

development. But, in either case, the west coast of Scotland would be unable to support the kind of growth that has taken place in Aberdeen and other centres on the east. The necessary infrastructure of roads, communications, ancillary and service industries, and so on, is simply not there. To create it would mean a radical transformation of the environment and traditional economy and culture of the region. Specific development decisions by local councils have already touched off politically explosive clashes between pro- and anti-development forces. Central to the debate is the issue of compulsory purchase of land needed for oil-related development purposes, particularly land occupied by crofters, which still accounts for one-quarter of all land in the Scottish Highlands.

In this kind of situation, the SNP has to tread warily. Its program calls for controlled development of the offshore-oil industry, due allowance being made for the demands of environmentalists.

Solid gains made

After the October 1974 general election, then, the SNP finds itself in a moderately strong position. It has made solid gains at Westminster, though without making significant inroads into the Scottish Labour vote. Moreover, being the second party in Scotland means that it has managed to overcome the obstacles that third parties traditionally have in the British electoral system. Apart from oil developments themselves, a number of other factors are likely to influence the party's fortunes in the next few years.

First, Scotland remains a part of the United Kingdom. Its economy is therefore affected by the general pattern, which in 1975 means inflation and the threat of higher rates of unemployment. This will be the crucial test for the SNP. If it continues to grow in electoral strength, it could justifiably claim that the historical pattern of support for Scottish nationalism being voiced only in times of relative prosperity has been broken; and so far (except in the Northwest, the region most affected by oil to date) support for the SNP has been based on rising expectations rather than contemporary realities. Secondly, the SNP has, for historical reasons, not been clearly identified with a particular social creed, apart from a nationalism centred on a vague kind of small-entrepreneur conservatism. This has allowed it to tap support from many sections of Scottish society. Oil, however, raises complex issues. It is not evident that the SNP could espouse one point of view that would be acceptable

to all interests affected by oil developments in Scotland. One possibility, though admittedly not apparent as yet, is, therefore, of the party fragmenting under the pressures of trying to hammer out a coherent planned-development program for offshore oil.

Finally, there is the impact of a future Scottish assembly. The Labour Government, following the recommendations of the Kilbrandon Commission, has a commitment in principle to establish some form of assembly. It is not clear, however, what such a body would look like. The SNP group of MPs have demanded a "gilt-edged" commitment from the Government to establish a Parliament, and set out a time-table for the holding of elections to it. Furthermore, they have insisted that the assembly be one with real powers over the nationalized industries in Scotland, government ministries, unemployment and social services, and, crucially, the extraction of oil. On the one hand, there is a possibility that the provision of such a forum for the expression of Scottish grievances would serve to defuse nationalist sentiment. It has been argued, for example, that an important element in voting support for the SNP consists of demands for the betterment of Scotland's condition that could in fact be accommodated within the constitutional framework of a reformed United Kingdom. On the other hand, such an assembly could, depending on circumstances and the Government's handling of development decisions, generate more support for the nationalist case by sheer momentum. Much would depend on the precise nature of the assembly's powers, and whether or not it could be construed by the SNP as a tool of London.

In 1973, the Kilbrandon Commission on the Constitution reported that: "To an unknown extent . . . , North Sea oil would be a point in favour of Scotland's economic viability. But we see no reason to doubt that an independent Scotland . . . would be viable even without oil." However, this question was "anyway of secondary importance". Separation of Scotland, and Wales, from the rest of the United Kingdom "would come about only if there existed an overwhelming political desire for it on the part of the Scottish and Welsh people". "In that event," the Commission said, "arguments would hardly be relevant; viability would take care of itself." The Scottish National Party has now put a considerable distance between itself and the lunatic fringe of British politics, but it cannot — at least not yet — be said to reflect the "overwhelming political desire" of the Scottish people.

*Control of oil
crucial to
devolution*