it could do to the Liberal Democrat-Labour coalition, the Tories retained an entirely dogmatic approach to electoral reform in local government. Rather than support a reform which would wreck Labour's local one-party states, generate a coalition crisis and lead to the election of scores of Conservative councillors, the party retained its opposition to any electoral reform for fear of what it might mean at Westminster.

The 2001 general election and after

The 2001 election was almost as disappointing for the Tories as that of 1997. Whilst the party won back Galloway and Upper Nithsdale in the face of a collapse in the SNP vote and came close to retaking Perth, results in most other seats were disappointing. The party saw small rises in Ayr, Dumfries and Edinburgh Pentlands but a decline in their support in the key seats of Aberdeen South, Aberdeenshire West and Kincardine, Eastwood, Edinburgh West and Tayside North. These latter constituencies may now be lost to the Conservatives on a permanent basis: the case with the seats lost in the electoral collapse of 1987. More fundamentally, popular support for the Tories in 2001 was 15.58 per cent (1.93 per cent less than the 1997 disaster) and the Tories came fourth behind the Liberal Democrats: an all-time low for Scottish Conservatism. Winning a seat in what was an apocalyptic election seems nothing short of miraculous, however, the general election did not presage any great Conservative recovery in time for the 2003 Scottish election. The 2001 results pointed to an improved ability to win FPTP seats compared to 1999, but any gains will be offset through the corrective mechanisms of the regional lists. The party will therefore continue as a marginal force at Holyrood in terms of seats and coalition-potential (see Table 9.2).

The post-Hague Conservative leadership election had a negative impact on the party in Scotland, not so much in terms of who was actually elected as leader in September 2001, but in the manner in which the debate over the

Table 9.2 The 2001 general election in Scotland

	<i>% Vote</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Change</i>
Labour	43.26	55	-1*
SNP	20.06	5	-1
Liberal Democrat	16.37	10	-
Conservative	15.58	1	+1
Speaker	-	1	+1

Note: * Former Labour MP, Michael Martin now sits as the Speaker.

leadership fanned the flames of factional conflict within the Scottish party. Given there was only one Scottish Conservative MP elected to Westminster in 2001, there was little Scottish influence on the MP's ballots at the leadership contest. However, the ballot of party members brought a much greater opportunity for Scottish involvement and influence over the leadership contest. Both Kenneth Clarke and Iain Duncan Smith made forays to Scotland during the campaign and each addressed the Scottish Conservatives' one-day conference on 1 September 2001. Prominent MSPs took a stand as supporters of each candidate and the focus of the leadership campaign in Scotland began to revolve around the impact either candidate would have on the Scottish party. Of the two candidates, it was Clarke who sought to make political capital amongst Scottish Conservatives by addressing Scottish issues. However, such efforts were extremely ill-informed and self-destructive. Initially, Clarke promised that he would seek to give more powers to the Scottish Parliament to increase the extent of devolution.²⁶ However, Clarke provided no serious proposals to back this statement up. Next, Clarke proposed to give more autonomy to the Scottish party's MSPs to make policy: apparently ignorant of the fact they had enjoyed such autonomy in devolved areas since 1999. Third, Clarke produced an entirely muddled position on public expenditure in Scotland. His leadership manifesto promised a review of the Barnett formula to address 'budgetary unfairness' and reduce Scotland's share of public spending: a proposal to attract support in England. However, this policy was retracted quickly in favour of arguing for a needs assessment of regional spending in the UK:²⁷ a policy which could still involve reducing Scottish spending and undermining the Scottish Parliament. This latter position invited and received considerable ridicule from the Scottish media.

In contrast to Clarke's manoeuvring, Duncan Smith adopted a more relaxed approach to Scotland and to devolution. Indeed, Duncan Smith eschewed any attempt to court Scottish opinion through Scottish issues. Rather, he came to Scotland with an open mind about devolution and the role of the Scottish Conservatives, concentrated on dialogue with the Scottish party and talked about the general campaign themes such as public services.

Duncan Smith's only foray into devolved politics involved his suggestion that the Scottish party leader should sit in his shadow cabinet at Westminster: a complete reversal of devolution that disappeared from view after July and was not implemented following Duncan Smith's success in the leadership ballot.

However, the significance of the leadership campaign was not how the two candidates handled Scottish issues, but what the contest itself did to the Scottish Conservatives as a party. The leadership contest inevitably led to increased tensions within the Scottish Tories as leading MSPs and party office-bearers moved to support the opposing candidates. Prominent right-wingers such as new MP Peter Duncan, Phil Gallie MSP, Brian Monteith MSP and former Scottish chairman Raymond Robertson supported Duncan Smith, whilst left-wing and centrist Tories such as Murray Tosh MSP, Struan Stevenson MEP and Malcolm Rifkind supported Ken Clarke. However, as the internal politics of the Scottish Tories has traditionally been extremely fractious and personalised, the leadership contest brought about a period of intense faction-fighting between the left, right and centre of the party in Scotland. The faction-fighting was not confined to policy issues or the ideological positioning of the Conservatives under Clarke or Duncan Smith, but was about the effect of a change of leadership on the balance of power within the Scottish Tories. Such issues included the performance of the Scottish party leader, David McLetchie;²⁸ the effectiveness of the MSPs in the Scottish Parliament; the selection procedures for candidates at the 2003 election;²⁹ and factional sympathies of the person who would be appointed as Scottish party chairman by the Westminster leader.

The leadership campaign was not aided by the decision by Nick Johnston, regional list MSP (Mid-Scotland and Fife), to resign from the Scottish Parliament amid accusations of weak leadership by McLetchie and factional conflicts amongst the MSPs.³⁰ The leadership contest also generated uncertainty about McLetchie's role as Scottish leader, with speculation that a Duncan Smith victory would lead to pressure on McLetchie to stand down as Scottish leader and briefings against McLetchie from MSPs from various wings of the party. There was even speculation that Duncan Smith would appoint a party chairman in Scotland who would effectively undermine McLetchie.³¹ The Scottish conference therefore took on an entirely different complexion. It was no longer an opportunity for the two leadership candidates to impress the party faithful, but an event overshadowed by internal conflict and instability which damaged the party's image in Scotland.

Of course, such faction-fighting and internal conflict is exactly how the Scottish Conservatives operate. One newspaper report of the conference was headlined 'Blood on the agenda at Perth',³² whilst another read 'Back-stabbing and blood-letting ... it's party time for the Tories'.³³ Prominent Conservative and newspaper columnist, Brian Meek, remarked that:

The Tory party, particularly the Scottish version, has a lot of similarities with the Balkans. No sooner is one regional revolution quelled – peace proposals accepted, handshakes all round – than a grenade from another faction re-opens hostilities. What happens next is equally predictable: the media are blamed for stirring up trouble, though in back-stabbing terms, the party's ever-declining number of MPs, MSPs and leading members could teach old Brutus a slash or two.³⁴

Thus, to find the Scottish Conservatives descending into factional in-fighting seemed an entirely natural state of affairs. And, yet when the leadership contest was over, McLetchie survived as Scottish party leader and a factionally neutral member, David Mitchell, was appointed as Scottish party chairman by Duncan Smith.³⁵ The in-fighting had no outcome barring the destabilisation of the Scottish Conservatives and little effect on the leadership election itself.

Conclusion

The years between 1997 and 2001 were a difficult period of adjustment for Scottish Conservatives, though one which they coped with reasonably well. The party made no great strides in terms of electoral success, but settled into the Scottish Parliament and sought to carve an opposition role for itself in the new devolved Scotland. Hague's *laissez-faire* attitude to the Scottish Conservatives clearly assisted the party's period of adjustment.³⁶ At a time in which Labour was heavily criticised for political and organisational centralisation that flew in the face of devolution – in Wales and London for example – Hague allowed the Scottish Conservatives a substantial degree of freedom. On the one hand, this freedom was exactly what devolution was supposed to be about. Furthermore, the Scottish Conservatives needed such freedom to seek to establish themselves as a credible political force in Scotland which gave some truth to the party's claims to be 'Made in Scotland'. On the other hand, such freedom was permissible because the Scottish Conservatives were unimportant as an opposition party with no prospect of government: with clear similarities to the party at Westminster during the 1997–2001 period. Therefore, there was little to lose from allowing the Scottish Conservatives to go their own way.

Whilst Scotland-London conflicts were few and far between from 1997 to 2001, despite the deployment of controversial issues such as the West Lothian Question and Barnett formula at Westminster, the domestic position of the Scottish Conservatives in this period was not a particularly happy one. Gaining representation in the devolved parliament in 1999 and carving a role as a strong opposition is one thing, but the prospect of power is very much another. The Scottish Conservatives seem set to exist as a party representing a small, centre right electorate, with little prospect of broadening its support

and gaining a share of power in the Parliament. The party's coalition potential is severely limited in a multi-party system in which the Scottish Conservatives remain *persona non grata* to the other parties and therefore permanently excluded from power. Whilst the party's prospects in the Parliament are extremely limited, its electoral future remains uncertain. If Iain Duncan Smith and the Conservatives at Westminster increase their credibility and political support, this will feed into the popularity of the Scottish Conservatives, especially at Scottish elections: a very ironic position for the Scottish Conservatives to be in.

Notes

- 1 D. Seawright, *An Important Matter of Principle. The Decline of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 1999), p. 29.
- 2 HMSO, 'Scotland in the Union: A Partnership for Good' (Edinburgh, Scottish Office, 1993). Cm 2225.
- 3 See J. Rudolph and R. Thompson, 'Ethnoterritorial movements and the policy process: accommodating nationalist demands in the developed world', *Comparative Politics*, 17:3 (1985) 291–311.
- 4 See D. Denver, J. Mitchell, C. Pattie and H. Bochel, *Scotland Decides* (London, Frank Cass, 2000).
- 5 This move was entirely populist – they had completely ignored the issue when in office from 1979 to 1997 – though had some precedent in the Tories' Next Steps initiatives which had a marginal effect on the Scottish Office.
- 6 D. Urwin, 'Scottish Conservatism: a party organisation in transition', *Political Studies*, 14:2 (1965) 145–62.
- 7 C. Stevens, 'Scottish Conservatism: a failure of organisation?', in A. Brown and R. Parry (eds), *Scottish Government Yearbook* (Edinburgh, Unit for the Study of Government in Scotland, 1990).
- 8 Seawright, *An Important Matter of Principle*, p. 29.
- 9 'Tories set for a u-turn on devolution position', *The Scotsman*, 8 May 1997.
- 10 'UDI call to Scots Tories', *The Herald*, 29 May 1997.
- 11 The CSU had already been aired as a model for the Scottish Tories as far back as 1996 but only became prominent after the 1997 election. See P. Dwyer, 'Conservatives need to create a true Scottish identity', *The Herald*, 9 May 1996.
- 12 B. Meek, 'Taking the bold step', *The Herald*, 19 May 1997.
- 13 The Foundation was reported to have provided finance for a breakaway Scottish Tory Party, even though in reality it had only agreed to fund a study group of CDU-CSU relations by Conservative dissidents. *The Herald*, 26 June 1997.
- 14 This reform provided for five executive members, including the Convenor, to be directly elected by an OMOV ballot of party members. However, the majority of the executive remained nominated, co-opted and ex-office members, with three of them actually appointed by the UK party leader.
- 15 Former Scottish Tory Cabinet Ministers such as Michael Forsyth, Ian Lang and Malcolm Rifkind demonstrated no interest in standing for the Scottish Parliament or Scottish Conservative leadership.
- 16 A situation made more competitive by former Scottish MPs heading South following electoral defeat in Scotland: Michael Ancram, Gerry Malone and Ian Sproat are examples of this trend.

- 17 The Strathclyde Commission, *Made in Scotland* (Edinburgh, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, 1998), p. 7.
- 18 This position improved slightly in 2000, when the Tories won the Ayr by-election to give them one FPTP seat in the Scottish Parliament.
- 19 See the polls in G. Hassan and P. Lynch, *The Almanac of Scottish Politics* (London, Politico's, 2001).
- 20 See P. Jones, 'The 1999 Scottish Parliament elections: from anti-Tory to anti-Nationalist politics', *Scottish Affairs*, 28 (1999) 1–9.
- 21 D. McLetchie, 'Introduction', *Scotland First: Scottish Conservative Manifesto for the Scottish election 1999* (Edinburgh, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, 1999).
- 22 Scottish Conservatives, *Scotland First*.
- 23 See A. Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organisation and Power* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- 24 See H. Kitschelt, *The Logic of Party Formation* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1989).
- 25 See G. Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976).
- 26 *Scotland on Sunday*, 29 July 2001.
- 27 *The Scotsman*, 31 August 2001.
- 28 *The Scotsman*, 1 September 2001.
- 29 *Sunday Herald*, 12 August 2001.
- 30 *The Herald*, 11 August 2001.
- 31 *The Scotsman*, 1 September 2001.
- 32 *The Herald*, 21 August 2001.
- 33 *Sunday Herald*, 2 September 2001.
- 34 *The Herald*, 4 September 2001.
- 35 Though, this situation was illustrative of the weakness of the Scottish party itself as a key Scottish appointment was still made in London in spite of devolution.
- 36 Indeed, there were no major cases of disagreement between the Scottish and UK Conservatives in this period over policy, organisation or strategy.