



## **LINK, the SNP and Westminster**

The political dynamics of the Westminster Parliament were dramatically changed at the 2015 general election. The Governance Group discussed this at their meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> May and decided that the several issues arising from the result require further, detailed discussion. We have to recognise that our colleagues operating in and around Westminster know that Parliament best but that we know the SNP opposition very well indeed and that they probably have little knowledge of this new force. This paper is designed to facilitate a discussion of the situation and maximise opportunities for successful lobbying.

First must be considered, however, some facts.

- (1) With 56 MPs elected in May 2015, the SNP have become the third largest party at Westminster. This will entitle them, under the conventions, to very considerable speaking and other rights in the chamber, and they have already appointed Shadow spokespersons covering all substantive Cabinet policy areas.
- (2) In the past, the SNP have not voted or intervened on matters they deemed to be purely English – and with very small numbers of MPs, this has tended to be loosely defined. Now, with much greater numbers, they have indicated that they intend to tighten the definition greatly. For example, matters of education and health policy, which are fully devolved, have nevertheless consequences for Scotland through the disbursement of funding using the Barnett Formula – and the SNP have stated that they will intervene if they think that Scotland's interests are being affected. And this question cannot be seen from only a Scottish perspective. Already on the issue of fox-hunting we have seen appeals for support and votes from SNP members coming from radical interests over a purely English matter.
- (3) The Conservative Government has very clearly indicated that it is intent on quickly delivering “the Vow” given during last year's referendum for greater powers for the Scottish Parliament and Government – although the exact meaning of the rhetoric used is an opaque area. The starting point will be the report of the Smith Commission, but negotiations have begun between David Cameron and Nicola Sturgeon over extending the areas to be devolved in the legislation. The Conservatives though, have pledged to address, in addition, the issue of English Votes for English Laws (EVEL) in parallel with any Scotland Bill. Both of these matters are likely to be very dominant issues on the political agenda at Westminster over the next couple of years (if not for longer).
- (4) On Committees, it is almost certain that the SNP will hold two Convener-ships. The first of these is likely to be the Scottish Affairs Committee – which in the 2010-2015 session was used as a highly partisan weapon on constitutional issues, and could be a powder keg, especially if the SNP are denied a majority on the committee. The second is rumoured to be the Energy and Climate Change Committee. Here the Conservatives will insist on a majority on the Committee, which will render holding the chair influential but considerably less than decisive. It opens, nevertheless, the possibility that the SNP will try to distinguish themselves as more radical on climate change issues (where they proudly claim that Scottish legislation is “world-leading”) than the Westminster parties.
- (5) The SNP have never nominated any members of the House of Lords and have said that they intend to stick to this position. Questions of the role of the second chamber are, therefore,

likely to be a distinct constitutional issue – but it may become tangled up with territorial issues.

If these are the facts we have to adjust to, there are also some political questions we should ask – or developments that have to be watched carefully. The first covers cultural adjustment, while the second is more a matter of political strategy.

### **How “native” will the SNP go?**

The indications from the behaviour of previous SNP MPs (including one Alex Salmond) at Westminster has been that they, as with almost all members, is that they “go native” and fit into the pattern of rules, customs and behaviours of the Westminster culture. We have already seen this acceptance of norms in the spat over Denis Skinner’s preferred “rebel’s seat - on the front bench, below the gangway”.

There is, however, a reasonable chance that the new SNP MPs will react against the culture of the Westminster Parliament and find it irksome. This might cause divisions within the SNP ranks – as happened in the 1974-79 and other sessions. It might on the other hand end up with a decision to go “disruptive” – dismissing the traditions as pointless and causing loud questioning of the “rules” – as per the example of Parnell’s Irish nationalists in the c.19. (It is notable that Parnell is something of a hero to Alex Salmond.)

### **What will they vote and speak on?**

As indicated above, the SNP voluntarily refrained from voting on issues they saw as “purely English”, but there is a new definition of this term we will have to watch carefully. We will have to bear in mind that environmental matters are very largely devolved, but that there is very considerable overlapping between the two. This is an issue we need to monitor and discuss with our colleagues in the four countries, as it will require sensitive handling with regard to (a) it being a sensitive procedural matter for the SNP to decide for themselves, and we should not fall into the trap of telling them what to do (unless asked) but (b) we will have to co-ordinate, also, any advice we offer them on issues of policy substance with the advice being offered by London colleagues

LINK has never had to deal with this type of situation before, and at an organisational level there are three further questions we must address.

### **How do we cultivate contact with Westminster?**

We have a variety of existing Westminster contacts. Should we (a) review them and add any deemed necessary? and (b) improve our level of provision to Westminster contacts and offer to increase our help to them?

### **How do we co-ordinate with Sister Links?**

Do we require any new mechanisms for co-ordinating our approach with our sister Link organisations? If so, what forms might this take?

### **What advice do we give to LINK members operating at Westminster?**

Many members of Scottish Environment LINK are also members of larger, UK-wide organisations, with active lobbying operations at Westminster. These members have already started extensive work on models to grapple with the questions being asked here. Are there any ways we can assist them? Should we try to establish some “rules of thumb” on handling contacts across the movement?