

Nationalism comes of age with discovery of North Sea oil

By Greig Macleod and Robert Boardman

The two British general elections of February and October 1974 left many uncertainties in their wake. Harold Wilson has to work with the slimmest of Parliament majorities; the Conservative Party almost immediately after the second lunged into a leadership crisis; and Britain's seemingly perennial economic difficulties showed few signs of abating. Behind each election lay the question of Britain's offshore-oil resources. Apart from the issue of the royalties that ought to accrue to the Government, this was not a major question for the country as a whole. Yet both Labour and Conservative Party strategists were reported to be viewing the prolonged 1974 contest as having a long-term significance. By 1980, Britain will, by current forecasts, be heading towards self-sufficiency in oil. So whichever party is governing when the benefits begin to be felt by the electorate will clearly be in a favourable position for fighting elections during that decade.

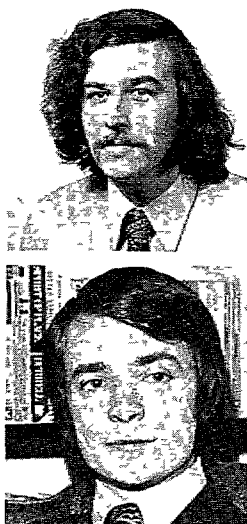
More immediately, the question of oil was not lost on Scottish voters. The existence of large, exploitable resources off the Scottish coast has now lent credibility to the argument of the Scottish National Party that an independent Scotland would be economically viable. In the October election, the party gained a total of 11

Commons seats, and won 30 per cent of the Scottish vote. Its electoral successes in recent years seem to correspond perfectly with offshore-oil developments. Between the elections of 1959 and 1966, its share of the Scottish vote increased from 0.8 per cent to 5 per cent. In 1970, it doubled this to 10 per cent; by the February 1974 election, the SNP vote had risen to more than 20 per cent of the Scottish electorate. Its gains in October were made predominantly at the expense of the Scottish Tories. In one case, the constituency of Perth and East Perthshire, the SNP overturned a Conservative majority of nearly 9,000. It came within 53 votes — after the recounts — of taking the old Commons seat of former Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary Sir Alec Douglas-Home. For a majority of Scottish constituencies, the SNP fielded either the winning or the second candidate in the last election. It is now the main party opposing Labour in Scotland.

Still, this does not represent the decisive breakthrough that some SNP supporters had been hoping for. The party still has to show that in a general election, as opposed to a by-election, it can break Labour's hold over Scotland's central industrial belt. Its strength still seems to lie in the rural areas and smaller towns, particularly in the North. Despite its victories, it still holds only 15 per cent of the Scottish seats at Westminster. Yet, if the SNP continues to break fresh ground in parallel with offshore-oil developments, the present Commons balance can be expected to change considerably between now and 1980. What, then, are its objectives?

Recent revival

Though the SNP was founded in 1928, the present revival of its fortunes dates back only as far as the late 1960s. Scottish nationalism has been an unattractive option for most Scots in times of economic hardship. The late nineteenth century, for example, was a time of Scottish pressure for "Home Rule"; support for the idea



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